Black Education and Art as Activism in the Southeastern United States during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements: Archival Research toward Racial Justice

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ABSTRACT
Set in the context of a History of Art Education course in Spring 2021, this article presents archival research highlighting three educational programs in the Southeastern United States that centered art for activist purposes during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The programs include the Freedom Schools in Mississippi, the Urban Mythology Film Program in Georgia, and the Neighborhood Art Center, also in Georgia. The article contextualizes these programs as continuing a trajectory of Black Education as activism that existed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Amid pressing calls for racial justice then and now, we suggest these programs and their situatedness in history can be powerful resources for art educators with activist aims in the present. Therefore, we conclude the article with six characteristics of art education for racial justice, culled from the three projects, that can serve as critical guidance for art educators pursuing justice-oriented work.

KEYWORDS: Archival Research, Black Education, Art, Activism, Civil Rights, Black Power, Black Arts, Racial Justice, Art Education

In January of 2021, I (Christina Hanawalt) was preparing to teach a graduate-level History of Art Education course at the University of Georgia for my third time. The last time I taught the course was spring of 2019. Like many higher educators, I aim to revise my courses as I prepare to teach each new iteration; yet the year leading up to the spring 2021 semester was like nothing we had experienced before. As

the semester was getting ready to begin, we were still amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, had witnessed pressing calls for racial justice in the face of continued police violence against Black Americans, and most recently, had watched the storming of the United States Capitol building at the incitement of Donald J. Trump in the final weeks of his presidency. Given the significance of these events, course revisions weighed heavier that semester. As was likely the case for many educators, I knew I had to rethink my course content in a manner that would acknowledge the tumultuous experiences the students and I were living through and the ways they were variously impacting each of our lives.

Though not particularly groundbreaking, my efforts toward reckoning with the current moment began with changes to my syllabus, course texts, and platforms for access to course materials. These changes reflected my attempt to grapple with my complicity in the history of racism and centering of White norms pervasive in the history of art education, education more broadly, and the social fabric of the United States. I added a statement to my syllabus that acknowledged my own positionality as an instructor and the biases of Whiteness that exist in both the history of art education (Acuff et al., 2012) and archives (Gibbs, 2012), particularly those we would engage with at the Richard B. Russell Special Collections library at the University of Georgia, a Predominantly White Institution (DATAUSA, n.d.). I also incorporated two new texts, including James Anderson's (1988) *Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 and Marinella Lentis'* (2017) *Colonized through Art: American Indian Schools and Art Education, 1889-1915*, both of which offer crucial perspectives not addressed significantly in texts specific to the history of art education (e.g. Efland, 1990[1]). Lastly, because a primary focus of the course was to guide students through a historical research project using archival materials and because we were meeting primarily online that semester, I worked with the research librarians to locate digital archival collections. These collections broadened the scope of the research projects students could pursue and the histories represented.

By the end of the semester, what was most striking to me was that I had witnessed nearly every student in the course wrestle with their own subjectivities and with the role of race in their archival research projects, which had not been the case in previous semesters. While the changes I made to the course may have been partial factors in this shift, I suspect that it was the intensity of the social, cultural, and political climate

1 It should be noted that recent art education texts (e.g. Bolin & Kantawala., 2017; Bolin et. al, 2021) have begun to address these narratives.

we were living through that had the biggest impact on how students approached their research. Importantly, as a White art educator with primarily White graduate students, I believe we were all interested in harnessing whatever insights we could about our role in social reform toward racial justice through the historical and archival texts we were engaged with. As White art educators, what could our investigations teach us about the histories of education in the US and the role of art in efforts toward racial justice? What could these inquiries teach us about our own positioning within these histories and how such histories may continue to shape our actions in the present?

Three years later, we are already witnessing a dismantling of many of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts that were spearheaded in response to the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 (Mosley, 2024). Therefore, though the context is continually shifting, we follow the assertion of Carpenter et al. (2023) who, in their Editorial for the *Art Education Journal*, asserted, as a field, we must move *beyond* a focus on diversity to become racially literate and to develop a more astute understanding of the persistence of racism. Racial literacy, as discussed in the work of art educators Acuff and Kraehe (Acuff & Kraehe, 2022; Kraehe & Acuff, 2021;) and defined by Critical Race scholar Lani Guinier (2004), calls for analytical processes that move away from a perspective that might see racism as solely a problem of individuals to one that understands racism as "an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks" (p. 114). Racial literacy recognizes the intersections of race and power, "acknowledg[ing] the importance of individual agency but refus[ing] to lose sight of institutional and environmental forces that both shape and reflect that agency" (Guinier, 2004, p. 115). Events of 2020 such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic brought this reality to the fore, highlighting the structural forces that have continued to inscribe racial hierarchies in our society despite an illusion of post-Brown equality[2]. Developing racial literacy, then, is a critical component of working toward racial justice.

Just as our understandings of structural racism were being informed by the events unfolding daily that semester, we were also learning from our historical investigations. In particular, our readings and archival inquiries made evident how systems of White domination in the US have consistently shaped education through practices of

2 Guinier's (2004) article explains that the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education to desegregate schools functioned mainly "to treat the symptoms of racism, not the disease" (p.99), suggesting that an emphasis on equality alone was not enough to solve the problems of racism without efforts to dismantle White Supremacy.

public schooling. It seemed that, in real time, the past and present were collapsing to demonstrate the persistence of racism across time and place. Overwhelmed with recognition for the ways Black oppression was both entrenched and ongoing, we felt a certain sense of despair regarding what could be done, yet we also began to see promise in the stories that emerged about the sustained efforts of Black communities to create their own alternatives, including the use of art as a tool for activism. Not only did the Anderson (1988) text illuminate the persistent, sustained efforts of Black communities to create their own sites of education throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but students' archival research also led to materials describing specific programs that used art for activist aims during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. These programs included efforts initiated by Black educators to secure their own survival and challenge existing structures as well as those initiated by White educators aiming to collaborate with Black communities in efforts toward racial justice.

