

# Investigating Race and Racism through African American Art and Artists

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## ABSTRACT

Inspired by Victor Lowenfeld's teaching at The Hampton Institute (1939-1945) in Virginia, this study will explore why and how I address issues of race and racism in my classrooms at Francis Marion University in South Carolina, in which I regularly have more than 50% African American students. Methodologically, this study is grounded in critical race theory (CRT) that grew out of the critical legal studies movement in the 1970s and made its way into the field of education in the mid 1990s (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). I believe that racially and culturally responsive teaching plays a critical role in helping students come to understand their ethnic self-esteem, cultural diversity, and social inclusion. Therefore, we as educators broadly need to re-evaluate our content and teaching goals in terms of the cultural, ethnic, racial, and social diversity of our students. Then, we will be able to renew and expand the role of art education in a democratic society.

KEYWORDS: Social Justice, Race, Racism, Self-Esteem, Self-Identification, Victor Lowenfeld

According to the *New York Post* on December 5, 2015, Mr. Joseph filed a lawsuit in the Manhattan Supreme Court to sue the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) for showing four "racist paintings" by Italian masters – *The Crucifixion* by Francesco Granacci; *The Holy Family with Angels* by Sebastiano Ricci; *The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes* by Tintoretto; and *The Resurrection* by Perugino (Nussbaum, 2015). Joseph claimed that Jesus had "black hair like wool and skin of bronze color," but the paintings depicted Jesus as "white and blond" (para. 3). He insisted that the artists completely changed Jesus' race "to make [it] aesthetically pleasing for white people," and that caused him "personal stress." Mr. Joseph said, "I am suing in a public venue which by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 can't discriminate on a protected basis" because the Met showed the "offensive aesthetic whitewashing" of Jesus' images, which represented "an extreme case of discrimination" in a public institution (Boniello, 2015, para. 9). The Met responded, "when they were painted, it was typical for artists to depict subjects with the same identity as the local audience. This

phenomenon occurs in many other cultures, as well” (Neuendorf, 2015, para. 8).

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), according to BBC on July 8, 2015, also cancelled *Kimono Wednesdays* after protesters decried “the event as racist, saying it propagated racial stereotypes and encouraged cultural appropriation” (Bofferra, 2015, para. 3). At the event, visitors were encouraged to try on a kimono to recreate the painting of Claude Monet’s wife, Camille, and pose in front of the original *La Japonaise*. The MFA finally released a statement on the website that the museum apologized for offending any visitors with the event. While the MFA reported that “this idea was to give visitors a ‘tactile experience’ with the kimonos made in Japan to understand and experience the painting in a new way” (Rodney, 2015, para. 1), the protesters regarded the event as “typecasting and exoticizing Asian Americans” (para. 2).

In today’s society, there is plenty of talk on race issues in mass and social media. Recently, the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Tony Robinson, and Walter Scott led to national debates over the use of deadly force by law enforcement. These incidents greatly inflamed race and social justice issues because all of the deaths were of African-Americans. However, the topic of race is an entirely different story in many schools, classrooms, and communities (Desai, 2010). Teachers tend to avoid controversial subjects like social discrimination, injustice, equality, and racism. When they do take place, classroom conversations on such topics remain simplistic or superficial. There is plenty of research demonstrating that children notice race at a young age and begin to form stereotypes (Nadworny, 2015). Therefore, if we do not deal with racial factors in our classrooms, we are essentially telling our students to figure it out themselves (Dell’Antonia, 2014; Milner, 2015).

Race – the ways in which we identify ourselves and are identified by others – affects our lives and opportunities, and defines our attitudes, thoughts, and feelings within society (Bolgatz, 2005; Kraehe, 2015). Race also plays a decisive role in many people being treated differently based on their physical characteristics such as skin color or hair texture. Race is a social construct and is enacted in society in different ways (Lee, 2012). Racial silence, therefore, does not transcend racial distinction; rather, it continues to disregard and neglect the educational needs of non-Whites (Kraehe, 2015). We as educators can create opportunities for our students to learn about and address the critical issues of social justice like racism that affect their lives (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, & Paul, 2010; Dewhurst, 2014; Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). Quinn (2005) said, “What better tools and what better place, than the arts and art education?” (p.190).

