

# Art and Visual Intervention Strategies to Resist Racism and Racial Stereotypes

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## ABSTRACT

In our article, we share five teaching strategies to address and confront racism, racial bias, and stereotypes. Echoing contemporary artists who provide excellent visual interventions against racism and racial violence, we offer artistic and visual intervention strategies designed for art classrooms and community settings. Our strategies include visual intervention, anti-racist gaze, counter-narrative and storytelling, cultural and ethnic identity celebration, and coalition building. We believe that these strategies advance racial dialogues in schools, providing students of color with opportunities and tools for their stories to be heard. Facing unprecedented violence and multi-layered racial problems in our society, our strategies grounded in the power of artistic intervention and activism will offer a valuable tool to engage students with the practice of anti-racism.

**KEYWORDS:** Racism, Visual Strategies, Coalition Building, Counter-Narrative, Anti-Racist Gaze

## Introduction

Recent events, such as COVID-19, globalizing racism, and racial violence, have fueled further racial tensions and conflicts in our society (Bode, 2022; Kraehe, 2022). Students have been affected by racism and the toxic rhetoric of indifference and harassments in schools and on their way to school (Mitchell, 2021; Yam, 2021). The efforts of rejecting and removing Critical Race Theory in schools is one of the movements in many states and the political arena. Facing these racial tensions and violence, artists have publicly conveyed striking statements to

support marginalized groups and communities through various street artworks and social media posts, rejecting racism against any race and ethnic group. Some artist-activists' art or cultural projects, such as Asian American Federation (AAF)'s *I am Really From* posters (2021), Little Mekong art and cultural projects in Saint Paul (Sutton, 2021), Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya's posters (Beete, 2021), and Cerise Lim Jabobs' opera activism (Coons, 2021) have utilized social media to raise awareness and have mobilized to protest and promote solidarity and coalition among community members, activists, and artists. One of their key strategies is to create visual images for visibility utilizing the power of art as a voice for the voiceless (Cooper, Hsieh, & Lu, 2022).

As art educators, we argue that racial messages have infiltrated our lives through powerful popular media and visual culture (Duncum, 2020). For example, there has already been a long but negative history related to racism against marginalized groups through popular and visual culture (Cooper, Hsieh, & Lu, 2022; Bae-Dimitriadis, 2021; Kraehe, 2022). Almost all minority group members have witnessed and/or suffered from distorted and biased depictions of them, labeling and stereotyping, and marginalization. In our article, we offer several teaching strategies applicable to K-12 schools or community settings, developed first among us as strategies to confront anti-Asian racism. We realized that these strategies should be extended to other marginalized groups in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture. The following strategies are a collection of our works for the past couple of years, going through a series of struggles with concepts and approaches to addressing racism and racial issues in the classroom. We applied them to our classroom and will share their responses in this article.

Before we start our story, we disclose our positionality as Asian-American immigrant art educators who teach art and visual culture education in U.S. higher education. Considering our immigrant status from Asia, we extensively worked on pedagogical approaches to reject racism, especially anti-Asian racism. We expand these strategies to support all students of color, as we have successfully applied these strategies to our classes, in which we believe that all students, including white students, can benefit from them. The testimonials and artworks by students were collected and analyzed after we implemented teaching strategies into our classes, such as art education methods and general education courses. After carefully reflecting and reviewing student responses to our teaching, we present our student artworks and anecdotal data as well as our critical reflections in this article in support of our claims and recommendations towards a racially just pedagogy.

Our strategies include visual intervention, anti-racist gaze, counter narrative and storytelling, cultural and ethnic identity celebration, and coalition building. Each of them will be introduced, and we will

share some of our student works as the outcome of our anti-racism pedagogical practices.

## Visual Intervention

There are numerous visual perversions of race and culture in our daily lives. We can easily find stereotypical or distorted portrayals of others, especially of minority backgrounds (Lawton, 2018). Visual intervention can be an effective way to challenge this situation (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2021; D'Souza, 2021; Kraehe & Acuff, 2021). We offer an art intervention strategy as one of the most significant ways of both creating art against racism or subverting covert and overt racism. To achieve this goal, we encourage students to take three steps. First, identify how visual images have been used to activate racial stereotypes and bias in popular culture, social media, and their community. Second, by analyzing contemporary artworks, students further reflect on their observations and experiences of how their racial or ethnic identities have been distorted and misrepresented in everyday objects and images. Lastly, by visualizing their counternarratives in their own artworks, students promote a better understanding of others and bring social awareness of our surroundings.

