

Reflecting on a Paradigm of Solidarity? Moving from niceness to dismantle whiteness in art education

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses personal reflections interwoven with critical analyses of whiteness to explore how whiteness is upheld and perpetuated in art education. Through a discussion of the pervasiveness of white-centered cultural values that maintain the power of white ways of being, the author argues that the field must seek different values and practices. Drawing on the work of several anti-racism educators, this essay highlights several values and practices that, if embraced, might move the field of art education towards a paradigm of solidarity.

Keywords: whiteness, white cultural values, art education

A note to the reader: As you read this essay, you'll notice several unconventional notes in the text. I have included the comments of one of the reviewers as they provide important markers of the ways in which the very whiteness I am trying to write about seeps through in my writing. Although I admit an initial defensive reaction to some of the reviewers notes, after a little time I realized that these comments generously offered me a chance to think more critically about my own writing and thinking. A few months after the initial reviews, I am grateful for the generosity of the reviewer's comments; they have encouraged me to reach for the kind of humility necessary for white people like me to learn how to hold. With this in mind, I have included my own thoughts in reaction to the reviewers' comments (demarcated with an MD) in an effort to make visible my own processing of these important critiques. I hope that in trying to make my missteps visible, and in grappling with them publicly, it might help other writers see how whiteness shapes every aspect of our collective work.

That's so nice!

It's the end of an anti-racism workshop that my colleague, Keonna Hendrick and I have just facilitated for a group of docents in a large art museum. As usual, we are greeted by several participants who come up to tell us how great the session was and to politely thank us

for our time and preparation. And as usual, our collegial conversation is peppered with teasing comments about being New Yorkers (“headed back to the subway—hope it’s working today!”) or about the inclement weather (“so hot! so cold!”) or about how cold the galleries were so we all needed scarves to keep us warm (“what a lovely one, where did you get it?”) or about our excitement about the creative programming for an upcoming exhibition (“what a fantastic idea to involve the public!”). We laugh and smile. We exchange business cards. We hug. We thank everyone profusely for engaging in the work of anti-racism and proclaim faith in their ability to carry on without us.

I think about these moments often as my colleague and I head home. Each time there is a similar pattern, a comfortable repetition to the performance of gratitude at the end of a workshop. I don’t mean to suggest here that the gratitude here is not genuine, as I truly believe it is, I merely note that there is a specific way of offering and receiving appreciation and feedback that is unique to museums—and more broadly arts education. There is much celebration and, for lack of a more robust word, niceness in these interactions. When I speak to colleagues in other domains—the sciences, technology, or engineering, for example—they often describe a different form of post-presentation communication, one with less small-talk and scarf-compliments. Sometimes they cut straight to the chase with biting criticism; other times they jump immediately into comparisons about upcoming grant deadlines. Certainly, this is not surprising. We know that each domain has its own culture—its own way of interacting, of behaving professionally, of even defining what that professionalism looks like. We assume someone is an architect by the style of their glasses or a tech entrepreneur by how often they consult their phones.

In art education, I’ve noticed that we are often guided by a code of composed niceness; when we greet each other, we smile, we cheer each other on, we compliment, and we make small talk about art, travel, the claimed busy-ness of life. But recently, I’ve started to wonder about the unspoken codes and performances of our field. Although I certainly wouldn’t want to give up the sense of kindness I have often felt, I’ve been listening closer to colleagues who tell a different story, who do not experience interactions in art education the same way I do. I’ve listened as colleagues have shared how the code of composed niceness has often turned a cold shoulder to their perspectives and their very existence.¹ And I’ve started to see it in

1 I realize that non-white cultures can certainly exhibit this kind of niceness, however, they typically do not have access to the same levers of power as white people. Here, I’m trying to pinpoint a particular kind of cultural communication that people point to as a form of censorship and exclusion. Akin to DiAngelo’s concept of “White Fragility” this niceness can be a common individual personality trait to be sensitive or fragile, however as a cultur-

glimmers myself—how the very niceness I’ve always embraced might actually be harming people. Now let’s be clear, these unspoken codes—the cultural values and practices of arts education—are specifically harming our colleagues and students who are not identified as white in our society.² Something is amiss here; and it’s definitely not nice.

This reflective essay is my attempt to start examining the cultural values and practices of my own work with an eye towards unraveling the ways in which I am upholding a culture that maintains white power. In this essay, I reflect on how my current cultural practices maintain whiteness and try to imagine a different set of cultural values that might help me turn towards solidarity (and away from whiteness and racism). Mostly I write this essay to speak to the white people in the field of art education (and we are plentiful), though I hope that many people who do not identify as white will find value in naming what they likely already know to be true: that our field is dominated by specific white cultural values. Hopefully, there will be something in here that supports a collective dialogue about what we want to do about this. I realize already that this work is a flawed and problematic attempt; but it’s where I am at today. And it comes, thanks in part, because of an invitation to engage more deeply in concepts of whiteness in art education; an invitation, I hope to accept in my writing, teaching, and daily being.