In this article, three of the students from the course share their archival investigations of educational programs that were activist in nature and were either art-centered or included art as a component of their curriculum. Similarly to how researcher and educator Gholdy Muhammad (2020) studied the histories of Black literary societies, particularly as tied to liberatory practices, to locate salient qualities that could inform literacy education in the present, we discuss these programs with the goal of discerning characteristics of art education for racial justice that can inform the work of contemporary art educators. Further, as Muhammad (2020) suggests, we see these stories of persistence, resilience, and creative activism as an opportunity to expand narratives of Black education beyond those "steeped in pain" (p. 21). As Muhammad explains, the stories of Black people most often taught in schools emphasize narratives of struggle or suffering, but stories of excellence must be included as well in order to challenge any notion of a single story. With this warning and recommendation in mind, the authors of this article recognized the potential for the archival materials that were emerging through their investigations to highlight inspirational work involving Black communities, art, and activism as important contributions to existing narratives in art education. The first project, described by Lisa Novak, focuses on the role of art at the Mississippi Freedom Schools in the Summer of 1964. The second project, described by Ann Marie Satterfield, takes a critical look at the Urban Mythology Film Program, a film and photography program started in 1968 in Atlanta, Georgia. And the third project, described by Emily Hogrefe-Ribeiro, investigates the forms of art education employed at the Neighborhood Arts Center, a community arts center in

Atlanta, Georgia, that offered programming from 1975-1990. We begin by offering a brief history of Black education in the South[3] to set the historical context for the projects discussed. In addition, each author includes relevant historical context as part of their discussion. We conclude the article with six characteristics of art education for racial justice, culled from the three projects, that can serve as critical guidance for art educators pursuing justice-oriented work.

A Brief History of Black Education as Activism in the South (ca. 1860-1970)

Beginning with the emancipation of enslaved peoples in 1863 and continuing into the Reconstruction era (1863 to 1877) that followed, the history of education in the South is characterized by schooling designed for White populations and the numerous efforts of Black populations to therefore create and sustain forms of education that properly served their communities. These efforts, fundamentally activist in nature, included both the development of formal schooling specific to Black communities and informal approaches to education.

According to Anderson (1988), formerly enslaved people viewed access to education, especially reading and writing, as a fight of oppression. This perspective of literacy, and education more broadly, as a "means to liberation and freedom" (Anderson, 1988, p. 17) was "shaped partly by the social system of slavery under which they first encountered literacy" (Anderson, 1988, p. 17), when reading and writing was, for them, against the law. Anderson points out that no other class of southerners had experienced literacy as something they had to fight for the right to earn. Many who pursued literacy in secret as an act of rebellion became leaders of Black education after emancipation. The correlation between literacy and freedom likely contributed to the drive of Black leaders to become "the first native southerners to wage a campaign for universal public education" (Anderson, 1988, p. 18). Though the schools were segregated, in a matter of ten years, between 1860 and 1870, formerly enslaved Black southerners developed a complete school system. The success of their efforts was evidenced by the fact that "fourteen southern states had established 575 schools by 1865, and these schools were employing 1,171 teachers for the 71,779 Negro and white children in regular attendance" (Anderson, 1988, p. 19). Southern Blacks not only fought for education as a right, they

3 Given that we have situated this article in the context of a History of Art Education course in which James Anderson's (1988) book served as a new text, we rely heavily on his description of education for Blacks in the South for this section.

also worked with Republicans to build it into the constitutional law of Southern states, all while the planter class worked to oppose them and secure their own economic and agricultural domination.

Although the dominant-class Whites did not agree with education for Blacks, especially a system that could lead to a literate Black working class, they eventually came to realize they would not be able to combat the progress made by the Black educational movement of the 1860s and 1870s; therefore, they shifted their efforts toward *shaping* Black education instead (Anderson, 1988). By the 1880s, Whites from the planter class and abolitionists from the North set out to mold the emerging system of Black education in the South "to teach subservience within a racist power structure" (Stankiewicz, 2013, p. 211). Schools established by Black communities were designed to be sites of pride and sought to ensure that students received the same classical liberal curriculum as students in White schools, but during this period Black schools were forced to focus on industrial training, preparing students for manual labor jobs that would maintain the racialized labor hierarchy of the South. When it came to high schools, a primary aim of White philanthropists was to "transform southern black secondary education into a system of training and socialization primarily for prospective unskilled and semi-skilled workers" (Anderson, 1988, p. 208), thereby limiting the potential for Black southerners to disrupt existing class structures.

One model of industrial education became especially popular through the efforts of Samuel Armstrong (a White northerner) at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia (founded in 1868) and his most famous student, Booker T. Washington (a formerly enslaved Black man), who would carry on the traditions of the school by founding the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama in 1881 (Anderson, 1988). As Anderson explains, the "Hampton-Tuskegee Idea" sought to avoid confrontations with the Planter class in the South, for example, through "a pedagogy and ideology designed…to maintain within the South a social consensus that did not challenge traditional inequalities of wealth and power" (Anderson, 1988, p. 33). The Hampton model of industrial education as promoted by Washington was firmly "outside the mainstream of black educational thought" (Sherer, 1977, p. 146 as cited in Anderson, 1988, p. 67), but did gain momentum through well-organized efforts between "northern businessmen philanthropists and southern whites" (Anderson, 1988, p. 78). By the early 1900s, the debate over the "proper education of black people" (Anderson, 1988, p. 77) reached a zenith as the young W.E.B Dubois emerged as a leader who

would challenge the Hampton model with his proposal for a rigorous form of higher education for the most exceptional Black youth in order to "guide the race's social development" (Anderson, 1988, p. 104).

The development of second-class education for Black students in the South was never overlooked by Black communities, who found ways to provide forms of education more in line with their goals. One way that Black communities fought back was to establish an educational network of Sabbath schools in churches and self-funded, self-regulated, and self-taught private schools, often choosing to keep their children out of schools run by White philanthropists in favor of these self-created educational spaces (Anderson, 1988). Importantly, Anderson notes that attendance at Sabbath schools was not reported in statistics of school attendance, yet research suggests that by 1885, the African Methodist Episcopal church alone reported 200,000 children in their Sunday Schools, where instruction did not just cover the Bible but included spelling, for example. These efforts demonstrate how the impulse towards educational activism not only maintained but often created unique Black educational systems that thrived.

