

The White Supremacy of Art Education in the United States: My Complicity and Path Toward Reparation Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author discusses legacies of white supremacy in the United States of America and the effects on art education. Through personal reflection and resourcing the ongoing work to right the misinformation acquired through inherently white-privileged educational experiences, the author suggests the possibility of actively anti-racist arts pedagogies and pedagogies of justice in the arts.

KEYWORDS: Culturally sustaining pedagogies, anti-racist arts pedagogy, equity and justice

“Teachers are often among the group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught” (bell hooks, 2003, p. 25).

This started as a more traditional manuscript: a critical investigation of my whiteness through philosophy, theory, and praxis. These tools were given to me (yes, given) with limited hesitation because of my whiteness. The intersections of my gender (I am a woman) and my sexuality (I am queer) produce challenges to access and credibility within the academy and the world. Ultimately though, I can rely on my whiteness as privilege. Additionally, white supremacy relies on the normalization of that experience. Put another way, white people being unable or unwilling to see the social and cultural underpinnings of access is a function of white supremacy. And it is functioning well. So what I really want to discuss is white supremacy, generally, and the white supremacy of Art Education, specifically. In doing that, I am refraining from academic citations from white scholars in Art Education who aren't explicitly confronting their whiteness. I am, whenever possible, avoiding privileging a scholarly voice and instead relying on honest narrative about my complicity in white supremacy. This essay includes embedded resources throughout. I have found

these and others helpful in exploring white supremacy, confronting my part in white supremacy, acknowledging the unearned privilege I enjoy, and developing language with which to discuss related issues with students, with colleagues, with family, and with friends. Lesson one that I have been taught is that we ([white and white presenting people](#)) [have to do the work](#). Whenever possible I am relying on scholarship that is [open access](#), acknowledging the institutional privilege of academic scholarship and restricted access that is rooted in systems of oppression. So I am sharing in my learning, but I am not doing all the work for you. In doing this, I hope my fellow white art educators in school, museum, and community spaces will read with open hearts and understand this not as a character assassination. Rather, this is our opportunity to acknowledge how legacies of racism and violence continue to deeply impact curriculum and pedagogy in the arts; to make space where we have failed in the past; and to reconsider pedagogy as a step toward reparation or mitigating the effects of white supremacy in Art Education on our students, our colleagues, and our communities.

White Supremacy and Rhetoric of Whiteness

Race is a construct and, according to Alexander (2010), a historically recent development “owing largely to European Imperialism” (p.23). She continues, “Here, in America, the idea of race emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery- as well as the extermination of American Indians- with the ideas of freedom preached by whites in the new colonies” (p.23). We can point to a historical emergence of white supremacy following Bacon’s rebellion in 1675. A white property owner in Jamestown, Virginia, USA, Nathaniel Bacon, successfully united enslaved Blacks, indentured servants, and poor whites against planter elite in the American colony. The rebellion effectively failed to overthrow the planter elite. In efforts to preserve their power, the planter elite extended privileges to poor whites to “drive a wedge between them and black slaves” (p. 25), eliminating future alliances between enslaved Blacks and poor whites and establishing white supremacy as poor whites sought to expand their racial privilege (Alexander, 2010).

According to Kuykendall (2017), whiteness “is predicated on the power to grant recognition and legitimacy...[it] exercises the right to impose meaning, objectives, and worldview on the racialized other and so makes the issue of race undiscussable” (p. 295). What most people- especially white people- are taught to understand, either directly or indirectly, is that race isn’t constructed but biological. A biological imperative of race was used to support [the eugenics movement](#) in the USA, where the desire to “breed” out so-called unwanted traits resulted in the forced sterilization of [Native Americans, Mexican immigrants, and Blacks in the south](#). If we consider the history of the construction of race, and the reasoning

behind its construction as a maintenance of power for white, wealthy landholders in the 17th century, then we can begin a process of unraveling the white supremacist power maintenance of “race” as it is intentionally violent toward Black and Brown bodies.

