THE CHALLENGE OF NEW COLORBLIND RACISM IN ART EDUCATION

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The election of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States, is undoubtedly historic. Many of us, both people of color and White were deeply moved the night of the election. In New York City, where I live, and around the country and globe, celebrations broke out and people took to the streets reveling in the beginning of a new age. Immediately, news commentators and media pundits proclaimed that we had entered a post-racial era.

This view that an Obama victory would signal the end of racial inequality was a major concern of several Black intellectuals and bloggers who supported Obama prior to the election. Lawrence Bobo, a Black sociologist, said “If Obama becomes the president, every remaining powerfully felt Black grievance and every still deeply etched injustice will be cast out of the realm of polite discourse” (Swarns, 2008, p. 1). Mr. Obama was clearly aware that his candidacy or election would not solve the nation’s racial inequities. His March 2008 speech was the only one to address race directly. According to Glen Ford (2008), the Obama Campaign was “relentlessly sending out signals to White people that a vote for Barack Obama, an Obama presidency, would signal the beginning of the end of [3] race-specific agitation, that it would take race discourse off of the table” (11). Perceptions and beliefs of racial inequality vary widely between Blacks and Whites (New York Times CBS News poll, 2008).

As art educators who work with the next generation of teachers, we need to pay close attention to this disparity as it speaks to the racial divide that colors the experiences of students from public schools to universities. In public education today, we are faced with three interconnected realities: (1) the majority of teachers are White, middle class, and female; (2) our student body is racially diverse and the rapidly changing demographics point to an increase in students of color; and (3) students of color are more at risk of failing in our schools. This new reality suggests that art teacher education needs to directly address racial inequality. In this article, I examine the ways the colorblind ideology shapes our post-Civil Rights society, what is now being called the new racism. I look specifically at the ways colorblind ideology is produced and reinforced through multiculturalism and visual culture (media), I then look at how it shapes art teachers’ understanding of racism. Drawing on the work of several contemporary artists who challenge the colorblind ideology, I argue that through new representations of race/racism in the art-world, media, and classrooms we can shape anti-bias art education practices.

Racial Inequality in the Age of Obama

We are not in a post-racial era. The gap between Whites and people of color continues to grow in education, health care, income, unemployment, and incarceration (see Figure 1). It is clear then that racism is still endemic to our society. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) explains “Racism springs not from the heart of racists,” but from the fact that dominant actors in a racialized social system receive benefits at all levels (political, economic, social, and even psychological), whereas subordinate actors do not” (p. 558).
For several years now, among other art educators, have written about the ways the institutionalization of multiculturalism has perpetuated racism by reinforcing the idea of a colorblind society. It does this by focusing on culture, ethnicity, and the celebration of diversity (Collins & Sandell, 1992; Ballenger-Morris & Stuhrl, 2001; Desai, 2008, 2005, 2000; Wassen, Stuhrl, & Petrovich-Mwanki, 1990). Multiculturalism, as enacted in a majority of elementary and high school art classrooms, is about tolerating diversity, which has led to the marketing of difference in particular ways, rending invisible the racialization of punishment, immigration, schooling, art practices, and media. The growth of multiculturalism (schools to corporations) implies that we have "overcome" racism without necessarily shaking up the power structures that are expressed through and that constitute the social context of racism" (Davis, 1996, p. 43). The underlying assumption is that difference can be understood by acquiring knowledge about it and this knowledge will erase racial inequality. However, as Angela Davis (1996) states, "Policies of enlightenment by themselves do not necessarily lead to radical transformations of power structures" (p. 47).

**Seeing Colorblindness**

The dominant narrative of the post-Civil Rights era is the notion of colorblindness, which is an important component of what sociologists are calling the new racism. Shaped by the liberal discourse of individualism, freedom, and opportunity, contemporary racism is described as laissez faire racism (Beba, Kuegel, & Smith, 1997) or colorblind racism (Bonia-Silva, 2001). Despite differences in the terms used to describe our current racial condition, broadly speaking, the beliefs and views that frame contemporary discourses on race include the notions that (1) people of color should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, implying that they are unmotivated; (2) discrimination is not the cause of racial inequality; (3) government gives too much attention to race and gives too many opportunities to people of color and not to Whites; (4) people of color are to blame for the persistent gaps in socio-economic conditions and in education; (5) race is no longer an issue; (6) Whites face reverse racism; and (7) people of color tend to use the race card to their advantage.