During the Civil Rights movement, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954 deemed segregated schools inherently unequal and unconstitutional (Rury, 2019); yet, amid the tumult of the period and struggle for equal education, racial inequality in schooling continued to be a problem, particularly in the South. Despite the national campaign towards integration, Black activists became disillusioned with the goal as they confronted racism in the enduringly White supremacist mainstream educational system. Public schools for Black students were often severely underfunded and under-resourced (Harris, 1993). Black Power advocates argued that the White school system had no expectation for Black children to succeed – a problem that had persisted since Reconstruction. The system approached Black children in integrated schools with a deficit mindset that blamed Black culture, families, neighborhoods, and even genetics for academic underachievement (Williamson, 2005). Activists responded in multiple ways, including through Civil Rights Organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960, which "engaged poor Southern Blacks in the same project of self-discovery and social transformation to which they had committed themselves" (Perlstein, 2005, p. 36). SNCC developed one of the best-known examples of alternative educational spaces in the Freedom Schools, where activists worked with Black learners to cultivate agency by constructing meaning from their own experiences to incite advocacy toward justice and equality.

Additionally, Black Power advocates of the 1960s and 1970s focused their energy on both formal and informal educational systems, particularly community solutions that emphasized Black-centered materials and students' lived experiences (Williamson, 2005). These schools were liberatory in nature and explicit in their goals for revolution. Perlstein (2005) argues that the Black Panthers' most significant achievement in transforming the consciousness of African Americans was their emphasis on educational agency that offered students "an alternative to the ideologies of racial supremacy and economic oppression that surrounded them" (p. 54), exposing students to the culture of power and inspiring critique of that power. More broadly, African Americans continued to strengthen their own schools, even as they simultaneously attempted to access mainstream, White educational systems (Williamson, 2005).

Education for Black Americans in the South has been a persistent struggle, with segregation and racism creating separate educational systems in which schools for Black students suffered from a clear lack of resources and attention. However, throughout this history there has existed a pattern of rupture and community investment on the part of Black communities who actively and persistently worked to challenge these unequal systems. Schools created by Black Southerners elicited community care, advocacy, and an emphasis on education as freedom from oppression. The push for education came from a unique motivation propelled by the trauma of slavery and the concurrent need for liberation amid nearly 100 years of Jim Crow laws. Instead of attempting to make a White, racist educational system work, community members prioritized activism and local solutions. The three community projects highlighted by Lisa, Ann Marie, and Emily in the following sections were born out of this activist educational lineage.

Art and Activism in the Mississippi Freedom Schools

As a White woman born and raised in Central Europe, I (Lisa) grew up on a diet of American popular culture. The striking images of Black revolutionaries, the social movements of the 1960s and the violent images of segregation permeated much of my youth by way of books and documentaries. During my graduate studies in a small Southern college town, where I conducted this archival research, I found myself surrounded by obvious and not so obvious signs and signifiers of its White supremacist past, living amidst a history that I had previously encountered from a distance but in reality, still knew very little about. Wanting to learn more about the "South" and given that I had a long personal interest in creative disobedience and artist- and activist-run

schools, I decided to focus my archival inquiry on the Mississippi Summer of 1964, with a primary focus on art education at its Freedom Schools. Specifically, I wanted to know how art education shaped the political and activist nature of the Mississippi project that summer; what was taught, made, discussed, and with whom. However, before trying to locate archival documents that would help me find out more about the role of art and art education at the Mississippi Freedom Schools, I considered it necessary to situate Freedom Summer, in which White volunteers from the North alongside Northern and Southern Black folks descended on Mississippi to register disenfranchised Black voters, within a wider historical and educational context. This summer marked the signing of the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, which outlawed segregation in public places and schools, prohibited employment discrimination, and enforced the right to vote (Civil Rights Act of 1964). Weeks before the Act was signed, in June 1964, various Ku Klux Klan members, including the 26-year-old deputy sheriff of Neshoba County, Mississippi, tortured and killed Freedom Summer activists James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman (Public Broadcasting Service, n.d).

Mississippi Schools: A White Space

It had been ten years since the passing of *Brown v Board of Education*, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional and tasked school systems to implement programs that would eventually desegregate all schools in the South (supreme.justia.com, n.d). Despite its ratification, however, critics of *Brown* noted that the law, in reality "declined to guarantee that white privilege would be dismantled" (Harris, 1993, p. 1751) and "failed to expose the problem of substantive inequality in material terms produced by white domination and race segregation" (Harris, 1993, p. 1752). Black schools in Mississippi remained substantially underfunded, and Black students were deprived of classes that were available to White students, including art. Some Mississippi districts allocated "$464.49 per white but only $13.71 per black student" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017, 1944 to 1954 section) in the ten years between 1944 and 1954. Almost ten years later in 1962, school districts like Clarksdale, Mississippi, continued their segregated funding practices, spending $146.06 on White students while only allocating $25.07 to Black students (Bolton, 2005). However, Mississippi's reluctance to desegregate eventually led the US District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi to mandate school boards to formulate desegregation plans by July 1964 (Dixon, 2020). Following a call for the desegregation of public

schooling, political leaders responded by encouraging citizens to "construct a segregated educational haven" (Bolton, 2005, p. 109) by developing alternative schools for White students. A September 1964 issue of the anti-integration publication *The Citizen* titled "How to Start A Private School!" provided White readers with a step-by-step guide on how to create private schools that did not have to follow the court's rules to desegregate. Little was said in the manual about the role of art education, except that one will "want to make some provision for music and art, and physical education" (Citizen's Councils of America, 1964, p. 15).