White supremacy assumes an [intersectional](#) erasure of [women](#), disabled [bodies](#), and queer [bodies](#). I will not approach a discussion of the violences committed upon Black and Brown bodies without acknowledgement of those intersections (you should probably also read [this](#)). Instead, I wish to weave the tapestry of violence that white supremacy enacts, and how without actively anti-violent pedagogies and curricular reconsideration, the field of art education continues to reinforce narratives that exclude and harm.

Intent vs. Impact

Simply put, one’s intention does not govern the response. If something one says or does hurts another person, that pain is not erased because one did not intend to hurt another. “Do no harm” is only an effective strategy when one can identify the harm one is doing. White supremacy relies on the cloaking of violence toward non-white persons as normalized. White supremacy in art/education relies on the normalization of whiteness in arts curriculum and pedagogy: a normalization that is inherently violent (Ighodaro and Wiggins, 2013). White people, if we are not willing to critically analyze what and how we were taught about the world, our intentions do not matter. If we are not willing to acknowledge that what we achieve is always at least in part to our [unearned privilege of whiteness](#), our intentions do not matter. White teachers, if we cannot be truthful with ourselves about how white supremacy has influenced our teaching in order to actively combat the negative impact of white supremacy in art/education, we continue to enact violence on our students.

Who Am I?

So, like many of you, I am trying to do the work. I am a former high school art teacher now working at a university helping prepare future art educators. With a few exceptions related to job relocation and graduate school, I have spent the entirety of my white life in the Deep South of the United States of America.¹ Presently, I live and work in the former capital of the confederacy, [Richmond, Virginia](#). As a white person born to [non-racist \(but not actively anti-racist\)](#) white parents

¹ This essay is accompanied by images and videos from my recent visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. Individual county and state monument images represent the places from which my family comes, places I have lived, places I have worked, and places where my family still resides.

in the south-eastern corner of Alabama, being white dramatically shaped my perception of self and the world around me. However, because we didn't talk about [whiteness as a race or racism in general](#), I lived without explicit acknowledgment of how the construction of race benefitted me and others like me, in spite of experiencing [casual racism](#) almost daily. Now, as an adult who is owned by my Southernness in many ways, I am actively learning new strategies to undo the damages of explicit and [implicit bias](#) in my professional and personal lives.

What We Need to Begin the Conversation

Engaging in difficult discussions about race requires some agreements between participants. Side by side with one of my students, we adapted these guidelines from Lynn Weber's [Guidelines for Classroom Discussion](#):²

1. We believe that in order to honestly and thoughtfully have this discussion, we must acknowledge that institutional oppression- including but not limited to racism, ableism, classism, sexism, genderism, transphobia, and heterosexism- exists.
2. That we are taught misinformation about our own groups and others.
3. That we agree not to blame ourselves for misinformation that we were given and to accept responsibility for not repeating it once we've learned otherwise.
4. To always do the best we can.
5. To actively seek information.
6. To not demean or devalue people for their experiences.
7. To actively combat myths and stereotypes.
8. To be brave and vulnerable and honor the space during discussion- including not repeating information outside of the conversation if asked not to do so.³

Legacies of Racism and White Supremacy in My Learning

Examples of Content I Did / Didn't Receive from my [\(Mostly\) White Teachers](#) :

I DID receive content that slavery was abolished.

I DIDN'T [explicitly receive content about legacies of racism](#) that continue to oppress Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) or that the concept of race as we understand it in the USA was constructed to preserve white supremacy (Alexander, 2010).

² I use Weber's guidelines when working with university students and with adult learners, however students have frequently asked for a version that might be more accessible in language in particular for younger audiences.

³ Thank you to Patrick Carter for his valuable insight and input on this adaptation

I DID receive content about the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving.
I DIDN'T [explicitly receive content about genocide](#) and ongoing erasure of Native identity in the United States of America.
I DID receive content about “equal rights”.
I DIDN'T explicitly receive content about what [colorblind racism](#) (Desai, 2010) is.