In our art education courses, students discussed the stereotypical representations of minority groups in our surroundings, including Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups. Sharing visual images which lead to racial and cultural misperception, students critically reflect on how our society and popular media portray the images of different races and ethnicities. For example, the racial stereotypes of Native Americans were often discussed from popular culture, sharing numerous examples of stereotypes in sports, films, TV shows, and Disney characters. In one of the author's classes, a student brought the image of a "sleeping Mexican" statue, displayed in many different places, including restaurants or the front yard of individual houses. Other students pointed out that those "Mexican Siesta" statues are "classic" cultural stereotypes, widely utilized as a form of art in our everyday surroundings (CF, Personal Communication, September 19, 2022). A student responded to the conversation, by arguing that "These label Mexicans, or those of Mexican ancestry, as being lazy and doing nothing but sleeping all day. It's incredibly insulting because as we all know, those of Mexican heritage are some of the hardest working people out there" (CF, Personal Communication, September 19, 2022). Another student also criticized that, unlike the original intention of representing Mexicans taking a siesta after a day of hard work, "this statue was used to mock Mexicans during the Great Depression as lazy, drunk, and unemployed" (MC, Personal Communication, September 20, 2022). Echoing those viewpoints, a student further warned that this way of portrayal of an ethnic group could even provoke a misunderstanding that "all Mexican people are

supposed to dress like the statue with a “sombbrero” and the “sarape” (MA, Personal Communication, September 20, 2022). Identifying the visual misrepresentation in our daily lives, and making others conscious of those widespread misstatements can be an effective first step of visual intervention in art education.

Furthermore, by reviewing contemporary artworks, students can critically contemplate racial and cultural biases and expand their understanding by discussing the issues with their peers. For this purpose, first, we guide our students to examine contemporary artists’ counter-narratives toward racial and cultural prejudices. By watching the artists’ interviews and analyzing their responses and visual outcomes, students explore how those artists interpreted social concerns while visualizing them in their artworks. Second, we further ask students to consider whether they had similar experiences or perspectives, and how they also can incorporate any visual cues or sociocultural statements in their artwork. The students with minority backgrounds often address their racialized experiences and struggles by making connections to those contemporary artists’ artworks. For example, one Muslim student shared two images of a young artist whose works portray stereotypes about Muslims and Asians to criticize people’s limited understanding of other racial and ethnic groups. The student highlighted that when people see a Muslim, “the first thing that comes to their mind is ‘terrorist’” (NA, Personal Communication, September 18, 2022). She further emphasized that “After COVID-19 hit, all Asians were seen as the cause of the virus to the point that some Asians were being harassed and even some lost their lives” (NA, Personal Communication, September 18, 2022). She claimed that not everyone, “who has a scarf around their head is a terrorist,” nor “Asians are the virus;” rather, asserting that people should “stop judging every person in a race or religion” (NA, Personal Communication, September 18, 2022). Followed by this powerful statement, her peers agreed and continued the conversation about the topic. One student stated that, “There are so many people in the world that judge just by taking one glance at someone else,” (IM, Personal Communication, September 19, 2022), while another peer highlighted that, “[the artworks] really do scream the message of correcting such stereotypes that have become a huge problem around the world.” She continued stating that, “These images are a voice to the many people that are discriminated [against] on a daily [basis] and sharing them would help spread awareness on the discrimination of such” (AM, Personal Communication, September 19, 2022). These students’ statements provoked critical conversations about the social situations among their classmates. As instructors, we encourage students to freely share their thought processes with their peers while reflecting on their surroundings. Inspired by those contemporary artists’ provocative visual statements, students also reflect on their surroundings and the prejudice against people

from different backgrounds and develop social awareness through meaningful conversations.

Finally, as a visual intervention, students can create their visual artwork to deliver positive images and commonalities among individuals from various cultural and racial backgrounds. Utilizing their cultural symbols, valuable relationships, memories, and/or stories, students can represent their identity in positive ways to break possible connotations of certain cultural biases. As seen in Figure 1, students can include positive cultural components in their artworks, such as religion, food, and cultural heritage. We also noticed that some students had unfamiliar symbols and images in their artwork. In this case, student presentations helped clarify and help to understand the meanings and values of symbols within the student’s culture. These visual representations can help viewers to see the common aspects of human lives regardless of their racial, cultural, or religious differences.