With this information in mind, I set out to find materials about the state of art education in Mississippi during the 1960s. Though it was difficult to source documents specific to art curriculum, I did come across a series of high school yearbooks that offered a glimpse of life in Mississippi schools. Photographs of all-white students and faculty, and teenagers with up-dos at celebrations for seniors, including the 1964 Stephen D. Lee High School Voodoo Village banquet in Columbus, Mississippi – a blackface extravaganza, reify the casualness with which White supremacy shaped Mississippi schooling and everyday life (Stephen D. Lee High School, 1964). Lee High was also home to an all-White arts club that collected "new art supplies and used pencils to be sent to a Mexican school…to promote an interest in art at Lee High" (Stephen D. Lee High School, 1964, p. 160) every year. Ironically, while the White students at Lee High mailed their care packages to children they considered in-need to do moral good, Black students in their surrounding communities had few, if any, instructional and art supplies at their disposal (Bolton, 2005). The examples briefly described here are crucial in understanding Freedom Schools as activist-led projects whose purpose it was to supplement and provide "the intellectual wastelands" of Mississippi's Black schools with a "broad intellectual and academic experience" (Cobb, 1963, p. 2) otherwise not accessible to Black students.

Freedom Schools

"The children who came to [Freedom Schools] felt special because there was a school made just for them" (Clemons, 2014, p. 147)

The 41 Freedom Schools drew approximately 2,000 local children and youth, who were recruited from nineteen communities across Mississippi (Bolton, 2005). Historical documents reveal that art was not dismissed as frivolous and useless, but that Freedom Schools "crystallized the value of a cultural approach to movement work,

integrating music, theater, art, poetry and history into the development of political awareness" (Street, 2004, p. 276) among Black Mississippians. In preparation for Freedom Summer, the many volunteers were expected to travel to Oxford, Ohio, for canvassing and teacher-training (Watson, 2011, p. 19). A document titled Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Orientation Art Workshop Notes dated June 26, 1964, begins by outlining that art can be used "as a medium of expression," "as an approach to the community," and "as a medium of mass communication" (Koppelman, 1964, p. 1). Like a guide for beginning teachers, the workshop notes provided instructions on how to inexpensively produce clay or finger paint, offering suggestions for playful projects that invited students to experiment with nontraditional, natural, and found materials. Projects explicitly called for volunteers and students to get to know the surrounding community, and to "draw upon people to give [them] ideas about the kinds of projects [they] can do, and to come to the center to help teach something they are good at…or to contribute to a program" (Koppelman, 1964, p. 4). Art engagement at Freedom Schools, the organizers imagined, would be a tool for activism and relationship-building, and offer opportunities to closely work with those who lived and worked nearby (Figure 1).

In my search for archival documents related to art curriculum, a footnote in a journal article led me to the Library of Congress website where I found just what I had been looking for: The SNCC Freedom Schools Art Curriculum. This curriculum document listed eight different ninety-minute-long workshops for ten to twelve students with the goal of fostering student self-sufficiency through woodworking, building, and design, and included a graphics workshop, a cultural history of art course, and a social value of art workshop. Importantly, two of the workshops addressed the relationship(s) between art, activism, and everyday life, with art teachers relaying to Freedom students that "[Black] American artists…[were] essential to our understanding of freedom, emancipation, civil rights, assimilation, and the continued struggle for social and political change" (Johnson, 2014, p. 194). While the graphics workshop supported the "printing of communications of community importance" (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964, Graphic Workshops section), the discussion-based *Cultural History of Art* course introduced students to the complex nature of art in society and sought to illustrate to students what may happen "when art blossoms, and when it withers from neglect due to sociological events in that society" (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964, Cultural History of Art section).

The art teachers, many of whom were women (Street, 2004), were also

Figure 1. *Two children color together during Freedom Summer.*

Note. Frame 28: Kids drawing together. From Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party records, 1962-1971, by the Wisconsin Historical Society, n.d. (https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM97882). Reprinted with permission.

given access to a forty-seven-page recreational manual titled *Something Special*, which included a detailed ten-page section dedicated to best practices in art instruction. Noting that "an atmosphere of creative excitement is always the most important step toward meaningful art instruction" (Council of Federated Organizations, 1964, p. 6), the authors of the manual outlined twelve suggestions for arts teachers, encouraging them to not judge the youth's efforts, to be receptive to ideas that are fostered and imagined by the group, and to complete one project before introducing another.

Art that Serves the Community

The importance of art as a tool for social engagement and community-building was articulated in the objectives of the Freedom School's *Social Value of Art* course, which focused on how "art can serve the community" (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964, Social Value of Art section). According to the curriculum document, sections of the course were to be devoted to the planning and organization of exhibitions and fundraisers, to fostering community pride, and to supporting artists; additionally, the course encouraged coordinating social action groups with art groups, establishing workshops for recreational programs, and ensuring practical training for Black leaders committed to community growth and development (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1964).

During the Mississippi summer of 1964, the young Black students at Freedom Schools were "encouraged to express themselves through whatever means were at their disposal and in whichever way they felt most comfortable" (Street, 2004, p. 285). At the end of the summer, some of the drawings were exhibited at Palmer's Crossing Community Center in Hattiesburg, where smiling children proudly displayed their work for the first time (Figure 2). These moments of togetherness were at the heart of Freedom Summer's ethos, giving all participants, including organizers, teachers, community members, adults, and students, the opportunity to enjoy the work of the Freedom Schools' art departments. Liz Fusco, the coordinator of the Freedom Schools, emphasized the importance of arts engagement that summer, noting that "a visible result of the Freedom Summer include[d] the kids' drawings on the walls of Freedom Schools and COFO offices all over the state" (Fusco, 1964, p. 19).