Side story: Reflecting on an Invitation

On the flight home from the 2018 Art Education Research Institute, I typed so furiously on my laptop that my fingers ached. In one of the final sessions, Dr. Joni B. Acuff, Dr. Amelia Kraehe, Dr. Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis, Dr. B. Stephen Carpenter, II, Dr. Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, and Dr. Sunny Spillane (in absentia) offered the audience of almost entirely white researchers a generous gift: they invited us all to think critically about how whiteness shapes our field. While many of us are taught to conclude our academic presentations with calls to action of this sort, I name this specific invitation as a gift because it was offered from an esteemed group of colleagues who courageously recalled the many times in which their white colleagues have failed to value them as scholars and people, who have persevered with

al mode of communication shared by many groups of white professional arts educators, it has more damaging affects. Such is the conundrum of whiteness!

2 Note: They are also harming our queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming colleagues and students as well, however, in this essay I am focusing primarily on the lens of racial categories. This is not to say that these categories don’t intersect and overlap, but for purposes of a short essay, I’m asking the reader to bear with me as I make the problematic move of pulling out one layer of our identities to examine it more closely.

humanity in a field that regularly fails to acknowledge, let alone try to change patterns of racism, and who still, that morning, trusted the audience enough to invite us all (yet again) to work in solidarity against racism. Risking both professional and personal vulnerability, they trusted that maybe their invitation would (this time) be accepted.

Reviewing my frantic mid-air notes in response to this invitation, I'm struck by one line in particular: "In my white body I both represent/embody oppression and contain the potential to reject/resist this embodied oppression." In other words, as a person in a body that is seen and valued as white in our society, I move through the world insulated by a cultural belief in whiteness that protects me. The very existence of my white body is a visual reminder of the cultural power of whiteness—a power maintained by the control of and violence enacted upon brown, black, and indigenous bodies. No matter how friendly, how nice I try to be, my body conveys a history of oppression from the vantage point of power (Yancy, 2015; Alcoff, 2006). And yet, when the scholars trusted their colleagues with an invitation to dismantle white supremacist ideologies, I remembered something else. Alongside the ways in which I will always embody the very same racist ideologies I hope to destroy, I also contain the *potential* to resist this oppression. We all do;** the trick is to recognize our specific roles and responsibilities within this resistance—roles and responsibilities shaped by our racial identities.

****Reviewer 71:** *Is this we a reference to people or white people? What about the "we" in the following para? Please clarify.*

MD: *How quickly I fall into the trap of the supposedly inclusive "we." I was consciously trying to avoid it, but only made it a few pages in before I fell back on it. Here, the we upholds whiteness by clouding out the multitude of voices and perspectives contained within this pronoun. In using "we" here, I nominate myself as the spokesperson for everyone—and my views are certainly not shared by everyone.*

Although we are often taught that many ideas and ways of being are mutually exclusive, this is rarely the case in reality. In countless indigenous cultures and in queer studies, we hear stories that illustrate how we can hold multiple truths—even seemingly contradictory ones—within us at the same time (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, 1981). It is possible to be both the source of oppression and to have the potential to work against it at the same time. The process might not be pretty or easy, but it is possible (Frankenburg, 1996; Aaneraud, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018). Many people already know what it means to live within this complexity, to live with what Du Bois (1903/1969) famously termed a "double-consciousness" (p.45). Certainly the scholars on that panel did. So, when they invited a room of predominantly white-bodied art education researchers to join them in an analysis of racism in our

field, they knew they were challenging many of us to think beyond how we've been taught to see the world (and ourselves). I believe they were asking us to honestly recognize the ways in which we uphold a *culture of whiteness* in our scholarship and teaching, causing harm to marginalized people—an awareness that would likely pull the rug out from many of our white feet, destabilizing our sense of who we are and who we could be. But, I also believe their invitation was also asking us to *join* them in deconstructing the very essence of whiteness, to participate in imagining new ways of teaching art. In this invitation, I believe that they were appealing to my / our potential to hold this multiplicity central while stepping into new paradigm of solidarity. In other words, to be able to work towards the destruction of the white power I embody while simultaneously recreating a world no longer dominated by whiteness. This reflective essay is my attempt (as a white person seeking to upend my own power) to heed their call.