Colorblind racism, according to Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2004), involves: (1) an increase in covert racial discourses and practices; (2) avoidance of racial terms and claims by Whites that they experience reverse racism; (3) language or "semantic moves" that avoid direct racial references in order to safely express racial views; and (4) invisibility regarding the mechanisms of racial inequality. To speak about new racism does not mean we have not made advances regarding race relations since the Civil Rights movement. We have. However, as a nation and certainly in our schools we tend to avoid meaningful discussion about racism.

Art educators who work in teacher education must examine the new colorblind racism that frames our understanding of difference in order to challenge racist practices in our schools and communities. This honest examination is required if we are to address what the playwright Anna Deavere Smith (1993) calls "our struggle to be together in our differences" (p. 88).

Each year in my university classes, I witness the deep racial divide between students of color and White students. White students are annoyed when students of color challenge their colorblindness. These challenges inevitably lead to heated and emotional charged discussions about race and racism. Students of color, on the other hand, avoid confronting racist discourses and often remain quiet—perhaps something they learned to do from a very young age. Talking about racism is difficult, painful, and emotional. Vastly different lived experiences inform students'
understandings of racial inequality. For many of my White students, their experience of difference is experiential, as they grew up in White suburbs and attended K-12 schools where the majority of students were White. Even those White students who grew up in major cities experienced racial segregation. They typically attended city schools with a high percentage of White students. Many White students' understandings of difference are based on popular culture and media images that promote racial inequality as a thing of the past. They grew up seeing images and often stereotypes of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans in the media and in advertisements on a daily basis. Our visual culture continues to reproduce colorblind racism by naturalizing and normalizing images of racial difference in the name of cultural diversity.

Visual Culture and Colorblind Racism

Popular magazines and the media are important pedagogical spaces (Giroux, 2006) as they provide the first lessons on colorblind racism. I use both visual culture and contemporary art to start conversations about how race relations are part of our daily lives and how these experiences shape our values and beliefs about different racial groups. One project my students undertake is to analyze contemporary cultural products (TV shows, films, paintings, shoes, advertisements) that have stirred racial controversy. They explore the ways colorblind ideology is shaped or negated through the various discourses circulated about a cultural product. This then opens ways of understanding how discourses in our cultural landscapes are racialized. For example, the April 2008 Vogue magazine featured for the first time on its cover a photograph of an African American man, LeBron James, with top model Gisele Bündchen. This image sparked a major controversy exposing the fault-lines of race relations in the United States, as the cover portrays LeBron James in an ape-like stance, bearing his teeth while simultaneously clutching a petite white model. Gisele Bündchen, recalling images of King Kong. Similarly, Adidas introduced a new line of trainer shoes called the "Yellow Series" that represented a stereotypical cartoon image of an "Asian youth with bowl-cut hair, pig nose and buck teeth" (n.a. 2006, ¶ 1). This image offended many Asian Americans, but Adidas contended that the artist Barry McGee created this image as an anti-racist commentary.

Disney, one of the most powerful oligopolies in the world, is a cherished part of childhood experiences in the United States, shaping understandings of social relations as normative and given, rather than constructed. Disney images represent dominant ideas of race, gender, sexuality and social class (Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Naomi Klein (1999) writes that "Disney has achieved the ultimate goal of lifestyle branding: for the brand to become lifestyle itself" (p. 155). Most Disney shows oversimplify the complexities of race/racism and neutralize it through colorblind ideologies. In February 2005, Disney Channel aired "True Color" the 53rd episode of its longest-running sitcom, That's So Raven, which was nominated for an Emmy Award and praised for its portrayal of African Americans. The episode, despite its African American cast, stopped short of addressing the political landscape of race/racism that permeates our society by limiting the discussion of race to one episode, thereby delegating challenges to dominant culture to the margins (Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Another media example is the award-winning movie Crash, directed by Paul Haggis. This movie taught our culture's imagination and has been hailed as a true post 9/11 representation of the complexity of race relations in our country. From high schools to universities, Crash is widely used in classrooms to address race-relations. "Crash is eminently pedagogical. It clearly attempts to teach the viewer something about race and racism" (Howard & Dai, 2008, p. 4). The teachings regarding race, however, are ultimately about individuals and their prejudices across the racial spectrum, leaving one with the message that racism is an individual and not systemic issue. As the editors of the book Crash Politics and Antiracism: Interrogations of Liberal Race Discourse. Howard and Dei state, "What is interesting about this movie, however, is that while many it purports to say something new, anti-racist and anti-colonial analyses reveal that it plays directly with almost no deviations, into dominant oppressive, Eurocentric, and white supremacist discourses of race" (p. 4).