The Urban Mythology[4] Film Program: Activist Art Programming in the 1960s South

In my project, I (Ann Marie) examined the Urban Mythology Film Program, a film and photography program initiated in Atlanta in 1968 by White artist and educator Tullio Petrucci to provide a space for Black "urban youth" to tell stories about their lives (Georgia Commission on the Arts, 1969). Though the name of the Urban Mythology program did not explicitly describe that the program worked with Black youth, in Atlanta as in other cities, the word "urban" had become largely synonymous with "Black." I first encountered this program when I read a 1969 report by the Georgia Commission on the Arts available through the Digital Library of Georgia. The report cited how the Urban Mythology Program used "film and photography as a way of focusing attention on the myths which pervade the urban environment, thus affording children an opportunity to establish an art based on their everyday lives" (Georgia Commission on the Arts, 1969, page 15). In an article about one of the program's initiatives, Project Enlarge, Petrucci expressed his hope for "children to get their own way of seeing onto paper," insisting that "They need to build their own standards, way of looking at things and set of values" (Petrucci cited in Hippler, 1968, p. 2L). Further, the program description explained that, through televising their process and publication of photographs, leaders hoped the students' work "may have a real chance to influence the development

4 Note that the program is referred to as both the Urban Mythology Film Program and the Urban Mythologies Film Program, depending on the publication. I use Urban Mythology, which is the name used in the report where I initially learned about the program.

of American culture" (Georgia Commission on the Arts, 1969, page 15). The Urban Mythology program was widely documented in the media (Figure 4) and was filmed as a television series that won an Emmy in 1969. Additionally, photography by the program's participants was exhibited throughout the country, including in Expo '69 at the Coliseum in New York (Georgia Commission on the Arts. 1969, p. 15).

Figure 2. *Image of children at a Freedom School art exhibit by Herbert Randall, 1964.*

Note. From the Digital Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Photographs of Black students involved in the program were included in the Georgia Commission on the Arts report (Figure 3) and prompted me to become curious about the influences and motives behind this White-directed arts programming for Black youth in the recently integrated South. In the 1960s and 1970s, the integration of schools gave way to tensions surrounding White educators teaching Black students. Black students often protested White teachers teaching Black

history, and as one 1970s Black high school student stated, "We were not listening to any white people, at the time, unless they had shown some solidarity with our cause" (Rury & Hill, 2013, p. 504). Furthermore, during this time period, many White teachers showed hostility to Black students, especially in the South (Rury, 2019). With this context in mind, Petrucci's role in the Urban Mythology program was a point of interest for me. As a White art educator from Georgia educating students of color and working to develop culturally responsive pedagogy in the South, I often asked myself how my positionality affected my teaching and wondered what I could learn from taking a critical look at the efforts of Petrucci and the Urban Mythology program. For example, did Petrucci fall into a White savior trope (Schultz, 2019) or perhaps what Denmead (2019) describes as the pitfalls of "good White creatives" (p. 2) in his analysis of an urban youth art program?

Figure 3. *Image of participants in the Urban Mythology Film Program.*

Note. Image from page 17 of the Georgia Commission on the Arts Report. From the Georgia Commission on the Arts by the Digital Libraries of Georgia, 2024. (https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-ba775-pa7-ba1-b1969). Reprinted with permission.

The Urban Mythology program was not Petrucci's only involvement in the arts in Atlanta. According to the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (n.d.), he was head of the design department at the Atlanta

College of Art from 1963-1968, Chairman of the Visual Arts Committee for the Atlanta Arts Festival, and worked with the Youth Experimental Opera Workshop (YEOW). His role as a White art educator in a program designed especially for Black youth, however, was likely a complex one. Communities in the South were especially resistant to integration of schools, and public schools in Atlanta did not begin integrating until 1961 (Burns, 2011; Georgia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). When they did, the result was middle class, White flight to the suburbs, leaving urban areas to increasingly become characterized by Black poverty (Rury & Hill, 2013). Schools in urban areas were deeply unequal to those in the suburbs, having fewer resources and opportunities to provide their primarily Black students (Georgia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). Black high school students were engaging in protests across the country for greater equity of resources between schools (Rury & Hill, 2013) and pressure from Civil Rights Groups, including the NAACP, influenced Lyndon Johnson to initiate the 'War on Poverty' in 1965 (Rury, 2019). During this time, it is likely that programming for Black youth in Atlanta offered limited opportunities for engagement with the arts.

The Urban Mythology program was funded in part by laws stemming from the War on Poverty, including the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA). Many programs were developed through libraries, museums, and community centers to address community and social concerns using film (Dearlove, 2017), and the Urban Mythology program was among them. In a 1970 hearing to extend the LSCA, director of the Public Library of Atlanta, Carlton Rochell, described the library's actions as a "catalyst in the social revolution" and credited the Urban Mythology program as a project "solving the educational and social ills of [Atlanta]," stating, "The results of this project have been amazing" (Library Services and Construction Amendments, 1970, p. 88).

The Urban Mythology program was also associated with and supported by the Atlanta Postal Street Academies, an organization initiated by Black Civil Rights Activist C.T. Martin to address the growing high school dropout rate among Black youth in Atlanta (Jordan, 2011). These academies operated as storefront schools in urban areas, serving and educating high school dropouts. The program was enormously successful and Postal Street Academies opened in several other cities including Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Washington D.C (Housman, 1970). Today, Postal Street Academies are known as Communities in Schools, Inc., and have garnered national recognition

(Jordan, 2011). The collaboration between the Urban Mythology program and the Atlanta Postal Street Academies suggests that Petrucci situated the program within the social justice work already being conducted by Black Civil Rights leaders.

Petrucci's work with Urban Mythology was supported by other members of the Civil Rights movement as well. The program was often featured in the newspaper, *The Atlanta Voice*, which was founded by Black Civil Rights activist Ed Clayton. The newspaper's motto was, "A People Without A Voice Cannot Be Heard" (*The Atlanta Voice*, n.d.) and was created with the intent to provide media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement which was being ignored by the White media. Additionally, in a 1969 article from *The Atlanta Constitution*, Civil Rights leader Julian Bond responded to the success of the Urban Mythology Program by saying, "these photographs present a mirror image of the life of the photographers. Their lenses are their eyes. They have shown here what their days are like: What life is like for them...Their cameras are weapons" (Brown, 1971, p. 62). Given these positive descriptions of the Urban Mythology program by Civil Rights leaders, it seems likely that Petrucci's efforts were aligned with the hopes and goals of Black activists in Atlanta.