Some background: Terminology, givens, and positionality

Much has been written about definitions of racism, whiteness, and positionality (i.e. Tatum, 1997; DiAngelo, 2012; hooks, 1992; Crenshaw, 1991; Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, 1981) so I will not go deeply into these terms and ideas in this essay. That said, I offer a few brief descriptions of the ideas upon which this essay stands. These concepts are based heavily on the literature cited in the bibliography as well as several online resources such as Racial Equity Tools (racialequitytools.org) and Dismantling Racism (dismantlingracism.org).

Race is socially constructed: As a society, we give meaning to the color of our skin; there is no biological definition of race. Since the Enlightenment, race as a concept has been used to rank some people (those with paler shades of skin) as superior to others (those with browner shades of skin). This essay focuses on how race is socially constructed in the United States; in other parts of the world, the social construction of race takes on different forms.

Whiteness shapes our realities: The belief that people with pale skin color (who we typically refer to as white) are superior affects how we see ourselves and each other. When we value one group of people over others, we often tend to uphold their cultural practices as superior as well. When we talk about whiteness, we are typically talking about a system of values, beliefs, and practices that shape our attitudes and behaviors. Because we are all raised in a world that ranks white people as better than others, we are all raised with a view of whiteness as right-ness (even if we don't actively notice it).

Whiteness is inherently a signifier of violent racial categories that are used to maintain the power of people who have white skin: Whiteness is violent by

nature because it stems from a belief that people with white skin are inherently better than others and has always been tied to actions that seek to limit—and often destroy—access to power, land, and even life by those who do not also have white skin. It is impossible to separate whiteness from this legacy because separating people with white skin from this ideological legacy is part of the task of anti-racism.

All people are harmed by racism; though differently and disproportionately: people—both those who are identified as white and those who are not—are hurt by racism. However, this violence takes different forms and occurs to different levels based on one's identity. Historically, people who are not identified as white have suffered physical, emotional, economic, political, and social violence. People who are identified as white are harmed by limitations of their own capacity to be humane—perhaps a more psychic or spiritual violence. Additionally, the concept of intersectionality reminds us that various aspects of our identity result in different forms of violence and that violence is based on who we are and in what context we are operating. The layering of the violence associated with our various social identities can result in greater levels of violence for those people who belong to multiple communities of marginalized people.

My perspective here is limited: My positionality—the way I view the world based on my own social identities—absolutely shapes my writing here (and always). As a white person, while I work to undo the damage caused by whiteness, I also embody it, represent it to people, and have absorbed it myself. As many times as I try to think, teach, write, and behave in a way that seeks to dismantle the oppression caused by whiteness, I cannot escape it. It limits my capacity to understand many concepts. There are many points in this essay (and everyday) in which I think I am doing or saying something that will dismantle the status quo of racism, but I am actually upholding and perpetuating it. Whiteness itself prevents me from seeing the whole picture. (The reader will witness this in action as I continue.)

As these foundational ideas suggest, this essay focuses on the cultural practices and ideologies that maintain whiteness within art education research (i.e. our composed niceness), in an effort to help envision what a new paradigm of solidarity might look like. How might we work together from our different positionalities to create an entirely different way of constructing, analyzing, interpreting, and sharing knowledge in the arts? I choose solidarity here with an intention of highlighting how we must all be in this struggle together—no simple allyship will truly dismantle whiteness. It is too pervasive. But solidarity—the action of working alongside each other, with shared visions, and strategic actions—perhaps that might help us imagine a world beyond whiteness (and perhaps a different form of niceness)?

What does art education research have to do with it?

It is hard to imagine three words that might contain more access to cultural power and social transformation than art, education, and research. As we know, art as a form of cultural production is about documenting the world as we see it, conveying a community's values, expressing complex ideas and experiences, and imagining alternative realities. It is through art that communities communicate ideas about who they are and why that matters. There is significant power in an artist's ability to create those messages and to have them heard by others. Likewise, education captures how knowledge is constructed, shared, learned, and taught. How, why, and who we teach is connected to who we are, who and what we value, and who we want people to be. Those who make decisions about education hold tremendous power in a society. Akin to art, research is fundamentally about constructing, interpreting, and sharing knowledge. Those who have access to shaping research can control the messages and values that are upheld in a society.

Unfortunately, the dominant approaches to art, education, and research are—like everything else—built on ideologies rooted in whiteness. These approaches maintain the cultural power of whiteness and uphold the ideology that white people, and their associated cultural values, are superior to all other people. Pause for a moment to consider some examples: the overwhelming majority of artwork taught in schools or displayed in museums has been created by white artists; our conventional pedagogies prioritize didactic teaching whereby the expert teacher (who, in the United States is almost always white) gives knowledge to her naïve students; and in research, academic standards rarely value oral histories, auto-ethnographies, or arts-based methodologies that decenter the primacy of the written word. In each of these examples, the cultural values of whiteness are prioritized over so-called alternative approaches to art, education, and research.** In doing so, the consequences are dire.