## Research Purpose, Method, and Rationale

What is the proper role of art educators in responding to basic social justice issues like racism and race relations? How can art educators successfully address issues of race and racism in their classrooms? “Awareness is the start” (Quinn, 2005, p.189). Primarily, it is important that teachers understand that racial experiences are real; they impact students’ social experiences and cause their worldviews to be different from others. Lee (2013) regards this realization as a starting point for educators to effectively bridge any racial divide between themselves and their students. However, “don’t stop there” (Quinn, 2005, p.190). We should “question, connect, critique, and take action” (Dewhurst, 2012, p. 89).

This research is inspired by Nazi-controlled Austrian refugee and art educator Victor Lowenfeld’s teaching at The Hampton Institute in Virginia – which later became Hampton University, a historically black college. I investigate why and how I address issues of race and racism in my classrooms at Francis Marion University in South Carolina, in which I regularly have more than 50% African American students from low-income backgrounds. Jung (2015) indicated, “Racism is not just a problem of one university or of the south. Rather, it is a problem that is deeply embedded in the history, culture, and institution of the U.S. society” (p. 216). Therefore, we as educators need to re-evaluate our goals and class content in terms of the cultural, ethnic, racial, and social diversity of our students. “If not, we are...teaching [our students] to devalue their own backgrounds” (McFee, 1998, p. 7). I believe racially and culturally responsive teaching plays a critical role in how students themselves come to understand their ethnic self-esteem, cultural diversity, and social inclusion.

Methodologically, this study draws from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which grew out of the critical legal studies movement in the 1970s and made its way into the field of education in the mid 1990s (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013). According to Desai and Marsh (2005), CRT emerged from primarily minority scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power, especially during the post Civil Rights period. Thus, CRT examines critical issues of social justice, liberation, economic empowerment, legal and criminal justice, race and racism, biases and stereotypes, political power, and underserved populations (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012; Bryant, Moss, & Boudreau, 2015; Jung, 2015; Kraehe, 2015; Kraehe & Acuff, 2013; Spillane, 2015). According to Patton, Ranero, and Everett (2011), it is a movement committed to changing and disrupting racism and its associated social, legal, political, and educational consequences as a means for challenging dominant systems of racial oppression (as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Although CRT is somewhat new to art education inquiry, it continues to emerge and expand as a theoretical framework and analytical tool for combating racism and other forms of discrimination (Jung, 2015; Kraehe, 2015; Spillane, 2015). It insists that *race* is a key part of understanding today's educational system, and is substantiated in several tenets. One important position is that racism is ordinary and common in the everyday experience of most people of color in the United States, because "white Euro American experiences often have been the standard by which all other racial groups' experiences are measured... the experiences and interests of whites are normalized" (Kraehe & Acuff, 2013, p. 297). Second, race and racism are not products of biology or genetics, but are socially constructed in response to the shifting historical and political circumstances of human relationships and thought (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012; Bryant, Moss, & Boudreau, 2015). In other words, they are "not objective, inherent, or fixed" (Bryant, Moss, & Boudreau, 2015, p. 3). Third, CRT conceptualizes race as interdependent with other social classifications such as ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation, because no person has a static, single, and unitary identity (Bryant, Moss, & Boudreau, 2015; Desai & Marsh, 2005).