Lastly, the Urban Mythology program also appeared to align with a call for new aesthetics articulated by the Black Power Movement's artist, scholar, and activist Larry Neal, who in his 1968 essay *The Black Arts Movement*, called for a Black aesthetic that confronted the dominant Western norm. Neal (1968) states, "...to accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values...he must create a new history, new symbols, myths, and legends…" (p. 30). Neal's essay was highly influential in shaping the aims of the Black Arts Movement, and perhaps his urging to create new myths for Black people inspired the naming of the Urban Mythologies program, as well as its goal to create photographs and films from Black perspectives that countered rather than reaffirmed Whiteness as an ideal (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Photograph of a participant in the Urban Mythology Film Program.*

Note. Image from page 14 of the Georgia Commission on the Arts Report. From the Georgia Commission on the Arts by the Digital Libraries of Georgia, 2024. (https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_ggpd_y-ga-ba775-pa7-ba1-b1969). Reprinted with permission.

During my research, I was able to get in contact with an art student of Petrucci, Tom Pittard, who worked alongside him on the Urban Mythology Program. Also a White artist, he described Petrucci as a "passionate supporter of the Civil Rights movement" (personal communication, June 2, 2024), along with many other White artists during the 1960s. Pittard also stated that he, along with Petrucci and other collaborators of the program, were highly influenced by Joseph Campbell's writings about mythmaking and the arts. Campbell, whose most notable work, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, was first published in 1949, asserted that myth-making functions in 4 distinct ways: "(1) the urge to comprehend the natural world in a meaningful way; (2) the search for a marked pathway through the succeeding epochs of human life; (3) the need to establish secure and fulfilling relationships within a community; and (4) the longing to know one's part in the vast wonder and mystery of the cosmos (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988, p.155).

Though Campbell's assertions about mythmaking and its influences on the Urban Mythology Program could be seen as worthy, I wonder if Larry Neal (1968), who called for the creation of new, Black aesthetic and mythology separate from the White mythmaking "of a society that will not allow him to live" (p. 30) would think it were possible to achieve a new Black aesthetic through the direction and philosophical lenses of White people. Did the Urban Mythology Program truly help create a new Black aesthetic? It seems that the Black youth involved in the program had a lot of say and power in what they created, though I also wonder how the presence of their White teachers (Figure 5), no matter how well-intentioned, may have filtered or swayed their final products and the cultural impact of their artwork. This is a tension that White educators, including myself, must continually contend with.

Figure 5. *Youth participants taking part in "Project Enlarge" with instructor David Burns.*

Note. Project Enlarge helps students grow," from The Atlanta Constitution, August 17, 1968 (p. 57). From The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. © 1968 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. All rights reserved. Used under license.

While the connections between Petrucci's work, the Civil Rights movement, and the efforts of Black leaders and communities seemed largely positive, the photographs of the Urban Mythologies program that appeared in news media were often accompanied by problematic descriptions. Such descriptions often othered the Black male participants, frequently referring to their work as "Ghetto

Photography" (Figure 6) and positioning the White directors as the artist heroes allowing "ghetto students" an opportunity to create art (Brown, 1971, p. 62). Given these descriptions, it is hard to say to what extent the printed images offered counternarratives or to what degree they may have contributed further to the production of stereotypical images of Black lives (Rolling, 2020). Looking back at the program from the present, I also find it difficult to fully assess Petrucci's efforts through the lens of anti-racist art education. It seems possible that his endeavors to align the Urban Mythologies program with calls for action by Black activists and artists positioned him as a worthy collaborator in support of Black creative resistance and justice, and not all images in the media enforced problematic tropes of the Black teen participants. At the same time, Petrucci may have been unaware or even complicit in the ways some media coverage reinforced racist stereotypes. White art educators today might therefore look critically at the complexities of their own efforts toward racial justice to consider the possibility of multiple, even contradictory effects.

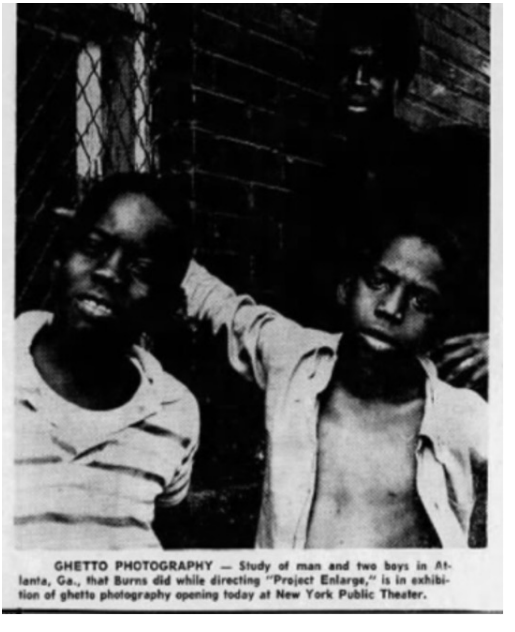
GHETTO PHOTOGRAPHY — Study of man and two boys in Atlanta, Ga., that Burns did while directing "Project Enlarge," is in exhibition of ghetto photography opening today at New York Public Theater.

Figure 6. *Newspaper clipping with participants from Project Enlarge, titled "Ghetto Photography."*

Note. "Ghetto Photography." Reprinted from Central New Jersey Home News, April 4, 1971, in Newspapers.com. © Central New Jersey Home News – USA TODAY NETWORK. Reprinted with permission.