****Reviewer 71:** *There is a rich body of research on this – rephrase to indicate that this is your experience that echoes the findings of decades of research that has said this.*

MD: *Oops. Here is a classic example of the ways in which whiteness plays out in academic writing. When I fail to cite the scholars before me who have worked on these ideas and who have informed my thinking, I benefit from their work without acknowledging them. This perpetuates their exclusion and lifts up my own scholarship. It does not expand the conversation to recognize the work—and with it, the humanity of—the many people who have dedicated their careers to these ideas. In doing so, I steal ownership of their ideas (even if unintentionally). And yet, I did not revise this here. I did not include extensive citations because my focus in this essay is not a scholarly literature review—others can and have done that excellent work before me. My aim here is rather a personal reflective essay about how I am thinking about my own work. I am concerned that if I begin to veer more towards the formal conventions of academic writing and citing here, I will lose the tone and the intention to write in a slightly different mode. I have tried to reiterate the idea that many of the ideas I write about in this essay are nothing new and that I am merely repeating what many unrecognized artists, scholars, educators, and writers have wondered and advocated before me (many of whom do not have formal publication records to cite). I struggle with whether or not I, as a white person, have a role in such a seemingly self-indulgent form of reflective writing, and yet, here is such an essay. The conundrum of writing about whiteness from within, as another reviewer points out, seems to be both problematic and necessary at the same time. So here, I lean towards the goal of multiplicity and an attempt to be vulnerable in my musings (without doing harm, I hope). I welcome suggestions about how to navigate this.*

But what if, as the panel of scholars in 2018 suggested, I (and others committed to deconstructing white domination) retrained my / our practices? What if we could all approach our work with the intention of destroying the whiteness that inherently limits our collective capacity? What might art, education, research, and therefore, art education research look like, in a paradigm of solidarity?*

****Reviewer 71:** *Isn't this the point of the panel, and others at 2018 NAEA? Rephrase this to clarify that you are thinking on this. You could do this by saying that the panel raised this question for you. – Replace "we" with "me" and "I" so its focus is clear.*

MD: *Oops, another example of the danger of "we."*

Towards a Paradigm of Solidarity

Recently, I've been reading the work of educators Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001), who write about the characteristics of a culture of white superiority.³ In their list, they include the following concepts: perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, valuing quantity over quality, worship of the written word, belief in only one right way, paternalism, either /or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, belief that I'm the only one (who can do this 'right'), the belief that progress is bigger and more, a belief in objectivity, and claiming a right to comfort. When I first read this list of characteristics, I was struck by how familiar they felt to my daily life; they echoed the lessons my grandparents instilled in me, and the ways I had been groomed to behave by managers and professors in my field. It felt as if I was reading a list of my own unspoken behaviors and beliefs—none of which I had ever thought of as being tied to racism. In my experience, these are the values of my people—namely, white people⁴—and, because these are the dominant modes of our society, it means that my white way of seeing the world, my white way of being, is maintained. **

****Reviewer 71:** *Be careful of generalizations.. what happened to intersectionality?*

MD: *I tried to address this by highlighting which aspect of my identity—my whiteness—I'm referring to, but the reviewer is right: without a clearer discussion of intersectionality my arguments flatten my identities into a myopic perspective. I haven't entirely fixed this in this essay. When teaching about whiteness I always stumble over how I need to falsely pull it out for a minute to analyze it as if it is not connected to all of my other identities. However, I have not yet figured out how to teach other white people about our own whiteness without focusing on it alone for the sake of conversation. I am deeply puzzled by how to do this in my writing and don't know the answer.*

I fit right into this set of cultural practices with ease—it's home!
However, for those people who practice different values or uphold

³ In true collaborative fashion, Jones & Okun attribute their work to many other scholars. I include their names here as well as they cite them in their own words: "Andrea Ayvazian, Bree Carlson, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Eli Dueker, Nancy Emond, Jonn Lunsford, Sharon Martinas, Joan Olsson, David Rogers, James Williams, Sally Yee, as well as the work of Grassroots Leadership, Equity Institute Inc., the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Challenging White Supremacy workshop, the Lillie Allen Institute, the Western States Center, and the contributions of hundreds of participants in the Dismantling Racism process."