Our students need to develop racial literacy to identify and critique racial discourse in popular culture, media and other sites of visual
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"Never, as far as I can tell, in the history of a presidential campaign has such a huge outpouring of independent posters been created for a single candidate" (¶ 1). Obama's race as well as his message of hope and change were factors that inspired many artists. Yet, the majority of artists de-emphasized Obama's race, rarely depicting his skin color. The most famous example of Obama art that captured the nation and world is the ubiquitous red, white, and blue posters of Obama inscribed with the words "hope" or "progress" and reprinted on buttons, stickers, and T-shirts (see Figure 2).

The Obama campaign strategically used the colorblind ideology to gain support, especially in swing states: "Obama's appeal among white Americans, its seems rests on his perceived ability to transcend race—that is, not to be a [B]lack candidate but simply an American one..." (Mazzama, 2007, p. 3).

On the other hand, the work of African American graphic designer Ray Noland, the first artist to create and promote Obama art, did not appear to appeal to the masses. Noland represented Obama as part of an African American discourse both ideologically and aesthetically by consciously depicting him in variations of brown. In one poster he uses basketball imagery and in some other posters he is shown among bullhorns and a mass of protesters holding picket signs repudiating the Iraq war.

Reframing Race through Contemporary Art

Similar to critical pedagogical practices, contemporary artists pose questions that prod us to examine taken-for-granted ideas about race, racism and whiteness. These questions allow us to begin the process of thinking critically about how our experiences are shaped by our social position, which is always informed by history. Much of the work done by contemporary artists of color who examine race, racism, and whiteness situate their work within a historical context—thereby challenging an ahistorical analysis of policies, laws and institutions that is perpetuated by our educational system. Their work asks viewers to consider their social position in relation to our history.

One of the main reasons for colorblind racism is the lack of knowledge and understanding about the history of race and racism in the United States. I often show my students two brief episodes of the PBS series Race: The Power of an Illusion in which Harris (1993) argues that "Whiteness" became property; one that holds tremendous value both materially and symbolically. The normalization of whiteness produces the colorblind ideology. Exploring the notion of colorblindness, Diggs (2009) created a public art project called "Face" that was intended to open dialogue about race relations at Williams College, where in the spring of 2008 a major bias incident took place (see Figure 3). Students at Williams asked to focus on race relations for a
figure 3 [right]

figure 4 [below]
NYU Student Artwork for the course: Contemporary Art and Critical Pedagogy: Issues in Race, Representation and Multiculturalism
day as part of “Claiming Williams:” the college’s first day of spring semester. The genesis of this project began a few years earlier when Diggs discovered that her family owned slaves in Virginia in the 17th and 18th centuries. Shocked and horrified by this knowledge, she “worked towards doing public art work about race, investigating whiteness in relation to non-whites. (Few white artists have dealt with their own whiteness in their work, and there are few models to wrestle with)” (Diggs, 2009, p. 1). Posing questions to herself about whiteness and race on the margins of books and articles became part of her artistic process, in much the same way that critical educators use the question-posing method in their teaching. These initial questions were reworked, discarded and new ones added in consultation with students, staff, and faculty at Williams College. Diggs decided to place two questions on each napkin used in all the dining halls at Williams College from February 6-13, 2009. Staff, students, and faculty could respond to the questions as a URL was provided on the napkin in hopes that a dialogue would ensue regarding race relations at Williams College, which like a majority of colleges in the U.S. is predominantly a White institution. Here, the public space of dining halls and the Internet become an educational space that opens dialogue about people’s feelings, thoughts, and experiences about race, racism, and white privilege. This is the first step toward developing an anti-racist pedagogy.

