Chapter 1

Understanding Race and Racism in Art Education

A Journey

Joni *I am from Starkville, Mississippi…a place with no art museums but lots of racists. I was never interested in the visual arts as a teen, or younger, so I can't say that I made any conscious connections between the arts and race. It wasn't until I was 19 and a sophomore in college that I saw art, physically and metaphorically.*

Amy *Hmmm…what do mean by that—physically and metaphorically?*

Joni *Well, my experience and, thus, my perspective was twofold. First, I went on my first museum visit to see art on a megabus trip from Penn State to New York City. The mall of museums was overwhelming and White.*

Amy *Did you perceive those two things as related?*

Joni *I thought, Is this something that only White folks do? Hmmm…who is art for? Second, when I started creating my own art just weeks later in my university classes, my instinct was to use the process to examine, question, and heal from the racist violence that had been happening at Penn State while I was there in 2001. I saw art as a means for an intervention.*

Amy *That sounds like a paradox.*

Joni *I know! How can art be both white property and my personal tool for destabilizing racial power? These contradictory experiences are at the foundation of my now years of research around the relationship between art and race.*

Amy *Like you, Joni, my relationship with art really crystallized in college. After growing up in the suburbs of Atlanta, I attended a small women's college just outside of Boston. The student body was predominantly White and affluent. I was able to take art classes. There were no barriers or prerequisites. Before long, I was hooked. After a few courses, I declared my major as studio art. That meant I would have to take some art history classes.*

Joni *Were those the standard sort of Survey I and Survey II courses?*

Amy *Yes. They covered the world of art from antiquity to the European Renaissance, and from there to the mid-20th century. I would sit in the lecture hall with the large screens that projected images side by side. My professors were world-renowned art historians. From behind the podium, their pale faces glowed from a single overhead spotlight. I viewed them as authorities.*

They were the keepers of art knowledge. I wrote down everything they said.

I had a racial awakening in that same auditorium. It was when a visiting scholar stood behind the lectern. She delivered two or three lectures on the intellectual life, art, and architecture of ancient Timbuktu in west Africa. It was remarkable.

Joni *Why do you say that?*

Amy *First of all, it was the only time I learned of great art made by Africans. Of course the professors and the textbook discussed Egypt. But they cast Egyptians as though they were not Africans. It was as though Egypt were cut off from the rest of the continent, a dismemberment of sorts. I now know this is a characteristic of Western art history's worldview. It's a story of art that has been constructed and repeated over time. Most often Egypt is noted for its contributions to European art. Hardly ever is Egyptian culture addressed on its own terms or as part of the rich and diverse artistic achievements of Africa. That stood out to me so clearly at the time, but I didn't have the language then to describe it. It registered in my body and my spirit. I now would call it racial trickery.*

Joni *As you recall this experience, I am coming to the realization that this is the very reason why I hated art history courses. I was so emotionally disconnected from the material. The professors were the "keepers of art knowledge," and the narrative they orchestrated with the art made me feel and believe that I had no place within it. I often wondered why I was even there.*

Amy *There was another more obvious reason this moment became a racial awakening. The visiting scholar who stood behind the lectern was a Black woman, full-figured just like my mother. What's funny is that I was shocked—by her physical presence as the authority figure and by my surprise in seeing her there. She was both familiar to me and yet strange in this setting. My eyes were wide open that day. She was the embodiment of knowledge, and she commanded the attention and respect of the room. I became aware of how pervasive and unspoken whiteness is in art and my own art education. This was a flashpoint in my learning—totally unexpected and profoundly affective. When learning like that happens, a person becomes more perceptive and critical of norms that mask injustice. I know I was changed by it.*

Over the last half century, art education has seen many changes. Art teachers now talk about multiculturalism, popular culture, gender representation, inclusion, and socially engaged art practice along with more traditional themes of self-expression, perspective drawing, elements of art, and principles of design. Our curriculum conversations are multidimensional. No longer focused on gimmicky one-and-done lesson plans, art educators today learn theories and methods that enable them to *teach art as if the world mattered*.[1] Art lessons are about "big ideas" that endure over time and have deep resonance with life beyond the classroom or studio.[2] Many of these developments in art education have been accompanied, if not inspired by, an increased awareness of specific ways in which sociocultural differences influence learning, and the broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts that make art a dynamic field of practice.

Despite these changes, there remains a third rail for many art educators—"big ideas" and topics that are too emotionally and politically charged to go near. As non-White women who have been engaged in art and art education for more than 50 years combined, we believe that third rail is race—or more precisely, racism. We have written this book so that we might share with others the research, frameworks, stories, examples, vocabulary, and strategies that we ourselves have found most fruitful. It reflects our quest to understand how race and racial hierarchies operate in art and art education. The book also reflects our teaching and professional development work in support of art educators in schools, museums, and universities The book is filled with ideas and activities from our classes, workshops, and presentations.

Each chapter addresses race head-on, providing readers the tools needed to step closer and conquer the third rail by overcoming the habit of avoidance that makes us all unwitting accomplices to racism. At the end of the journey, you will understand what race is and how it functions. It will be easier to recognize racism in art education, and you will be better prepared to deliberate and take action to remedy racial inequities in and through your own art education practice.

We believe in the pedagogical power of dialogue. We also recognize that dialogue is not easy, predictable, or always fruitful. Throughout our careers as art educators and in the writing of this book, we, Joni and Amy, have relied on dialogue to move us forward.

Our conversations are not solely about communicating our ideas. The conversation is how we work out our ideas. The experience of telling our stories enables us to figure out what we think, to test and discard ideas that are no longer viable, and to formulate new stories that make us more resilient, hopeful, and brave. The dialogue that runs through this chapter mirrors this philosophy and practice. You will learn about us, our backgrounds, and the method we suggest using when reading this book.

Rules of Engagement

We suggest thinking about this book as an opportunity and provocation to dialogue. So, how do we prepare for such an experience, particularly if this is the first foray into racial dialogue? Some rules for engagement can help set the stage for a successful journey. The following are practices we employ in our classrooms and workshops that have proven helpful. You can, of course, add your own. We offer these suggestions as a starting point:

1. Be Curious.

Race is an old idea. It has roots that date back more than a millennium. Yet many readers of this book are newcomers to talking about race. Maybe you have never discussed racism in an open, straightforward manner, or perhaps you grew up in a family that treated racism as a basic fact of everyday life. Each of us sits somewhere along this spectrum of racial experience, and our understanding of race and racism is tethered to that location.

We have written this book for all readers who desire to know more, to help them extend beyond the tethers. At the same time, we understand that new knowledge can be frightening when it troubles previous conceptions. You might even feel uncomfortable at times as you move through the pages ahead. This means you are doing it right! After all, learning requires that we step out of our routine ways of thinking, doing, and feeling. So remain eager to learn by arming yourself with an attitude of curiosity. This is the best way we know to grow.

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