⁴ In this statement, I intentionally focus on my racial identity over my other intersecting identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, economic class, formal education, religion, etc. I ask the reader to understand that I pull out my racial identity here not to neglect the other elements of who I am, but to continue my analysis of how whiteness affects my work.

different beliefs, there is *no place to exist* within the limits of these values. If we are what we value and believe, then the fact that these dominant values reign supreme means that people who do not ascribe to these values cannot participate in this culture; they are segregated out as misfits. Who has time for the indigenous elder who slowly recounts a story in the oral tradition of their ancestors? How can I cite something that does not exist in text? Who cares if someone is excluded when I teach in what I know to be the best way (according to the scholars)? And what if my niceness makes someone uncomfortable, or worse, silences their contributions? In other words, in maintaining these values, we maintain a white way of being as the dominant—and only—way of being; you’re either in, or you’re out. Whiteness as rightness.

Again and again, I’ve been drawn to this work on white cultural practices as I’ve engaged more deeply in co-facilitating anti-racism workshops for art and museum educators. The niceness of our field has been one of the comforts I’ve enjoyed for years. And yet, in these anti-racism workshops, surrounded by other white people, I have been struck by how hard it is for white people to move beyond our composed niceness to understand how our cultural practices reinforce whiteness and therefore perpetuate racism. We⁵ seem content to focus on condemning individual acts of interpersonal racism (i.e. a racist comment, an unjust hiring decision, or a discriminatory action by a school leader) rather than consider the institutional and ideological manifestations of the idea of whiteness as rightness. It is hard for us to hold up our cultural practices as potentially problematic; we like our niceness. We are so steeped in our whiteness that we cannot see a way out of it (and this is part of the work of whiteness itself—to keep those of us in power lulled into complacent ignorance).

The switch to thinking about the ideologies of whiteness, not just the interpersonal examples of racism is hard for many white people. In these museum-based workshops I’ve been co-facilitating, where the overwhelming majority of participants are white, all too often our discussions of the pervasiveness of whiteness are met with an exasperated plea: “OK, fine, I don’t want to be racist, but now what? What can I actually do?” As a white person, I’m sympathetic to this exclamation since I feel it myself regularly. When whiteness is so powerful, what can I, as a solitary white person—an arts educator and researcher, not a policy maker or legislator—do to topple an ideology that is far older, deeper, and more powerful than I am? How can I transform my own limited thinking and transform my daily activities

⁵ A reminder to the reader that I employ the collective “we” here to refer to people who are identified as or identify themselves as white. In this essay, I continue to pull on our white identities over our other identities to focus attention on the role of race and racism. Certainly, there are people who do not fit these experiences; however I have found many of these patterns to be prevalent in my own work.

into actions that lift people up, rather than extend and deepen harm?

What does it even look like to be a person in a white body trying to resist the whiteness I embody? In the past few years, these questions have regularly rattled me, causing me to question how and why I approach my work, my teaching, my activism, my relationships, and even, more personally my parenting. As someone who likes to think of myself as an activist, my scholarship has always focused on the intersection of art and social justice and I have always claimed to try to teach in a way that emphasizes liberatory education. However, as I've begun to interrogate my own values and practices, I've started to see how whiteness colors even my best intentions as an educator, researcher, and activist. While I think I know intellectually how to argue and discuss whiteness and how to encourage others to work towards anti-racism, I'm still operating within a culture that prioritizes white people above all others—and that culture has felt both comfortable and hard to re-imagine.

Drawing on the work of many anti-racism educators, especially the aforementioned work of Jones & Okun (2001; see also Okun, n.d.), I turn to their clear descriptions of the underlying cultural practices within white superiority culture to help me examine the cultural practices of art education researchers and practitioners with an eye towards unraveling how those practices are bound up in whiteness. By looking closely at the dominant modes of being that are common to our field (and often beyond it), I have started to better understand how the values and practices that I take for granted ultimately serve to maintain whiteness. As **I**** do this, **I** can seek what Okun and Jones term, “antidotes”—values in complementary opposition to whiteness—that might enable me (and more of us) to disrupt our current practices in art education research to move towards a paradigm not of whiteness, but of solidarity.

****MD:** *Oops—I used we as the primary pronoun in this entire section, forgetting that I was lumping in a lot of people with different perspectives by using we. Classic example of the omniscient white voice in action.*

In other words, if **I** can learn to disrupt **my** normal routines—the ways in which **I** enter **my** daily work, respond to emails, conceive of research or teaching questions, mentor juniors, prepare lesson plans, communicate with colleagues and students, facilitate classes, collect data, publish and present work, participate in critiques, measure our success, build coalitions, and even create art—then maybe, **I**, along with a community of others committed to this work, can construct a field that prioritizes solidarity over whiteness. Certainly, many scholars, artists, and educators are already doing this; by no means is this thinking new. I share it here as a public reflection of my own wondering in hopes of inviting others who might be new to these

ideas to join in a re-imagining of our collective work**.