The challenge of anti-racist pedagogy is to work with both my White students and students of color to gain a more nuanced understanding of how racism, gender, social class, disability, and sexuality shapes our educational experiences and spaces. As future teachers, they need to be able to negotiate the terrain of race relations that can only begin if they acknowledge colorblind racism and how it intersects with social class, gender, disability, and sexuality. I believe that contemporary art that explores the complexity of race and racism opens spaces for students to touch the discomfort about difference that resides in our body, and embodied knowledge, rather than just cognitively. As John Dewey (1954) reminds us,

the function of art has always been to break down the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. . . . Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception, appreciation. (pp. 183-184).

Take for example, the contemporary artist, Hank Willis Thomas, who portrays the normalization of Blackness by appropriating the language of advertising in his series Bi(joined and Unbranded) Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008 (2005-2008) as it can be easily decoded. Unbranded Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008 is a series of images taken from advertisements printed from 1968 to 2008 in popular African American magazines, such as Essence and Ebony. He digitally erases text, logos, and any other advertising information revealing how the naturalization of race relations is coupled with the desire to sell products to African Americans by showing images of themselves. He appropriately begins this series in 1968, a critical and turbulent time in politics that witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, widespread demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and the eruption of race riots in hundreds of cities across the United States. Speaking about this series, he says:

I believe that advertising’s success rests on its ability to reinforce generalizations around race, gender and ethnicity which can be entertaining, sometimes true, and sometimes horrifying, but which as a core level are a reflection of the way culture views itself or its aspirations (http://hankwillisthomas.com/portfolio.html)

By un-branding the advertisements he wants us to think about how signs shape particular understandings of our world. By highlighting the role of visual culture, Thomas points to the insidious ways in which race, gender, and capitalism get linked to individual desire and individual agency.

It is this creative potential of art that forces us to dream of a different future—a more racially just future for all of us.

Confronting the Colorline as a Way to Build Culture

Drawing upon the dialogical nature of contemporary art I asked my students to create a public artwork that was based on an analysis of four to five interviews they conducted with preservice or practicing art teachers regarding their views on race, racism, and art education. Not surprisingly their analysis showed that there was a clear distinction between the few teachers of color and the majority of White teachers they interviewed about their understandings of race relations and its impact on their class, schools, and communities. White teachers’ understanding of race relations was based on the most part, on a colorblind ideology. Most White teachers provided a ubiquitous response: “I do not see race I only see children.” Multiculturalism was the primary means teachers identified to address race relations in their art classrooms.
The challenge for my students then was producing artwork as strategic interventions to open dialogue about the complexities of racism rather than shut down conversations or perpetuate colorblind racism. One group created text badges in black and white that challenged a black and white binary shaping much of the literature in critical race theory, while another group installed three headless gender-neutral kids sitting in chairs against a changing background that spanned the color spectrum (see Figure 4). These works directly critiqued multiculturalism's colorblind ideology's celebration of diversity as a rainbow coalition.

In an era of public spectacles, multiculturalism is one such spectacle (Davis, 1996) that continues to reproduce colorblind racism. Multicultural images in visual culture and art education curricula are pervasive and need to be critiqued as they shape dominant racial narratives. The works of contemporary artists discussed earlier are forms of counter narratives that open ways for us to begin the hard work of directly addressing the unspoken color line in our classrooms. The power of art resides in its ability to reframe issues of race and racism. Creating artworks in art classes that speak to the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of racism in our daily lives and the lives of our communities can break the silence and pry open dialogue about racial inequality. Anzaldúa (1990) reminds us that creative acts for people of color are "acts of delicacy and desperate determinations to subvert the status quo. Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises." (p. xvi). It is this creative potential of art that forces us to dream of a different future—a more racially just future for all of us. And, it is in this art-based dreaming that "we build culture" (p. xvi) that works to dismantle the color-line in our schools and society.

References