The Neighborhood Art Center: Black Art Education as Activism in Atlanta, Georgia

While searching the Digital Library of Georgia, I (Emily) came across a group of photographs from a collection titled *Community art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander's Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts Center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library*. The documentary-style photographs of the Neighborhood Arts Center, or NAC, pronounced "knack" (Tate, 2012), depict Black art educators leading workshops, influential Black artists interacting with the Atlanta community, and the center's slogan "Art for People's Sake" (Tate, 2012, p. 13). I became interested in the creation and programming of the NAC as an activist art educational space in the South. As a White museum educator and graduate student in art education at a Southern university, I am interested in activism and social justice in art museum education, and my curiosity was piqued by this example of arts activism *outside* the complicated space of the established (White) museum system and the city's schools. The NAC situated a community-driven art center within a larger movement of education-as-activism rooted in self-created Black educational spaces in the South. I wondered: how does art education fit within the historical Black investment in educational and community spaces that were sustained through systems outside of (and despite) existing White educational structures?

Jim Alexander's 1980 photograph, *The NAC*, (Figure 7) depicts the center where it began — the repurposed former Peter James Bryant Elementary School in Atlanta's Mechanicsville neighborhood, a predominantly Black community chosen by state officials to be razed for the creation of a highway and the city's stadium (NAC, 1975-1978). The center provided arts education to residents of Atlanta from 1975 to 1990. It was created by public funding allocated by the city's first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson, and a group of local artists. The community-based arts center offered free workshops in dance, music, theater, creative writing, the visual arts (including painting, drawing, photography, and sculpture), and graphic design. Its initial audience spanned the entire community, including children, teens, adults, and the elderly (NAC, 1975-1978), and its legacy stretches into the present.

Figure 7. *Photograph of The NAC by Jim Alexander, 1980.*

Note. The Neighborhood Arts Center. Neighborhood Arts Center photographs series by Jim Alexander, from Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System, presented in the Digital Library of Georgia. Part of the Emory University Jim Alexander Collection. Reprinted with permission.

Very little scholarly research and writing has been done on the NAC. It is sometimes referenced as a community arts center created during the Black Arts Movement (Smethurst, 2006, 2010), but only one scholar (Tate, 2012) has done extensive archival research on the NAC. This research fills in gaps in existing literature about the regional and local dimensions of the Black Arts Movement in the South, which Tate and Smethurst contend is under-explored and -theorized. While Tate's dissertation provides the first historical analysis of the NAC, there is no scholarly research looking at the organization from an art education perspective. How does the NAC relate to larger art education trends and movements during this time? And, how does considering the forms of art education employed at the NAC as activism coincide with historical trends of Black education as activism in the South?

Community Arts Centers

According to Efland (1990), the arts-in-education movement of the 1960s was known for its "tendency to seek solutions to educational problems

outside of the school, to regard the school itself as *part* of the problem, and to involve community agencies such as arts councils and museums, as resources" (p. 246). As art education expanded into the suburbs during the 1960s and 1970s, the number of art positions advertised in large American cities like Atlanta decreased. Efland (1990) explains, "The larger central cities were facing severe economic problems as more affluent families moved to the suburbs and were replaced by poorer families," and as a result, "school districts economized by cutting back on central staffs that operated at the district level, placing greater reliance on building principals and supervisory functions" (p. 230). This redistribution of educators and funding likely played out in Atlanta during this time and, combined with the arts-in-education movement's interest in community arts efforts, might explain why the city of Atlanta implemented a project like the NAC during the 1970s.

Davis (2010) outlines a history of community art centers that provides further insight into the connections between the NAC and trends in art education. According to Davis, as early as the turn of the century, community-based educational centers developed from settlement houses that helped immigrants in cities develop marketable skills focused on industrial arts like drawing. By the late 1960s, however, artists began creating centers for arts learning in response to cuts in funding for schools and to combat social trends like gang life and drugs "that threatened the well being of…youth" (Davis, 2010, p. 85). In the 1970s, art centers in cities served the purpose of "working to help mend the fabric of schools damaged by the removal of arts education" (Davis, 2010, p. 85). During this time, schools began transporting students to arts centers, perhaps as part of the arts-in-education trend towards arts educational avenues outside schools. Art centers provided art education that had been marginalized elsewhere. In an article written after the NAC's first year of operation, the author describes the center as functioning similarly to the institutions Davis describes. They note: "the Center is mostly used by kids after school and before supper" in a "working class neighborhood without the tradition of enthusiastic adult amateurism that tends to flourish among the middle class" (NAC,1975-1978). In other words, the NAC provided opportunities for arts learning that would have been cultivated in Atlanta's wealthier, Whiter suburbs but might not have been prioritized in the working-class, Black neighborhoods of Atlanta.

Black Arts Movement

Another movement during the late 1960s and 1970s that advocated for the creation of alternative arts spaces emphasizing community

engagement was the Black Arts Movement, which developed as art took on a larger role in the Black Power movement. The Black Arts Movement put revolutionary Black art at the forefront of the political struggle for social, political, and economic opportunity. The movement rejected the common refrain "art for art's sake," and replaced it with "art for people's sake," which emphasized artmaking as "a mutual dialogue between artists and audiences rather than a singular experience focused upon the artist and himself" (Tate, 2012, p. 13). This new phrase became the motto adopted by the NAC, linking the center's cultural values to activism.

Larry Neal's (1968) seminal Black Arts Movement text explains that the Black Arts Movement "envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (p. 29). Black artists eschewed the mainstream art community and art museums. Instead, art education mirrored Black Power's emphasis on Black-centered educational content for schools and an active role in the community. Artists worked primarily within their communities, and they were invested in bringing the arts to their neighborhoods (Patton, 1998). The movement emphasized art centers as collective art educational spaces that realized "Art for People's Sake" through their programming, product, and institutional structures (Tate, 2012). The NAC fulfilled this role in Atlanta.

Looking at a 1975 press release announcing the center's opening, it is clear that a Black aesthetic and the arts of the African diaspora were a priority for the NAC. The press release includes workshops in Western European dance and artmaking techniques, but it also advertised African dance, Haitian dance, and silkscreening (NAC, 1975-1978). The NAC emphasized the role of local working and teaching artists in its creation and developed an artist-in-residence program. Its art educational programming brought participants into the arts center for lessons and workshops with notable Black artists, including Romare Bearden, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Eldzior Corter, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff (NAC, 1975-1990). The art and educational mission of the NAC adopted the political activism of the movement, prioritizing Black art traditions.