****MD:** *Thanks to the reviewer, I am trying to remind all readers (and myself) that my ideas are not original here; many others before me, particularly many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have been advocating these ideas—often without formal academic recognition—for years.*

In what follows, I draw on Okun's (n.d.) list of white supremacy culture characteristics to try to name some values and practices that seek to challenge the power of whiteness in art education research. While many of the values they describe apply to our domain, I have identified three dominant cultural modes in art education that I have been analyzing in my own teaching and research work: binary categories, individualism, and defensive pride. For each of these, I describe some of the consequences of the current mode of operation (as best I can from a limited vantage point), and some possibilities for solidarity and racial equity that could come from learning towards a value of solidarity. I try to keep the emphasis here on what I have experienced and observed in the fields of art education and research simply to focus our work as a field. It is likely that these values and practices affect each of us differently based on who we are; I am surely missing key elements as I try to unpack them. And this list itself is by no means definitive; a richer, more nuanced list would require some of the very values I mention below such as collaboration and expansive thinking. However, it's a start. I refer to it here as a reflective tool to help direct my own work and perhaps, to collectively imagine what a field of art education (and art education research) might look like if it were built on an ideology of solidarity instead of whiteness.**

****Reviewer 71:** *I am a little concerned here – the categories you offer are part of existing research, yet the way you write these indicate that these are original thoughts based on your experience only.. this makes for a weak literature review, in a scholarly paper. It makes the entire next section problematic. One way to amend this is to clarify how these ideas and categories are leading you to revise your teaching.*

MD: *The reviewer is right here in pointing out the danger of avoiding a comprehensive literature review. As I mention above, I did not set out to write a literature review. On one hand, I do want to maintain the tone and reflective perspective of this piece for two main reasons: first, I want to practice a kind of writing that is not typically acknowledged as useful in academic circles—a reflective and openly vulnerable essay. Because whiteness tells us to be guarded and confident in our writing, to write in the passive voice, to prioritize ideas that have backing in other academically approved sources (i.e. journals), I think there is value in writing that tries to undermine that convention*

MD (cont'd): *And secondly, I think there is something about writing in an accessible voice without the interruptions of constant citations that can invite readers to feel like we are in conversation. My hope with this essay was to spark conversation amongst other white arts educators. What that means for me as a white author is still confusing to me since it still causes the harm that the reviewer has pointed out here. Is that harm worth it? How do I hold these two conflicting truths at the same time?*

A note on the “we”: Using the language of imagination in the sections that follow, I use the collective “we” as an invitation to envision possibilities. The “we” in these sections is one that does not yet exist, but one for which many before and around me have imagined for decades. I add my thoughts here to the chorus of voices that have wondered about new ways of doing things long before I even knew that art education existed. Again, I write in many ways here primarily for my white colleagues who may be newly re-thinking their own work as a springboard towards more self-criticality and coalition-building**

****MD:** *Thanks to the reviewer, I'm trying to practice clarifying who I mean by we. All too often, when white authors use we, we obliterate the nuanced and important differences of the many perspectives included within any group of people, thereby silencing those important voices.*

From Binary Categories to Multiplicity and Expansiveness

Despite claims that art education is a creative, open-minded field, we (the field) are in effect, a domain dominated by white artists, white scholars, white historians, and white educators; there is primarily one way of viewing the world, and it's through the lens of whiteness. In our current binary-loving paradigm, only those scholars, artists, and educators who work within already determined categories (categories that were, historically and today, defined by white people and are largely occupied by white people) are valued. Consider the following white-created categories: art vs. craft (whereas many non-Western cultures do not differentiate the two); historical art movements (largely populated and determined by white artists and scholars); nation-based classifications for discussing art (even though the borders of many countries were created by white colonialists). The categories prevent multiple perspectives; they do not accommodate holding multiple categories simultaneously. There is no intersectionality. Within this paradigm we are missing so many perspectives and approaches. Our binary thinking prevents us from a deeper understanding of art and of pedagogy that could come from including more perspectives and approaches in our work. By prioritizing only dominant voices (aka white views) we have maintained the commitment to whiteness in our work; in doing so, our field suffers from a lack of multiple understandings and unacknowledged categories. I feel this often in teaching about

artwork from cultures outside of my own, when I wonder if I'm using limiting language or forcing categories on artists or artworks or objects that are antithetical to what the culture believes. While we may not always agree with perspectives different than our own, it is no doubt that including them in conversations deepens our own knowledge and understanding. Without this, our field will grow only more insular and narrow in focus.