**Figure 1.** Undergraduate student’s Digital Photo Collage, 2022.  
*Courtesy of the student artist.*

In another photo collage, a student also shared her valuable cultural and ethnic traits and backgrounds, and how they helped shape her identity mediated through various ideas, morals, and behaviors (see Figure 2). As a Hmong American, her physical aspects often signify her racial minority background; however, she rather embraced those racial components as positive aspects while highlighting the constructive quality of how her Hmong background led her to treat others with full respect.



**Figure 2.** Undergraduate student's Digital Photo Collage, 2020.  
Courtesy of the student artist.

## Anti-Racist Gazing

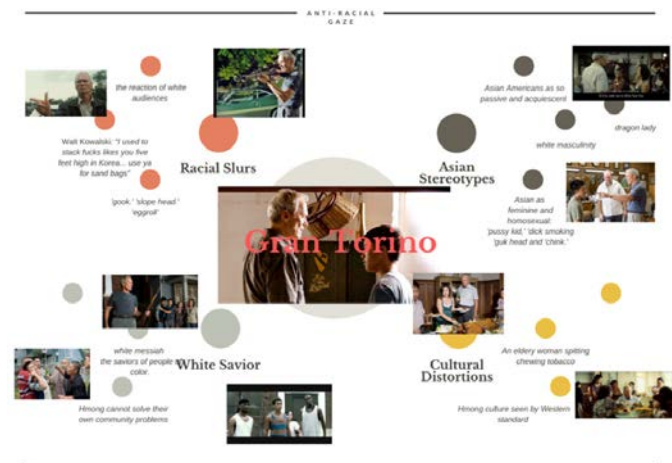
The meaning of the gaze, “incorporates many diverse ways of looking and also the physical, social and institutional contexts under which we look” (Duncum, 2020, p. 3). The purpose of anti-racial gazing is to critically examine symbols, images, and popular and visual culture to address and challenge racism in society (Shin et al., 2023). Gaze is an essential concept of how we see and understand visual culture and media. Students ask three questions: who is looked at, who is looking at, and the context in which they look (Duncum, 2020).

Utilizing this strategy, we encourage our students to choose and analyze visual culture, such as films, television programs, graphic novels, 3D virtual worlds, and video games. The goal of this practice is to analyze them to expose and address any racist gaze such as the White gaze, White surveillance gaze, and implicit racial bias. Through an anti-racist gaze, students can expose and resist the biased or stereotyped views of minority groups. For example, students are invited to challenge the White gaze as the default perspective that reinforces White supremacy in popular culture, examining how popular culture or social media are saturated with White master narrative. By analyzing the storyline, camera angle, and portrayal of people of color, students realize how media spread racialized and distorted views on minority groups. Students are often very surprised to realize some of their favorite characters from Hollywood movies or TV shows could be seen as offensive towards minority groups and their cultures. Some students

pointed out how they have consumed American popular culture and media without a critical lens.

Through gaze practice, students can examine the relationship of power in which looking and being looked at takes place, and this is a social understanding through which individuals’ perceptions, emotions, and behaviors are filtered (Kraehe & Acuff, 2021). Students often pointed out that they were not aware that many parts of the U.S. media’s portrayal of minority groups, such as Asians, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Middle Eastern descent, were based on racist perspectives and cultural misappropriation (Acuff, 2013; Kraehe et al., 2015).

Figure 3 presents an example of an anti-racial gaze in a visual illustration by one of the authors. This visualization of anti-Asian gazing exposes the racial stereotypes and discriminations against Hmong in the movie, *Gran Torino* (2008). The movie was directed and produced by Clint Eastwood, a well-known actor. He also starred in the film as Walt Kowalski, a Korean War veteran who performed a heroic action to save a Hmong family by fighting and sacrificing himself also for the Hmong community. Although his action is considered heroic, it resonates a similar White savior rhetoric, as this movie illustrates the Hmong people as a powerless ethnic group who merely waits for help. In the film, Hmong people cannot solve their own community problems, are depicted as gang members, and their cultures are viewed through the eyes of the dominant Western culture. Figure 3 shows how the film includes many racial stereotypes, slurs, and cultural distortions against Hmong and other Asians, although it grossed \$270 million worldwide and was successful commercially as a typical Hollywood movie.



