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Visual Culture Art Education to Cultivate Critical Racial Consciousness

Patty Bode

It was the first day of the college semester. I was teaching undergraduate preservice teacher education courses focused on critical multicultural education and curriculum design in January 2019, when a photograph of Ralph Northam, then governor of Virginia, surfaced from his 1984 medical school yearbook page in which he was wearing blackface and posing next to someone in a Ku Klux Klan costume (Blinder & Martin, 2019). The story was widely reported in the national media, and I opened all my class discussions with the question, "What do we know about blackface?" It became evident within our classroom communities that we did not know much. The historical perpetuation of White supremacy through anti-Black visual imagery that distorts Black bodies, intertwines Blackness with violence, and dehumanizes Black life was vacant from the consciousness of most of my students in the predominantly White preservice teacher classroom.

I threw aside my carefully planned notes for the first day of class and spontaneously logged into Netflix to search for Marlon Riggs's award-winning 1987 documentary, *Ethnic Notions*. While the computer was connecting, a thought bubble in my mind was flashing: "I bring antiracism into each component of this syllabus, but it has been years since I used this film. It was produced decades before most of these students were born, and I wonder if they will connect to its message." I asked students to pull their seats into a cozy half-circle as close to the screen as possible and prepare to take notes for discussion after the film. I also announced with empathy that some of the imagery may be experienced as painful, enraging, or traumatizing, especially to students of color, and that I prioritized self-care for all students. I explained that I am committed to stand in solidarity with any students who might choose not to view the film. Leaving the classroom was an option for all students, with the assurance that I would take full responsibility for adapting and personalizing course content in ways that would be most meaningful for them.

All students stayed in the room throughout the film. In our post-viewing dialogue, they responded with phrases such as, "Blown away, shocked and disgusted, embarrassed, ashamed by the White supremacy" and "Really wanted to view the film again, to take better notes, and dig in more deeply."

I replied, "Consider that syllabus I just handed out to be a first draft, which we will be revising together as we enact Paulo Freire's (1968/1970) concept of problem-posing education as critical pedagogy." That semester, my students and I collaboratively designed a module of the study explained in this article. Since that semester, I have taught the module in three different undergraduate public university programs in a range of course formats and structures.

Ethnic Notions and Visual Culture

Written, directed, and produced by Marlon Riggs, *Ethnic Notions* examines anti-Black stereotypes in popular culture from the antebellum period until the advent of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The stereotypes outlined in the film continue to permeate visual culture today. Riggs's meticulous research and depth of analysis lays bare anti-Black tropes, which he categorized as The Tom, The Sambo, The Mammy, The Coon, The Brute, The Pickaninnies, and The Minstrels. These tropes made an enduring impact on the social psyche and cultural fabric of the United States. His scholarly scrutiny illuminates the origin of the Jim Crow character, blackface, and the fictions of docile servitude and sexual aggression as racial attributes. Esther Rolle narrates Riggs's script:

> Contained in these cultural images is the history of our national conscience. A conscience striving to reconcile the paradox of racism in a nation founded on human equality, a conscience coping with this profound contradiction through caricatures. What were the consequences of these caricatures? How did they mold and mirror the reality of racial tensions in America for more than 100 years? (Riggs, 1987, 4:29)

The historical perpetuation of White supremacy through anti-Black visual imagery that distorts Black bodies, intertwines Blackness with violence, and dehumanizes Black life was vacant from the consciousness of most of my students in the predominantly White preservice teacher classroom.

Visual Culture, Critical Consciousness, and Racial Literacy

Antiracist art education requires cultivating critical consciousness and racial literacy in preservice teacher education to assertively combat anti-Blackness. In the field of art education, we are uniquely positioned to leverage visual culture's encompassing net of imagery to enter into dialogue as Freire (1968/1970) advanced, about liberating possibilities, and engage in transformative social action. Acuff and Kraehe (2020) asserted, "The repetition of racist imagery from historical to contemporary popular culture is indicative of a lack of visual culture education among artists, designers, and other creative cultural producers working today" (p. 1). Engaging preservice art teachers in inquiry-based visual culture art education (VCAE)[1] can help develop pedagogies that deliberately read and deconstruct images as text to interrogate the intent of representation and the role of those representations in the lived experiences of preK–12 students, teachers, and broader society. Connecting visual culture and implicit bias to structural, systemic, and institutionalized racism can pave pathways to critically conscious teaching. Visual culture and anti-Blackness are deeply entangled in U.S. consciousness. A first step to recognizing that is to study image-based messages in connection to abuse of power and its sociopolitical influence, for which the field of art education holds intrinsic responsibility.