What if, as many scholars, artists, and educators have wondered before, the primary mode of intellectual work, collegial conversation, and pedagogy in our field was built on a deep commitment to multiplicity and expansive thinking? Beyond binary thinking, there would be a sense that conflicting and contradictory concepts can exist simultaneously, and that the more multi-faceted our understanding of something was, be it an idea, a work of art, a student, or ourselves, the richer our scholarship and teaching would be. **

****Reviewer 71:** *Again, there are entire bodies of work that are dedicated to discussing and showing what this looks like in an art classroom.*

MD: *Yep, here is another example of how I, as a white person, unintentionally lay claim to ideas that have existed long before I was even born. By leaving out references to the many other people who have thought, talked, taught, and written about these ideas before, I erase them from the conversation and lift my own voice up over theirs. My excuses for this are weak (I didn't have enough time to look up all the citations, I didn't have access to my library while writing this from another country, etc.) but it basically comes down to a certain amount of laziness whereby I don't always make time to prioritize reading, tracking, and citing the many other people writing on these topics. This perpetuates their exclusion from the canon of art education scholarship.*

We would be rewarded for moving beyond surface-level or conventional thinking and making. Our curricula would reflect this through including forms of art-making from all cultures and we would discuss them through the lenses of many different perspectives—the makers, the users, the critics, the historians, the socio-cultural anthropologists, the learners, the elders, and so forth. We would question dominant discourses of art that tell us that art is only one thing and can only be made by someone deemed an artist by white standards. We would seek out multiple epistemologies to make sense of the act of making. Our research would reflect these layers of expansive thinking, calling into question moments when we say “that can't possibly be true.” Because, maybe it could be. ⁶

⁶ A reminder here that *many* scholars, particularly scholars of color—both in formal spaces and outside of them—have long argued for these ideas. Little of what I offer here is new, but rather my own reflections on what might be possible if I, and others can collectively dismantle whiteness.

From Individualism to Collaboration and Community

Whereas whiteness teaches us to seek out the individual and praise him/her/them above all else, resulting in a sense of competition and power-hoarding; this has been the foundation of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism. A field that clings to individualism can only benefit a limited number of people; and almost always, those people are the ones already in power, namely, the white people. In art education, we see this play out when we credit only one author or maker for our work, when we celebrate individual artists as geniuses, and when we fail to teach about the interconnected networks of thinkers, makers, and educators who all contribute to the growth of ideas. This results in extending the dominance of whiteness by failing to name the countless people (conventionally those who are not identified as white) who have contributed to the world of art and ideas; their contributions remain ignored. In my own work, I feel this pull towards individualism in my hunger for professional accolades and the pangs of jealousy when a colleague—even a beloved friend who deserves the credit—receives a grant or publication. I fail to see their success as interconnected with my own. Not only do these reactions harm my relationships, they also harm my own work, framing it as a solo endeavor, rather than connected to a lineage and network of others.

A move towards collaboration would re-center our work on lifting up all people with equity (meaning a redistribution of power especially to those who have had none) in mind. What if we could build on a commitment to multiplicity by actually incorporating and building on each other's ideas, art-making, and teaching to create new and collective ways of thinking about art, education, and research? With collaboration in mind, we could write articles that weave together our multiple voices; name the many contributors to our ideas publicly; co-teach classes that model the very collaboration we seek to promote; conduct research on questions that we've generated in working groups; and share ideas freely with colleagues across the field. In this paradigm, we would be rewarded not for our individual production, but rather for how we have contributed to a community.

From Defensive Pride to Humble Discomfort

In order to maintain power, white people are taught to defend themselves from critiques of their position and perspectives. As Robin Di'Angelo (2018) notes, this results in "white fragility" whereby white people react to questions about their motives, beliefs, and values with defensiveness—they are fragile in moments of racial conflict. Connected to the pride of individualism, this cultural practice prevents us from actively listening to perspectives outside of our own. When confronted with new ideas or critiques, this defensiveness

creates a barrier to deeper learning. In art education, we see this in the posturing or pontificating in our faculty meetings in reaction to so-called conflicting ideas and in the wounding anonymous critiques in teaching observations and on our publications. I feel it regularly when I respond with empty excuses to comments from students or colleagues about the ways in which my teaching or writing is racist. This defensiveness maintains white power by building a wall around deeper understanding about our identities, our blindspots, and the areas in which we must work harder to overcome our limited awareness. Whiteness teaches me to concede no ground to the critiques that don't match my way of thinking.