A focus on community was echoed in a statement by NAC's early director, John Riddle:

> 'People around here,' says Riddle, 'need and want contact with the arts as much as people do anywhere...especially as a

> means of recovering a cultural tradition they are in danger of losing completely. The Neighborhood Arts Center can become an important mechanism for focusing the whole community's awareness of itself as a community...When the members of the staff were once asked to define their jobs, they decided unanimously to call themselves 'cultural workers.' (NAC, 1975-1978)

The NAC reached into the community through the implementation of various festivals including Arts Festival Atlanta and the (still running) National Black Arts Festival (NAC, 1975-1990). Outreach programming took the form of writing classes for women at a prison release center and a Jazzmobile program that brought professional Black musicians into the community as a way to create access beyond the physical space of the NAC (NAC, 1975-1978; Priglinger et al., 2014). The NAC cultivated the careers of countless artists, writers, and dancers, including actor Samuel L. Jackson, writer Toni Cade Bambara, art historian Michael D. Harris, and film directors Spike Lee and Tyler Perry (*Memorial Drive*, 2020; *Smethurst*, 2010). Community investment, a Black aesthetic, and a focus on arts education as liberation saturate the history of the NAC.

The NAC, existing from 1974 through 1990, carried a lineage of education as activism, promoting political art education outside of and despite existing, White educational structures. Although there is a lack of existing literature that focuses on Black Art Education, I have looped together the threads of greater art historical trends, the role of alternative arts spaces, the political motivations of the Black Arts Movement, and a historical reference for arts education as activism to argue that Black arts education should be located within the framework of Black education as activism in the South. This arts education was located outside of mainstream arts education structures and was implemented, persisted, and thrived outside of White intervention.

Conclusion

We began this article by situating our research within the context of a course that took place at a particularly turbulent moment in recent history – one that brought racial injustice to our attention through horrifying events such as the death of George Floyd at the hands of police and the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on communities of color, while also prompting subsequent collective action toward racial justice in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement. Additionally, we recognized that our present moment has seen the dismantling of

some of those efforts, producing a different kind of turbulence. What is clear is that racial justice is pressing, and yet the fight is not new.

The creative activism deployed in the Civil Rights era offers a substantial resource for art educators seeking to pursue racial justice in the present, whether in public school settings or community sites. As we described in the introduction, we follow Muhammad (2020), who investigated historical efforts of education as liberation to consider what lessons could be learned. In addition, we build on the work of other art educators who have similarly examined the historical efforts of Black artists-educators-activists (e.g. Bey, 2011, 2017; Congdon, 2017; Grant & Kantawala, 2021; Hardy, 2018, 2022; Stankiewicz, 2013) and White allies (e.g. Holt, 2012; Kee, 2021; Kee & Stankiewicz, 2021). Therefore, based on our historical and archival investigation of art and activism at the Freedom Schools, the Urban Mythology Film Program, and the Neighborhood Art Center, we conclude this article by offering the following six characteristics of art education for racial justice, adapting some of Muhammad's (2020) lessons (pp. 32-35) as the foundation for our own, to serve as guidance for contemporary art educators:

1. **Art education for racial justice was responsive to the social events and people of the time.** Each of the programs highlighted in this article were developed in response to the events of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements and had goals for addressing social inequalities. They built programming that responded to pressing needs for advocacy and change and brought people in to engage in collective pursuits.
2. **Art education for racial justice encompassed art learning as well as the development of criticality and political awareness**. In each program, participants were engaging in artistic practices, but those practices were situated within the context of a broader focus on learning to read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Muhammad, 2020) and become active agents of change through art.
3. **Art education for racial justice had Black-centered curricula that cultivated personal and collective identities through art learning and making.** Unlike the White-centered curriculum of public schools, the curriculum of these programs was built on the study of Black artists, activists, and cultural workers. With this curriculum, participants could develop an empowered sense of individual and collective identity.
4. **Art education for racial justice prioritized participant voices, ideas, and expressions.** The aim of these programs was not simply to teach technique (though the Urban Mythology

Program and the NAC, especially, did seem to offer significant technical instruction), but to bring participant voices, ideas, and expressions to the fore. In all cases, art was seen as a means for participants to contribute to social, cultural, and political arenas.

5. **Art education for racial justice was a collective pursuit that was community-invested and community-embedded**. The programs were outward-facing, extending well beyond any building walls and working with and in communities. Both Black educators and White educators working as allies were embedded in the art and activism of those communities, collaborated with each other and community members, and created shared sites of education and community investment.
6. **Art education for racial justice, when enacted by White art educators, was vulnerable to the possibility of contributing to problematic discourses even while aiming to combat those discourses.** As highlighted by the "Ghetto Photography" image from the Urban Mythology Film Program, racial discourses pervasive throughout society are powerful forces that can negatively shape even well-educated intentions. For example, despite Petrucci's collaboration with Civil Rights leaders and organizations, some photos from the Urban Mythology Program contributed to an othering of Black youth. The fact that a program might embody aims toward racial justice and simultaneously produce harm is a tension that White art educators should be particularly aware of.

In summary, we suggest art educators today consider the efforts undertaken by artists-educators-activists of the past as a valuable resource when developing and implementing their own work toward racial justice. Investigations like the ones we have detailed here can offer powerful examples that can be equally inspirational and cautionary. In particular, we suggest art educators study the historical activism and events that took place in their local context so that those investigations might illuminate the social, cultural, and political discourses that shaped the past and therefore continue to shape the present. Certainly, as White women art educators in the South, we have learned that, in any justice-oriented work we pursue, we will need to remain especially vigilant of the pervasive discourses of racism in which we are embedded and how they might unintentionally shape our practices. Additionally, however, we have also learned that we can look to the activism that is generated from the ground up by those seeking justice in local communities to see where and how we can best

align ourselves and contribute our efforts in the critical work that is already being done—and that contributes to a long history of grueling, liberatory work led by Black communities in this country.

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