Figure 1: Memorial to victims of terror lynchings in Houston County, Alabama: the author's childhood home.



Figure 2: Clarke County, Georgia: location of the University of Georgia, where the author received her undergraduate and master's degrees.

What I learned was a [whitewashed version of history](#), one that privileges white experience and [white saviorship](#) (see also [this](#) and [this](#)) thereby maintaining White Supremacy. And when I started teaching, I replicated that- as many of us do (Spillane, 2015). This is not a vilification of every teacher I have ever had. Guinier and Torres (2003) cite continuing racial injustice as a result of a *canary in the coal mine* mentality- that by identifying a singular event or marker of

blame one fails to acknowledge the institutional and systemic causes of ongoing racial injustice.

This, of course, does not absolve one of one's personal responsibility, rather encourages us to understand racial injustice as deeper and more complicated than the singular action. Put another way, one's actions are a result of histories of myths and misinformation regarding race. Part of my work is to be honest about times where the legacies of racism have influenced my interaction with students. This story is hard for me to tell, and I'm going to tell it anyway:

It was my second or third year as a high school teacher. I could say I was young (an excuse often presented when [white people commit violence, but never for POC](#)) but I was still an adult, degreed, and working as a professional. One of my brightest and most dedicated students was a Black girl who I will call L. She wanted to go to art school. She came in before school and stayed after to work in our classroom. I felt close to her and I think she felt close to me. For most of the year, she wore her hair short and natural. One morning, she came in with long braids and proudly asked me what I thought of her hair. I thoughtlessly made what I considered a harmless joke about her new hair being a liability in a hallway fight. Typing these words right now brings me so much shame. She said nothing and I carried along in my day thinking absolutely nothing about it until the next morning when L came in before school started and asked to speak with me. She told me how hurt and embarrassed she felt by my comment. And she called me on my racism. Of course I apologized. And I meant it. And yet I was so eager to convince her of my anti-racism that I did the thing that many of us do when challenged on our white privilege or white supremacy: I failed to fully hear her. Or to fully acknowledge the ways I upheld white supremacy outside of that singular moment for which I was apologizing.

At the time, I didn't push myself to dig deeper. I simply and shamefully tamped down the incident because it made me so uncomfortable and therefore failed in acknowledging L's inability to "tamp it down." Because it wasn't a singular incident for her. It was persistent and oppressive. See, I thought the joke was harmless because I could not imagine L getting in a fight. It wasn't funny because what I was really responding to was the harmful stereotype of young Black girls being inherently volatile and the criminalization of Black girls in schools (Morris, 2016). In a moment, I undid all the trust I had been lucky to cultivate between myself and L. The ease with which I deployed a tactic of subjugation upon a Black body continues to haunt me, as does trying to locate all the other times I may have done so and not been aware of it. I live with the knowledge

of my violence against that student and likely the many others who could not find the words to call me out on my upholding of institutional violence. L, if you somehow are reading this, I am sorry. This essay is dedicated to you. I hope you are thriving.