What if we acknowledged how our work was shaped by others and continues to evolve, where we humbly seek each other's advice and encouragement on our teaching, our research, and our art-making? To choose humility over pride would significantly alter the day-to-day realities of our field. Rather than defensive rebukes of critiques, we would seek to learn from what colleagues and students are gracious enough to share with us about our work. The consequences for our teaching would be dramatic: the practice of humility with students would empower them to see themselves as agents in pursuit of collective knowledge. In stepping back as the primary expert in the classroom, we could lift up the voices of each member to contribute to a holistic understanding of art and art-making. In our research, humility would allow us to shed the omniscient passive voice in writing, to pose research questions that expose our lack of knowledge, and to approach data collection with a deep desire to learn and grow—and potentially (likely) learn that our original assumptions were incorrect. In other words, this move would enable us to move beyond the limitations a whiteness that fears losing power into a space of solidarity towards the pursuit of shared power. Our research and teaching would undoubtedly stretch into deeper understanding as we lost a desire to be the sole expert.

In a field where humility is paramount, we can let go of pretenses of expertise in all things to become open to the truth that we are always growing and learning—that we cannot possibly be right about everything. By embracing the value of humility, we put into practice a different mode of interaction with colleagues and students that can open up opportunities for us to learn in solidarity about each other's perspectives. With humility can come an unsettling discomfort as our ideas are challenged. But what if we lean into that discomfort in order to deepen our understandings? When a colleague or student suggests that our thinking might be limited by the confines of whiteness, we graciously ask them if they would be generous enough to tell us more. When our research is critiqued as supporting binary thinking or dominant discourses, we seek to understand why, even (and especially) when we feel pained by the critique. Just as we've always

asked our students to step out of their comfort zones to analyze contemporary art or to experiment with a new material or to embark on a first interview, we must follow their lead into that which feels intimidating or unsettling.

For deeper consideration; the list continues

Needless to say, the three cultural values and practices above are only the start of a list of modes of being that dominate our field. Whiteness touches everything. In a move towards solidarity, **I**, and **many other white people**, must also consider other cultural values and practices that perpetuate whiteness.

***MD: Oops, I had slipped back into the use of the blanket "we" again, despite my best efforts to speak from my own experience and not on behalf of other people.*

We might note how our sense of urgency prevents us from devoting the time necessary to build relationships with people across difference or how an emphasis on quantity over quality limits our capacity to dig deeply into our research questions, to give them the time and space they need to move beyond the barriers of dominant thinking. We might consider how a reliance on the written word means that we neglect so many other cultural perspectives who operate from an oral tradition, or who value song, dance, movement, or other forms of documentation. **

***Reviewer: Again, there are areas of research methods/ art education methods that cover these, but here it reads like it's your original ideas.*

MD: I agree. And yet, I didn't change this. I left it because I'm hopeful that my earlier revisions highlight how I'm reflecting aloud in an effort to call in other white educators and scholars into the conversation without being "bogged down" by citations and academic-speak. But I am doubtful if that is a good enough reason

We might begin to notice that our belief that progress is linear and always better has led us into a way of thinking that devalues historical knowledge or ancestral ways of being, again preventing us from learning cultural perspectives outside of those aligned with the post-Enlightenment quest for progress. We might also note that a fear of conflict has prevented us from experiencing productive points of rupture—moments that might lead us into new ways of understanding the world, perhaps one towards solidarity.

Closing thoughts: From niceness to radical disruption?

Attentive readers might notice that I have not yet begun to unpack

the concept of niceness—a form of polite interaction that often prevents deeper engagement and critique of ideas, silences divergent perspectives, glosses over important nuance, and precludes trusting, honest relationships. It is from behind a screen of niceness that we maintain the status quo by quieting discomfort and conflict. This particular kind of niceness keeps us all in line—and the line we keep is one created by white people. **

****Reviewer:** *Erm – not sure how I feel about this.. It sounds like you're saying niceness / being nice is a white cultural concepts. Non white cultures can be (im)perfectly nice too!*

MD: *Agreed! However white people also have control of power, and so my niceness carries a different kind of political and cultural weight that can be used (even unintentionally) to oppress, silence, and control other people.*

When participants at an anti-racism workshop approach me afterwards to say they learned so much, I often worry that niceness is preventing them from speaking honestly about how scared they are of committing to anti-racism. When I speak nicely about whiteness, I do so in an effort to calm the anxieties of my white colleagues (and myself as well). Even this essay, I'm pretty sure, is drenched in niceness; I've said little to dramatically upend the system of academic writing in art education.

Now, in critiquing niceness, I don't mean to turn away from the idea of treating each other with kindness, dignity, and humanity. Certainly, solidarity is built on these values. But how can we reach for those values if we don't step out from our composed niceness to really recognize ourselves for who we are—both the keepers of the cultural values that uphold whiteness and their potential disruptors?

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