Responsibility to Cultivate Critical Racial Consciousness

McDonough (2009) used the phrase *critical racial consciousness* to represent the preservice teacher's "growing analytical ability with regard to the role of race in society with an overall ability to think

As a White teacher educator, I carry responsibility for educating myself on racial literacy and modeling my goals of critical consciousness with sincere humility to all preservice teachers.

critically about a variety of issues of power" (p. 529). A review of research reveals definitions of critical consciousness and racial literacy as a continual process or an ongoing journey rather than a state of mind to which a teacher permanently arrives. Engaging in multiple and intersecting experiences that help preservice teachers examine the origin of one's beliefs and privileges, reflect on how one's knowledge or lack of knowledge is shaped, and recognize power structures within institutions can be deliberately planned within course activities to explicitly teach criticality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Fasching-Varner, 2012; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; McDonough, 2009; Peters et al., 2016; Sleeter, 2017).

Critical racial consciousness (McDonough, 2009) is not achieved by enrolling in a single course in multicultural education, reading one book about cultural responsiveness, viewing one film, or studying several artists; however, all of those strategies may contribute to its development. As Nieto and Bode (2018) emphasized, becoming a multicultural educator first requires transformation of self, which is a lifelong process of confronting our own racism and biases, continual learning, and seeing reality from various perspectives. Gay and Kirkland (2003) alerted teacher educators to recognize that many preservice students avoid engaging with racial issues in education courses. They advance some strategies rooted in critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) for counteracting that avoidance, including a call for teacher educators to "make explicit learning expectations of criticalness; modeling; providing opportunities to practice critical consciousness, and translating conceptual multicultural education into K–12 instructional possibilities" (p. 181). Course content selections and activity designs can make a difference in preservice teacher candidates when facilitated within a CRT framework (Sleeter, 2017).

As a White teacher educator, I carry responsibility for educating myself on racial literacy and modeling my goals of critical consciousness with sincere humility to all preservice teachers. Within a race-conscious critique of my pedagogy, my Whiteness holds different implications for preservice students of color, whose racial literacy is shaped in an entirely different trajectory than most White students. Research demonstrates that the lived experiences of many teachers of color lead to "deep, complex and critical analyses of educational inequity" (Kohli et al., 2019), through which they cultivate critical consciousness long before entering their teacher education programs. Critical consciousness was not a position they took professionally; rather, it was a positionality they continuously developed across multiple facets of their lives (Kohli et al., 2019). Family, schooling, and critical professional community contributed to participants' analysis of social structures. In teacher education classrooms populated by students of multiple races—with specific goals to counteract the predominance of Whiteness—I take responsibility for differentiating my practices. It is required that I construct assignments that can create space for students' ongoing engagement with critical consciousness development and demonstrate responsiveness to students' community context and professional needs (Kohli et al., 2019).

Cultivating Critical Racial Consciousness and Countering Anti-Blackness: A Module of Study

This course module combines three assignments that prompt us to explicitly commit to our goal of raising and expanding our critical racial consciousness. The three assignments include: (1) defining implicit bias; (2) viewing and responding to the documentary film, *Ethnic Notions*; and (3) developing a study of contemporary artists for preK–12 critical curriculum development. These assignments are outlined below, after a brief overview of the goals that integrate the National Core Art Standards into preservice teacher education while cultivating critical racial consciousness as outlined here.

Creating

For each assignment, students create visual imagery and written reflection in a visual journal submitted in an interactive slide format, such as Google Jamboard, VoiceThread, or Padlet. They generate and conceptualize the visual messages and comment about the imagery with attention to implicit bias and issues of power. Examples of students' visual journal imagery and their comments are included as figures (Figures 1–5) throughout this article.

Responding

The slide represents the students' response to artistic work and scholarly research through their perception, analysis, and interpretations of intent and meaning.

Presenting

Students convey their meaning by presenting their slides and comments to the classroom community (online or in person) with commitment to solidarity and empathy.

Connecting

Students relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding in replies to peers. This includes synthesizing and relating knowledge and personal experiences to connect with peers' work.

Dialogic Meaning

Connecting the content of the assignment to peers' visual representations in slides and written posts is required, and those

dynamic engagements are threaded into future classroom activities, which often shape the next assignment in course content. The research on cultivating critical consciousness in preservice teachers and Freire's (1968/1970) approach to transformational social action emphasize the essential role of dialogue with others to expand one's perspectives.

Assignment 1: Defining Implicit Bias

Investigating Research, Definitions, and Experiences of Implicit Bias

We aim to establish common understandings of the term *implicit bias* within the community of our coursework and deepen our perspectives through some brief videos. By generating a classroom community definition and shared understanding of implicit bias, we anchor our development as antiracist art educators in research and the goal of cultivating our critical racial consciousness. We emphasize our responsibility to develop countermeasures to implicit bias. Analysis by the Kirwan Institute for Race and Ethnicity reports that implicit bias can have broad negative impacts. Addressing implicit bias on multiple levels (e.g., individual and institutional) is critical for achieving social justice goals (Staats et al., 2016, p. 15).