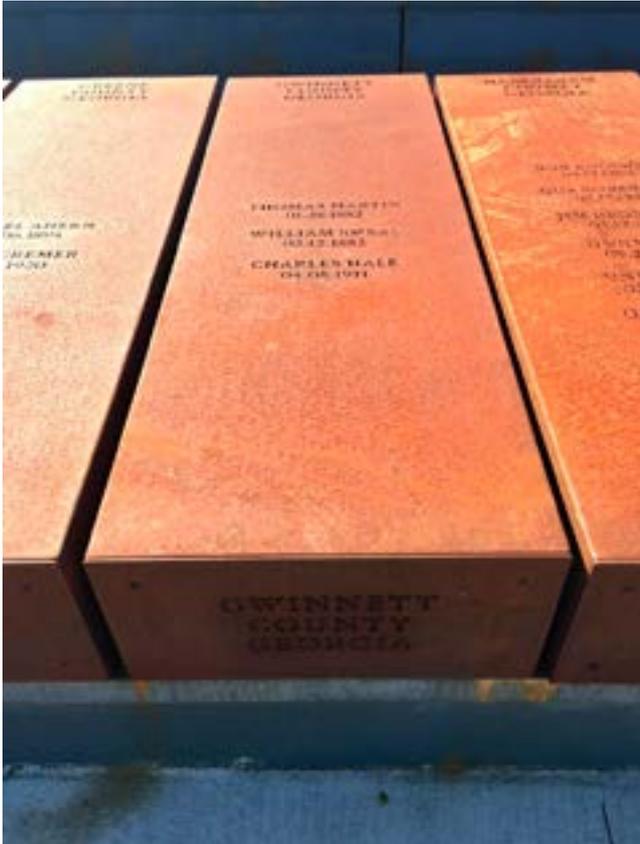


Figure 3: Gwinnett County, Georgia, where L was a student and the author taught at a public high school.

Regrettably, the narrative I learned about teaching- either explicitly or implicitly- was that “being there” was simply enough: that teaching art in a space with Black bodies didn’t require me to do any of the work to better understand legacies of white supremacy in education. That myth went unchallenged for much of my early career as an art educator. Unchallenged myths about race are a product of white supremacy, as are the histories of suppression in educational spaces for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC).

Making Space Where We Have Previously Failed

Ighodaro and Wiggan (2013) consider curriculum as a “social-psychological discourse of power, which reflects social and institutional values” (p.3).

They continue:

A curriculum forms a discourse of power and culture, where the interests of dominant groups or power elites are stated and then served through a dominant curriculum and where, in the curriculum process, less powerful groups are not allowed to enter the dialogue. (p. 3)

This discourse of power in educational spaces Ighodaro and Wiggan refer to as *curriculum violence*. Because, historically, Black people were considered as property in the United States, schools “purposely suppressed and denied the intellectual heritage of these groups” (Ighodaro and Wiggan, 2013, p. 6). Ighodaro and Wiggan contend that the legacies of exclusion and denial of culture are present in education today.

So how does one make space for anti-racist pedagogy where we have previously failed? To start, I posit that an ongoing and reflexive practice of developing culturally sustaining pedagogies is necessary. A culturally sustaining pedagogy “seeks to perpetuate and foster- to sustain- linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). If you made a Venn diagram of how and what you consider essential to teach at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, and how and what you were taught, directly or indirectly, to teach where would the overlaps be? I echo Ladson-Billings (1994) in claiming that we teach what we value. Put another way, we communicate to our students what we value through the artists, the content, the questions, and the processes we bring into spaces of art education. I also argue that [inclusion](#) is not demonstrating value. Our students don't need to be taught *about* Blackness or Brownness through inclusion of artists of color. They need to be taught that we *value* Blackness and Brownness as much as we value our whiteness. And how do/are we doing that in a culture that has taught each of us, Black, Brown, or white, that whiteness has inherent and superior cultural value? One way is to consider what Stewart (2017) calls the *language of appeasement*. Are we adopting language of *diversity and inclusion* in our approach to curriculum in art education or of *equity and justice*?

- Diversity asks, “Who’s in the room?” Equity responds: “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?”

- Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?” Justice responds, “Whose ideas won’t be taken as seriously because they aren’t in the majority?”
- Diversity asks, “How many more of [pick any minoritized identity group do we have this year than last?” Equity responds, “What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?”
- Inclusion asks, “Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong?” Justice challenges, “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?”
- Diversity asks, “Isn’t it separatist to provide funding for safe spaces and separate student centers?” Equity answers, “What are people experiencing on campus that they don’t feel safe when isolated and separated from others like themselves?”
- Inclusion asks, “Wouldn’t it be a great program to have a panel debate Black Lives Matter? We had a Black Lives Matter activist here last semester, so this semester we should invite someone from the alt-right.” Justice answers, “Why would we allow the humanity and dignity of people or our students to be the subject of debate or the target of harassment and hate speech?”
- Diversity celebrates increases in numbers that still reflect minoritized status on campus and incremental growth. Equity celebrates reductions in harm, revisions to abusive systems and increases in supports for people’s life chances as reported by those who have been targeted.
- Inclusion celebrates awards for initiatives and credits itself for having a diverse candidate pool. Justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups. (Stewart, 2017)

A culturally sustaining pedagogy in the arts would be a pedagogy that makes no claim, among other things, to race neutrality. Race neutrality can be understood as an effort to be inclusive with claims of colorblindness. But what race neutrality does in our classrooms is erase the history of inequity for BIPOC manifested in systems of white supremacy. Instead, doing the work of a culturally sustaining pedagogy in the arts would include engaging in difficult dialogues (Love, Gaynor, & Blessett, 2016) about race, in particular how race can shape experience or expression in the arts. I intentionally use the language of difficult dialogues as opposed to the more common phrasing I hear from teachers regarding a topic like race/racism: controversial. Controversy implies prolonged disagreement, and difficult dialogues are not inherently prolonged disagreements. Although they can be “controversial,” framing conversations as such has the added weight of not seeing them as appropriate for classroom settings. Additionally, it is too simple to overlay “controversial” onto



Figure 4: Experiencing Hank Willis Thomas's "Rise Up."
(video taken by author)⁴

a body- particularly bodies that have been historically marginalized. Bodies are not controversial, ideas can be. A culturally sustaining pedagogy in the arts would be a pedagogy that is actively anti-racist. An actively anti-racist pedagogy is not simply inclusive of Black and Brown artists. Instead, it would be a curriculum that de-centers whiteness by explicitly naming [histories of harm, erasure, and exoticization of Black and Brown bodies in the arts](#). De-centering whiteness in art education would involve, for many of us, filling in the gaps that formal education in the arts left us with: gaps in our knowledge of non-western art; gaps in our knowledge of indigenous art; gaps in the knowledge we acquired about what to *value* in the art world.

In 2017, white artist Dana Schutz's "*Open Casket*," a painting of Emmett Till, a child and victim of a terror lynching in Mississippi in 1955, was included in the Whitney Biennial. There was much debate following the opening of the Biennial regarding Schutz's inclusion of the portrait (Till is depicted in his open casket, as the title of the piece suggests), in particular of the subject matter. Was the story of Till's death one for a white, successful artist to further profit from? The capital-A Art World responded predictably, in my opinion, with rallying cries of censorship and artistic freedom. The New Yorker ran an essay in April 2017, titled "Why Dana Schutz Painted Emmett Till", that described Schutz as a painter of "enigmatic" stories and with a voice that is "high and childlike." After a detailed description of Schutz's career and accomplishments, the matter of "Open Casket" is discussed. The article concludes:

⁴ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fHpG5jPft56b4vx-CBvUZp6hmoO-J22tr/view>

'I knew the risks going into this,' Schutz told me. 'What I didn't realize was how bad it would look when seen out of context. Is it better to try to make something that's impossible, because it's important to you, and to fail, or never to engage with it at all? I just couldn't do it any other way.' (Tompkins, 2017)

First, to describe the story of Emmett Till's murder as "enigmatic" dangerously dilutes the horrors of [terror lynchings in the United States](#). Second, the rhetoric employed to describe Schutz, her voice as "high and childlike," reinforces an innocence of whiteness; what Kuykendall (2017) has referred to as the *logic of whiteness*, the "justification on which whiteness rests" (p. 296). Finally, for Schutz to speak of "risks" and not of reflection on cultural appropriation or possible mishandling of the story of the violent death of a Black child-brought on by the false accusation of a white woman- is [inadequate and, again, dangerous](#).