**Figure 3.** Anti-racist gazing and visual analysis based on *Gran Torino* (2008).

Anti-racist gaze analysis by a student prompted questions about racial representation in popular media and critique that the media lacks racial diversity. She was disappointed by how white people even play real-life people of color in a movie, arguing that, “people of color deserve to see themselves represented in the media, and people of color deserve to have their stories fairly and accurately told” (V. Long, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

The film *21* (2008) was a movie inspired by Jeffrey Ma, an Asian American man who was a star member of the MIT Blackjack team in the 1990s. Ma happened to be featured in the film, but not in the role of himself. Ma played an extra, while a white actor, Jim Sturgess, played the role of Jeffrey Ma. Not only that, but the filmmakers went as far as renaming the character to “Ben Campbell,” which ultimately erased any Asian identity from the character. Why would the creators of this film choose to cast a white man to tell the story of an Asian man’s life? Perhaps it is because the media believes that Asian people are not as marketable as white people, or perhaps they are hesitant to tell the success stories of people of color. Regardless of the reason, it is disappointing and disheartening that the media struggles with diversity to this extent. (V. Long, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021)

These two examples show how popular media culture is saturated with racial bias and stereotypes, which require close and critical reading for critical analysis against the racist representation of people of color.

## Counter Narrative and Storytelling

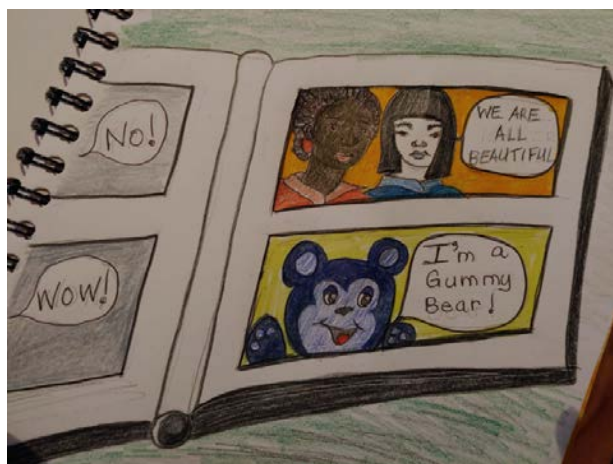
Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), narrative inquiry, life history, and autoethnography, counter-narrative functions as a transformative approach to culturally sensitive pedagogy and teaching for diversity (Miller, Liu, & Ball, 2020). Delgado (1995) explained that counter-story [narrative] is a, “counter-reality that is experienced by subordinate groups, as opposed to those experiences of those in power [dominant narratives]” (p. 194). The approach of counter-narrative and storytelling can be a powerful tool for learners to explore, express, and reflect on their untold but important experiences and stories. Sharing these stories with others could inspire others to do the same and counter the dominant narratives, which marginalize stories of minority groups, especially people of color (Shin et al., 2023).

The counter-narrative also can help learners construct their identities with multi modules or aspects of lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For instance, several authors (2022) shared their own

immigration stories with pre-service art teachers and guided them to re-discover their untold or difficult experiences to map out what factors have been shaping their identities. Another example is to share contemporary artists’ visual narratives [artworks] with learners as a source for activism and making marginalized stories heard. Cooper et al. (2022) showed a high-resolution video projection/sound/installation, *Chinaman’s Chances on Promontory Summit Golden Spike Celebration*, made by a contemporary artist Zhi Lin to their pre-service art teachers, and guided them to confront history and retrieve the memory. Zhi Lin’s installation video revealed the untold story behind the historical celebration and represented the viewpoint of the Chinese workers at the transcontinental railroad completion ceremony.

When implementing a counter-narrative approach in art classrooms, there are various ways to encourage learners to deliver their narratives. For example, Michelle Redwine, a preservice art teacher created a comic strip (see Figure 4) and shared her childhood experiences regarding the races and the comparisons of racial issues. She wrote (2022),

My comic strip drawing expresses the experiences felt when reading on the topic of racial harmony and enjoyment in my childhood. The many skin tones, hairstyles and textures, makeup, and colors in their clothing of the characters with dialogues of encouragement. I grew up in the 1970s and became an adult in 1991 chronologically. During those times the world seemed to be more harmonized-together or getting along in my neck of the woods...I remember my childhood best friend Allison (blonde hair and blue eyes). We went everywhere together. ...I look at the state of the world today and it is very scary. Even within my own race. It is like the mentality of crabs in the barrel-where you will not succeed if I cannot succeed. All that does is cause the race to implode. Graphic novels/comic strips are sometimes mirrors of what is going on today (Personal communication, April 2nd, 2022).



**Figure 4.** Michelle Redwine, *Comic strip and childhood memory*, 8" X 11", color pencil on paper

Her work demonstrated that counter-narratives are not only helping them to recognize lived experiences from various ethnic groups and nationalities (Shin et al., 2023) but also providing multiple entry points to students of color (Acuff et al., 2012).