With the approach of CRT at the heart of my pedagogical practice, this study will also share instructional resources to prepare for and engage in meaningful discussions with students. I discuss African American artists – Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and Faith Ringgold<sup>1</sup> – and their racial and social resistance, struggles, and distress. According to Samella Lewis (2003), there is still a need for more research and analysis of African American art and artists since they have been given little or no attention in the history of the United States. Jacob Lawrence said, "I've always been interested in history, but they never taught Negro history in the public schools... I don't see how a history of the United States can be written honestly without including the Negro" (HumanitiesWeb.org, para. 4). Nevertheless, Aaron Douglas said, "art and creative expression could bridge the gap between the African American and white worlds" (Kernes, 2007, p.6). He also believed in the power of education for positive change in African American life (Lewis, 2003).

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1 There are many other important African American artists (i.e. Augusta Savage, Betye Saar, John Biggers, Kara Walker, Kerry Marshall, Laura Simpson, etc.) who have continually illustrated the historical, racial, social, and ethnic stories such as social discrimination, injustice, racism, and segregation of African Americans in U.S. society, but I chose three artists – Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and Faith Ringgold – for this paper due to my personal interest in them.

## Addressing Racial/Ethnic Self-Esteem through Art Education

One of the greatest challenges for this nation is to ensure that achievement gaps in all areas of education among racial and ethnic minorities are eliminated. This includes the improvement of... educational experiences... and graduation rates of students from low-income backgrounds. The National Task Force on the Arts in Education believes that greater access to arts education can serve as an effective tool in closing the achievement gap, increasing the number of underserved students that achieve at the highest levels in education. (College Board, 2009, p.11)

Research shows that "people who feel good about their own race do better academically" (Nadworny, 2015, para. 4). Much research about racial identity has demonstrated that African American students have a negative self-image because one's self-concept is influenced by perceptions of the way one is viewed by others (Marks, Settles, Cooke, Morgan, & Rowley, 2004). Consequently, African American students have suffered from low self-esteem or self-hatred because of society's negative views of African Americans; people see them not as individual human beings, but rather as one racial group.

Findings from the research using "The Doll Test" (Brown, 1947) showed that a majority of African American children preferred to play with white dolls and identified the white dolls as having positive characteristics. Researchers concluded that prejudice, segregation, and discrimination created feelings of inferiority among African American children, who hated themselves for being 'black' or wished that they were 'white,' and damaged their self-esteem. Since then, many researchers have concluded that a majority of African Americans see themselves "not with members of the broader society, but with other African Americans" because of racial segregation in the United States and society's negative perceptions of their racial group (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998, p. 716).

Today's neighborhoods, churches, and schools still remain racially divided; poverty, unemployment, occupation, and access to health care vary disproportionately by race (Helling, n.d). In public institutions, students' ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds are increasingly diverse. Milner (2003) stated that students of color will make up nearly half of the American student population by 2020. However, the majority of teachers are white, middle class, and female, so students of color are at higher risk of failing in schools (Desai, 2010; Milner, 2003). The field of art education must re-examine teaching practices to integrate sociopolitical issues like social justice, equality, racism, discrimination, and prejudice into art classrooms; art educators need to develop appropriate pedagogical

methods to be able to talk meaningfully and effectively with students of color in their classrooms. Teachers especially need to highlight social justice within art education to address the problems that arise as a result of what playwright Anna Deavera Smith (1993) calls “our struggle to be together in our differences” (as cited in Desai & Chalmers, 2007, p. 7), so we are able to renew and expand the role of art in a democratic society.

### Understanding Racism: Victor Lowenfeld at Hampton Institute

Victor Lowenfeld is one of the most influential art educators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is primarily acknowledged as the author of *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947), in which he structured his philosophy of art education. He viewed the role of art education not as the aesthetic product, but as a means for developing students’ creative self-expressions “as a form of individual personality and identity formation” as well as “relationships with others” (Zimmerman, 2010, p. 85). He believed that it was educationally immoral to restrict any individual from creative art expression, regardless of any situation in life. As a European Jewish refugee art teacher at The Hampton Institute – a historically African American college – he deeply felt his students’ conditions of discrimination, prejudice, segregation, injustice, and racism in the United States. According to his analysis and perspective of African Americans (Lowenfeld, 1945), Lowenfeld knew that the development of their self-identity was influenced or limited by their social experiences in the United States,