As a white person studying art, I received a lot of liberal signaling as to what determined art and artists as credible. As white teachers moving toward a culturally sustainable pedagogy of art, we must engage in [active skepticism of the historic gatekeepers of culture](#), which include museums, schools of art, canons of art history, and, yes, art education as a field. Are you one to resist in engaging in socio-political content via social media? If so, you must believe that you get all the information you need about the world while engaging in other forms of media. Social media and forms of popular media are valuable, I would argue essential, sources for Black and Brown scholarship and cultural content. If you aren't following Black Twitter, if you aren't following BIPOC artists on Instagram, if you aren't actively seeking sources of information and art that weren't signaled to you as "valuable" or "credible" I would encourage you to question why.

Arts Pedagogy as an Act of Reparation

I am not going to engage in an argument of the necessity for [reparation](#). I am, rather, proceeding in this work with the mindset that, without it, a moral debt cannot be repaid. I recognize that the word "reparation" in this context requires some caution. I do not seek to undermine the gravity with which reparation is taken up regarding the violence and genocide enacted on BIPOC in the United States of America. Rather, I use it to suggest the gravity with which I consider anti-racist work done in the name of art and art education. The very least white teachers can do is push back on the white supremacy of art education that gives us unearned protection by virtue of being white. One of the most successful lies white supremacy teaches us is that we can't talk about it, even as white people. Especially as white people.

And to foist the responsibility on BIPOC, the imperative for action pivots away from an action needed for all to thrive to an action that is perceived as benefiting only some.

During a panel discussion in Richmond, Virginia, in the spring of 2018, art educator Joni Acuff was asked how we could support BIPOC high school students in pursuing degrees in art and art education. Her response, in effect, was that if we wait until high school it is too late. I have considered her words many times since then, and challenged myself to reconfigure my “pedagogies too late” into pedagogies for a more just future. By the time BIPOC students get to high school, if they have not been nurtured as artists, have not seen their lives represented in the examples shown in class, if they have not *seen their lives valued* in the art and processes and histories we bring into our spaces of learning and making, [it is too late for them to consider the world of art as one that embraces them.](#)

Whatever we are doing now, it’s not enough: no backpatting, no congratulating. We’re working within centuries of white supremacy and Black suppression that can’t be undone through a single well-meaning gesture or even a series of them. White supremacy relies on our sense of accomplishment when we include Black artists in our curriculum for Black History Month and do not question why the canon of artists is exclusive of Black and Brown voices or we conveniently overlook [Gauguin’s exploitation of his famous Tahitian women.](#)

It’s not about “right” language. It’s about working toward “just” language; to be prepared to have our ways of knowing challenged and to be willing to listen and make changes; to actively seek new ways of knowing instead of becoming complacent with what we already know; to acknowledge that there is much we do not know, but more so to acknowledge that we have, every one of us, been fed myths and misinformation about our own groups and groups which we are not a part of. And those myths need undoing.

We must look directly at the ways in which this racist ideology of white supremacy, this idea that white equals better, superior, more worthy, more credible, more deserving, and more valuable actively harms anyone who does not own white privilege. And we must look at the ways that this plays out at an individual, personal, intimate level - within you as a person. It is so easy to blame the system ‘out there’ for creating this oppression. But the system was created by individual people, and it is upheld by individual people (whether knowingly or unknowingly). (Saad, 2018, pp. 18-19)

Stay with it. The ability to retreat when we are uncomfortable is a product of white privilege. The understanding that we are afforded

when we do it is a product of white supremacy.

I humbly submit these words as a testament of my commitment to staying with this work. I dedicate all these words to my students: I am sorry for all the ways I have failed and will likely continue to fail you. In solidarity, and to a more just future of art education.



Figure 5: City, county, and state memorials for the victims of terror lynching in the United States of America-church bells tolling in the distance (video taken by author)⁵

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⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1b6b2leMJ6exDWYmIvHPKc08Nur5MP8dx/view>

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