### Cultural and Ethnic Identity Celebration

Cultural and ethnic identity is considered one's sense of belonging to a self-categorized cultural and ethnic group's heritage, values, beliefs, and traditions (Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Milne, 2017; Phinney, 1996; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Many students of color who were born and raised in America experience 'otherness' because of their race and ethnic heritage, struggling with their cultural and ethnic identity. To strengthen their sense of belonging, we encourage art teachers to consider the strategy of celebrating one's cultural and ethnic identity.

In applying the strategy, we invite students to critically examine contemporary artwork that engage with minority communities and their narratives. Place-based pedagogy emphasizes the real-world problems and lived experiences in a community, and it provides students to explore how human experiences are shaped by place (Edelglass, 2009). Applying the place-based pedagogy, students can investigate how artists, especially minorities, explore their ethnic communities and narratives as a way of celebrating cultural and ethnic identity. This strategy encourages students to explore and centralize their own community and its untold stories, transforming their struggles into a celebration of their cultural and ethnic identity.

KP, a Korean American youth who has struggled with his ethnic and cultural identity, was inspired by a local contemporary African American artist, Skip Hill, and his artwork, *Barber Shop (Edge Up!)*. Skip Hill portrays an African American barbershop with iconic symbols of African American community. According to him,

You can imagine white folks didn't cut black folk's hair. So, it was ready-made, customer-based, client-based, so early on, we see barbershops popping up in black communities, particularly in urban places. The beauty of barbershops for black people has always been a safe place where they can be themselves without being under the white gaze and could share a talk on weather, sport, politics, and what's happening on the street...I consider barbershops as an icon of the black community. (108 Contemporary, 2021)

After examining the cultural significance of African American icons, such as hair products and the dynamics of their hairstyles, and of the barbershop space for African Americans in the painting, *Barber Shop (Edge Up!)*, KP began to contemplate his lifetime haircut experiences in Korean barbershops. In his entire 15 years, he never experienced an American barbershop because his Asian hairstyles were different from those of whites or African Americans. For him, a Korean barbershop is a safe place where he can share anything on Korea-related pop cultures, issues, and community events as a Korean American youth, as seen in his drawing (Figure 5), *New Look* (2022).



**Figure 5.** 15-year-old Korean American youth, *New Look*, 2022. Courtesy of the student artist.

In *New Look*, I took inspiration from a multimedia piece, *Barber Shop (Edge Up!)* by Skip Hill. This piece depicts the cultural significance of a barbershop in African American culture. I took a similar approach in *New Look*, portraying a barbershop that I have been a longtime customer of. The Korean barbershop, reflected in the mirror, is decked with common Korean household objects such as K-drama, K-pop, Korean TV shows, Korean-style coffee, snacks, dolls, hair products, and bible verses in Korean. I used these cultural items to create a cultural atmosphere that expresses the Korean identity. (KP, personal communication, Jan 2, 2023)

By centralizing his Korean community and its untold narratives in this drawing, art became a tool to celebrate his Korean American identity that was rarely disclosed in public.

Another way to apply the strategy of celebrating one's cultural and ethnic identity is to encourage students to research and apply their own cultural symbols and icons into their art to navigate their sense of belonging and identity. In his next painting, Figure 6 *Girl* (2022), KP proudly used traditional Korean cultural symbols and icons, such as *Hanbok*, traditional Korean wear, and *Byeongpung*, a traditional Korean folding screen. The image of a traditionally dressed Korean girl who has slanted Asian eyes represents the stronghold of Korean culture in America. The cultural symbols, icons, and images signify a celebration of his Korean American identity, protecting his cultural and ethnic identity from white assimilation. He said,

The panels behind her shield and protect her from the grasp of white assimilation, which lay beyond her. Through *Girl*, I wish to highlight the importance of maintaining one's own culture, even when the society around us wants to break down our "walls" to attack and whitewash our cultural identity. (KP, personal communication, Jan 2, 2023)



**Figure 6.** 15-year-old Korean American youth, *Girl*, 2022.  
Courtesy of the student artist.

These two artworks show how the strategy of celebrating one's cultural and ethnic identity empowers students to build their ethnic identity, challenging stereotypes against their ethnic heritage.