At the present, the Negro artist as a member of a minority group is – like any other member of his race – very conscious of the restrictions enforced upon him through his minority status... I myself, being escaped from the claws of Hitler Germany, remember very well how my whole thinking and doing became paralyzed when Hitler marched into Vienna, the city in which I lived, and the only thought I was capable of was centered around the idea of how to get out of this hell. The awareness of the self and the problems arising from it is in value relationship to our physical, emotional, and mental freedom. (as cited in Holt, 2012, p. 11)

As a teacher for racially and socially marginalized African American students, Lowenfeld worked to resist attitudes and barriers of institutionalized racism and focused on his pedagogy as social justice art education toward the goals of inter-racial cooperation, equality, activism, resistance, and empowerment.

Lowenfeld’s program at Hampton was an antecedent in the

struggle for civil rights as his African American students influenced the larger art world and helped create social change. It represents a historical exemplar of art education advancing social justice values as students and professors worked to break down...institutionalized racism through public art, leadership, and social responsibility. (Holt, 2012, p. 8)

He believed that students had intrinsic potential to find their own voices in the arts in order to pursue the complexity of their identities; the discovery of self-identification in the arts was therefore one of the basic factors central to creative expression (Young, 2013). African American scholar Samella Lewis, Lowenfeld’s former student at Hampton, said:

To work against segregation, prejudice... [Lowenfeld] encouraged us to use art as an instrument or a tool to combat serious deprivation and prejudice, and the evils of discrimination. He forced us to take a position in relation to humanity and inhumane treatment of other peoples. (Holt, 2012, p.12)

From his own personal experience, Lowenfeld knew that “a person should never deny her or his background” (Young, 2013, p. 51), but rather address his/her social, cultural, political, racial, and historical experiences in the arts creatively and sensitively because “the purpose for teaching the arts is to contribute to the understanding of the social and cultural landscape that each individual inhabits” (Efland, 2000, p.171). In the search for identity from cultural and social perspectives, he also believed in the importance of art therapy through arts education to develop students’ creative thinking, psychological well-being, mental development, and confidence that their own thoughts were valuable, along with an understanding of their cultural heritage (Leshnoff, 2013). Lowenfeld had an inimitable relationship with his students, one that demonstrated his deep understanding of how racial discrimination, segregation, and prejudice affected his students in South. Lee (2013) signified that teachers’ racial attitudes and dispositions towards students of color are “critical components in ensuring equality (equal treatment) and equity (fair and just treatment) in education” (p. 142), and that significantly impacts students’ achievement and understandings of themselves and others.

### Art as a Tool: Self-Identification, Cultural Diversity, and Democratic Society

When I was in middle school, I was bullied for *not being black enough*, and when I transferred to a private high school,

I was bullied for *being black*. I had so many insecurities when I started college, but it was the awesome art faculty at Francis Marion University and art itself that helped me gain confidence in myself. I don't regret being bullied; it had shaped me to be who I am and had transformed me to be sensitive to others. Turning negative energy and experiences into something positive is a creative way to live. ("The Art and soul of spring," 2016, p. 51)

Smith (1996) claimed, "When the African American really considered his or her own experience, a different style of art was produced..." (as cited in Young, 2013, p. 52). Many researchers have demonstrated that African American students who felt more positive about African Americans and about being African American had higher self-esteem (Marks, Settles, Cooke, Morgan, & Rowley, 2004). However, the art world has largely ignored or discredited non-European cultures while deifying European-descended artists and cultures. From the white dominated mainstream art world, European ethnocentrism has led to "the distortion, devaluation and even the abrogation of non-European art practices and aesthetics" (Bowen, 2008, p. 111). Chalmers (1978) criticized "racism as the cause of the Eurocentric bias in art education" (as cited in Bowen, 2008, p.104). We need to conduct extensive research on the differences in values, attitudes, behaviors, traditions, histories, and styles of lives held by diverse cultural and ethnic groups. For example, McFee (1998) asked:

Look at what we are teaching them about art. Are we helping [students] ... preserve and develop symbols that help them preserve their cultural continuity, to identify and communicate...? Are we able to help them retain and respect their own culture at the same time that we give them the choice of accepting and appreciating all the visual arts? (p. 8)

Lowenfeld acknowledged the importance of self-identification, and part of this process for African Americans began by understanding more about their African roots and inheritances (Young, 2013). At The Hampton Institute, his students had little exposure to African art; in an interview with student John Biggers,

he recalled, "you have to remember that the word *black* meant the *devil*. It meant something negative... so Africa itself had a completely negative connotation" (see Clayton & McConnell, 1992). He later embraced art practice as a way to reflect the spirit and style of his identity and cultural roots: "I realized that I had a heritage, and inheritance that I was entirely unaware of before" (Biggers in Heyd, 1999, p.10). (as cited in Holt, 2012, p.12)

Lowenfeld used Hampton's African art collection to emphasize his students' cultural heritage, and he taught about African American artists who illustrated their struggles with education, culture, economic, and social deprivation in their art (Holt, 2012; Young, 2013). As an art educator at Francis Marion University who teaches a majority of African American students, I also believe that "if art is not related to their own past experience, to their own goals, the beginning experiences upon which further learning in art can be built will not take place" (McFee, 1998, p. 20).

However, when I began my teaching in the South, I had little notion of where to begin and how to do so. From my second year of teaching in 2008, I assigned students to visit a local Florence County Museum to study Florence-born African American artist William H. Johnson, along with some historical works of art, and then write a short essay with several pre-assigned questions. I realized that students deeply engaged with the questions and came to understand cultural, social, and racial issues of civil rights, social justice, discrimination, segregation, and racism in the South as well as their own heritage and cultural background through the works of art.

*Pee Dee Indians and Slaves* captured my heart in some way... There was a huge picture of an Indian that was amazing. It is a story filled with betrayal, defeat, reconstruction, and triumph. The Pee Dee Indians were warm-hearted people who were gracious enough to help defend explorers during the Yemassee War in 1715. They allowed *white man* to enter their land and eventually it was the *white man* who betrayed them and took their land over. As a result, the Pee Dee Indians had to endure great hardships caused by them, but by passing down their heritage, storytelling, and the cultivation of strong bonds allowed them to remain clan members. Surprisingly, the Pee Dee Indians today are located in Marlboro, Marion, and Dillon counties in SC... A room that focused on slavery was interesting, especially the painting of African American rice harvesters slavery time. (Dominique, 2015, p. 1)

The painting I enjoyed was the Blue Bird Tea Room painting made in 1986. In the painting, there were wealthy *white* people sitting at the table, waiting to get served. The painting looked like a warm beautiful blue... I dislike that the Blue Bird Tea Room was only for *whites* and the African Americans had their own kitchen further north that was not nice at all like Blue Bird Tea Room. But this painting grabbed my attention... (Anderson, 2015, p. 1)

Among numerous works of art in the museum, African American

students were readily engaged in the works that were related to or connected to their racial roots. They also interpreted the works of art from their racial points of view. Therefore, when educators are able to teach students about their own cultural legacies, it creates equal opportunities for all students from different social, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to function effectively in a diverse democratic society (Young, 2011).

## Teaching Critical Issues of Social Justice through African American Art and Artists

While people often assume that social justice art education must be based on controversial and overly political issues (i.e. race, violence, discrimination, etc.), that is not always the case. Rather, as long as the process of making art offers participants a way to construct knowledge, critically analyze an idea, and take action in the world, then they are engaged in the practice of social justice art making. (Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012, p. 7)

I believe one simple start is to include various issues of social justice through different works of art and artists from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds in the content of art classes. Art can be used to elevate and promote awareness of social justice; art educators can “facilitate social justice through various media, promote change and clarity, and generate healing, trust, and bridge building” (Gussak, 2010, p. vii). In this section, I will share limited instructional resources to explore the ways in which I have combined critical issues of social justice, especially race and race relations, with three African American artists – Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and Faith Ringgold.

### Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)

Jacob Lawrence said, “I am not a politician, I am an artist, just trying to do my part to bring this thing about ... This is my genre... the happiness, tragedies, and the sorrows of mankind as realized in the teeming black ghetto” (HumanitiesWeb.org, para. 1-3). He often portrayed vital African American figures (i.e. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, etc.) and periods in African American history. In particular, he was known for his 60-panel *Migration Series*, depicting portrayals of the Great Migration, when more than six million African Americans moved from the rural South to the industrial North after World War I for a better quality of life. However, African Americans experienced intensified levels of racial violence, ethnic riots, segregation, injustice, and discrimination on the way to the north as well as upon their arrival. Using primary colors with extreme

simplicity, he illustrated the immeasurable struggles of African Americans as a result of their “Negro” race. Lewis (1990) stated, “he is a social artist of great ability who speaks loudly and clearly through his work” (p. 131).

**Instructional Resource:** Jacob Lawrence’s *Migration Series* are co-owned by the Phillips Collection and the Museum of Modern Art. The following museum websites offer abundant teaching tips and tools, worksheets, games, and timeline information about Jacob Lawrence’s life and works for teachers: Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series ([http://www.phillipscollection.org/migration\\_series/index.html](http://www.phillipscollection.org/migration_series/index.html)); Jacob Lawrence Over the Line (<http://www.phillipscollection.org/sites/default/files/interactive/jacob-lawrence-over-the-line/html/nonflash.html>); and One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series (<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/>)

### Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)

Aaron Douglas was one of the first African American artists to illustrate racial themes. He developed a distinctive style with the rhythms of restricted colors and silhouetted forms in fractured space. He combined modernist forms and African motifs with the harsh realities of African American life, history, and labor, including segregation, lynching, racial riots, human rights issues, and hope for a better future through his powerful paintings (Douglas, 2007). His most well-known works are large-scale murals portraying topics from African American history and contemporary life such as the Great Migration, the Proclamation of Emancipation, lynching, slavery, labor, Jazz music, and dance. He synthesized aspects of modern European, ancient Egyptian, and African sculpture. In particular, the four panels of *Aspects of Negro Life* at New York Public Library illustrate the African cultural background of American Negroes. They represented his distinctively modernist style with graphically geometric forms, African sculpture motifs, and African American Jazz music/dance. Douglas said,

Our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painting black...let’s bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible... (Urton, 2009, para. 2).

In addition, Douglas believed in the power of education for positive change in African American life, founded the art department at

historically black Fisk University in Tennessee, and worked for nearly 30 years in teaching African American students (Lewis, 2003).

**Instructional Resources:** KU Spencer Museum of Art provides both Aaron Douglas Teacher Resources ([http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/resources/teacher\\_resource.pdf](http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/resources/teacher_resource.pdf)) and Family Guide ([http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/resources/family\\_guide.pdf](http://www.aarondouglas.ku.edu/resources/family_guide.pdf)), including a brief history and major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, a biography and the art of Aaron Douglas, and lesson/activity ideas for teaching. The Smithsonian American Art Museum ([http://americanart.si.edu/pr/library/2008/douglas/douglas\\_wall\\_text.pdf](http://americanart.si.edu/pr/library/2008/douglas/douglas_wall_text.pdf)) also offers detailed information about the museum's collections of Aaron Douglas and his works.

### Faith Ringgold (b. 1930)

Faith Ringgold is best known for her narrative quilts, especially *Tar Beach* (1988); she combined storytelling, painting, and quilt making. In this work, a little girl named Cassie goes up to the roof and dreams she can fly. She imagines that she has the power (political, social, and economic) to make life better for her family. Regardless of any situation in life, Ringgold said, "I just decided when somebody says you can't do something, do more of it" (Ringgold, 1996, p. 8). She said, "I'm inspired by people who rise above their adversity. That's my deepest inspiration... I'm inspired by the fact that if I really, really want to, I think I can do anything" (p. 8). Ringgold has used her art to remark on racism, gender inequality, social class, and civil rights. Her earliest series, *American People* (1962-1967) and *Black Light* (1967-1969), explored her experience of violence and ethnic struggles as a black woman in the United States. In particular, her powerful works, *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969) depicted the word *die* behind the stars and *nigger* within the strips on the image of the American flag, and *The Flag is Bleeding* (1967) superimposed a depiction of three interlocking figures through a curtain of blood dripping from the flag's red stripes. She was arrested and fined for violating the Flag Protection Act of 1968, but she claimed, "It would be impossible for me to picture the American flag just as a flag, as if that is the whole story. I need to communicate my relationship with this flag based on my experience as a black woman in America" (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2013). As a political activist and female artist, Ringgold has long been involved in the struggle for equality in race and gender; she is now one of the most important female figures in art: "My art is for everyone, but it is about me..." (Lewis, 1990, p. 164).

**Instructional Resource:** There are many educational resources for artist Faith Ringgold including books, websites, and blogs. The

National Museum of Women in the Arts' American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s: Educator Guide ([https://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/educator\\_guide-faith\\_ringgold.pdf](https://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/educator_guide-faith_ringgold.pdf)) provides a valuable reference and teaching resources including classroom activities and handouts for teachers. In addition, there are great videos on YouTube that can be used to teach Faith Ringgold's works and life including Ringgold: Race and Segregation in New York (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5nz3lGaVes>) and Faith Ringgold: Artist & Activist (9<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Comf9SetjRA0>).

Today, African American artists are energetic participants in a cultural revolution. Driven by needs that are both aesthetic and social, they are in search of cultural identity, self-discovery, and self-esteem (Lewis, 2003). They are not dominated by the European aesthetic standards, but instead are responding to their own life styles by creating art from the depths of their own needs, actions, and reactions (Smith, 1996; Lewis, 2003). They are also unique in their artistic styles and themes, depicting personal struggles, political turmoil, cultural conflict, racism, social discrimination, and African American music and dance. Young (2013) stated that self-identification of African American artists was often influenced by the history of African Americans in the United States and their struggles against racism, segregation, and injustice.

### Conclusion

I believe art education can foster understanding and serve the purposes of social justice. Bolgatz (2005) claims that talking about race and racism in many schools and classrooms is a meaningful activity for the following reasons:

- School is a place where students learn to live democratically.
- We have a moral imperative to teach students about social responsibility.
- Race and racism should be critical aspects of the school curriculum.
- Talking about race and racism helps students understand their worlds (p. 6)

I believe if we as educators are to promote justice, democracy, and academic integrity for students in our schools and improve their quality of life, we need to evaluate our curricular goals and ensure that they are relevant for our students and their needs.

Conversations about race should be critical topics for African American students – how race affects their lives, how racism worked in the past, and how it works today (Bolgatz, 2005). I believe such conversations profoundly affect our students' lives

and their prospects of being good citizens in constructing a society where everyone has equal rights. According to Lee (2012), teachers play a substantial role in how students learn what it means to respect, understand, and value diverse cultures in society. How future teachers define concepts like race, racism, and diversity will ultimately be reflected in their teaching, and their understanding of these concepts' overall impacts in what they choose to include and exclude in their curriculum. As an art educator, I believe we can teach students to understand the challenging issues of race, racism, and social justice in society through a more socially responsive visual art education to connect meaningfully to students' lives and lived experiences. Art educators should teach more than just 'art subjects' in the classroom.

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