### Coalition Building

Coalition building is an effective way to address anti-Asian racism that Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities face and to work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society. As art educators, in order for systematic change to occur, we seek the power of both coalitions among Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities and inter-ethnic or inter-racial coalitions to confront and address racism and racial inequity in the United States. First, coalition building among AANHPI groups to achieve a common goal is essential as it provides a platform for these communities to amplify their voices and increase their visibility. In addition, cross-racial and cross-ethnic solidarity is a shared goal that all minority groups should seek and expect, and we encourage educators and students of color to develop such coalitions (Fujino, 2021). We believe educators must break out of the divided and compartmentalized racial and ethnic walls defined by master narratives and White supremacy (Acuff et al., 2012; Rodriguez & Kim, 2018). Interracial conflict, distrust, and struggle among minority groups, such as Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinx

Americans, and others, have been mischaracterized as inter-racial crises and distorted by biased media representations, supporting the interests of White supremacy. When different racial and ethnic groups of students share and seek mutual understanding for the purposes of solidarity, it facilitates the development of more racially just, inclusive, and responsive classrooms (Lawton, 2018).

In terms of coalition building, an excellent example is AANHPI forming alliances involving community-based organizations and advocacy groups. Artists and organizations from AANHPI communities have actively worked together to provide platforms for each other to amplify their voices. For example, visual artist Audrey Chan, who is Chinese-American, and rapper Jason Chu created a collaborative project called “An American Vocabulary: Words to Action” (Figure 7). The project consists of four themes of multilingual flashcards: voice, ancestor, care, and persistence that portray AANHPI figures, events, and actions (JANM, 2023). Chan, Chu, and the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) collaborated with the Asian Americans Advancing Justice Southern California (AAAJSC) and organized events related to the project featuring musicians and visual artists from the AANHPI communities.



**Figure 7.** Selection of cards in “An American Vocabulary: Words to Action,” a collaborative project by visual artist Audrey Chan and rapper Jason Chu.



**Figure 8.** Template for students to create new AANHPI voices flashcards, designed by An American Vocabulary: Words to Action project.

This project is an example of coalition building among AANHPI communities as it is a shared vocabulary of AANHPI, “agency and unity in the fight for justice, healing, and understanding” (JANM, 2023). Chan and Chu consulted AANHPI community members about AANHPI knowledge, figures, and events when designing the four themes of multilingual flashcards. JANM and the AAAJSC provide a platform for artists Audrey Chan and Jason Chu to challenge dominant historical narratives and to bring a social consciousness through the power of visual arts and words (JANM, 2023; Chu, 2023). Chan, Chu, and JANM also provided workshops for teachers to use these multilingual flashcards in their K-12 classrooms to bring social justice awareness. For instance, Chan and Chu designed a template that K-12 students can create new cards (Figure 8) based on their research on AANHPI communities with drawings and descriptions of the stories. This template will also provide students with opportunities to bring their knowledge of AANHPI communities to classrooms.

Artists, such as Audrey Chan and Jason Chu, have been involved in community coalition building among diverse racial and ethnic groups. Their artistic and coalition building practices provide a platform or media for AANHPI communities to amplify their voices, which is crucial in addressing racism and racial bias or stereotypes. As art educators, we introduce those artists and their artworks to our students to increase the visibility of AANHPI artistic and cultural practices. Their artworks, which are rooted in AANHPI knowledge and events, can deepen the understanding of individual cultural specificities through inter-ethnic or inter-racial coalitions. Through the practice of coalition building, we can come together to amplify our voices and help each other better understand our voices through discussions of artistic practices. A deeper understanding of artistic and cultural practices can



help educators and students challenge racial and cultural stereotypes. And coalition building is essential to facilitate such understanding in art educational settings as it addresses the artistic and cultural nuances in each racial and ethnic community.

## Conclusion

In our article, we shared several teaching strategies to address and confront racism, racial bias, and stereotypes. Echoing various artists who provide excellent visual interventions against racism and racial violence, we offered five strategies applicable to most art classrooms and community settings, such as visual intervention, anti-racist gazing, counter-narrative and storytelling, cultural and ethnic identity celebration, and coalition-building. We believe that each of these strategies can be used and introduced without any particular order. Art teachers and students choose specific strategies based on their social and cultural background, reflecting on their positionality and artistic interest.

We face unprecedented violence and multi-layered racial problems in our society. As visual art educators, we strongly believe in the power of artistic intervention and activism as agents and advocates for positive social change and transformation. Our visual strategies will support students of underrepresented groups, embracing all races and enmities through coalition, care, and support for all. We hope that these strategies help art educators and their students to raise their voices and stories through artistic and creative visualizations toward transformative and inclusive learning in our schools.

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