Learning objectives for assignments on implicit bias. Create a slide with visual imagery and written or spoken text that demonstrates that you can:

- establish a shared definition of implicit bias to expand critical consciousness;
- practice using vocabulary words from implicit bias videos in the slide to name one's consciousness development;
- negotiate our perspectives within the context of our peers' discussion of implicit bias, visual culture, historical events, and contemporary art;
- name at least one example of a countermeasure I can implement realistically this week;
- reveal self-knowledge by recognizing ways that implicit bias has shaped my experiences; and
- respond to peers' slides with deliberate solidarity and empathy.

Implicit Bias Activities

- *View the video* "Implicit Bias: Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism"[2] (2 min., 26 sec.) from a series of videos on POV, a production of American Documentary, Inc. on Public

Figure 1. Traci Aronson, preservice teacher visual journal. This piece is mostly black and white, with some red to symbolize the bloodshed on our history to reiterate, as shown in the movie, how inhumane we can be and that we need to have a new way of seeing.

Broadcasting Service/PBS with Saleem Reshamwala as host (December 2016).

- *View four more videos at same link:* After viewing the "Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism" video, select at least four additional videos from the POV Implicit Bias series that follow the Peanut Butter and Jelly video (each is 3 minutes or less), and take notes.
- *View Videos by Jerry Kang*, which explain the brain science that illustrates the research on implicit bias, and what to do about it.
- *View Jerry Kang's TedX talk* (13 min., 58 sec.) called "Immaculate Perception: Vice Chancellor Kang at TedxSanDiego 2013."[3]
- *Then view all seven brief videos* at the University of California, Los Angeles's Office of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Implicit Bias page to gain an understanding of the vocabulary that helps us discuss implicit bias:[4]
  1. Preface: Biases and Heuristics (5 min., 14 sec.)
  2. Lesson 1: Schemas (3 min., 12 sec.)
  3. Lesson 2: Attitudes and Stereotypes (4 min., 13 sec.)
  4. Lesson 3: Real World Consequences (3 min., 45 sec.)
  5. Lesson 4: Explicit v. Implicit Bias (2 min., 49 sec.)
  6. Lesson 5: The IAT (5 min., 14 sec.)
  7. Lesson 6: Countermeasures (5:23 min.)

Assignment 2: A Study of *Ethnic Notions*, Documentary Film

Interrogating Visual Culture Through Marlon Riggs's Documentary, Ethnic Notions

Understanding how visual culture deliberately perpetuates the dehumanization of African Americans connects our investigation of implicit bias with distribution of power and structural racism. The imagery in the film is disturbing and requires a prepared mind and critical perspective. Current conditions caused by historically endemic systemic racism, such as the disproportionate percentage of pandemic deaths in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, the death of unarmed Black citizens at the hands of police, and the devaluing and suppression of knowledge of minoritized children in schools is perniciously linked to the depraved perspectives generated by historical images interrogated in the film.

Learning objectives for assignment on *Ethnic Notions*. Create a slide with visual imagery and written or spoken text that demonstrates that you can:

- reflect on your learning process and any shifts in knowledge or perspectives with "I used to think, and now I think";
- reveal self-knowledge about what surprised you;
- advance your introspection about current social racial inequities by resisting the evasion of responsibility with "it's all in the past";
- cite policy, practice, or law that is/was perpetuated by the prevalence of this imagery;
- consider media arts methods employed by Marlon Riggs and the influence of those studio practices on your experience of the film; and
- respond to peers' slides with deliberate solidarity and empathy.

First: View the film *Ethnic Notions* (58 minutes) by Marlon Riggs (1987) and take notes. It can be found on many streaming services. Complete the slide and comment post described above.

Optional Extensions to This Assignment: Study the Life and Work of Marlon Riggs

Ethnic Notions was one of Marlon Riggs's earliest films in his expansive body of work that viscerally asserted affirmation of Blackness and Gayness and poetically took on taboo topics with sparkling intellect. He was an award-winning filmmaker and beloved professor of journalism who wrote, directed, and produced an impressive collection of films in his lifetime, which was cut short at age 37 due to complications of HIV/AIDS.

- *Study the California Newsreel site*.[5] Marlon Riggs Critical Resource page and the biographic film of Marlon Riggs, *I Shall Not Be Removed* by filmmaker Karen Everett.
- *Recognition 30 years later.*[6] In 1991, Riggs founded the nonprofit Signifyin' Works to produce and distribute audiovisual material exploring the history and culture of African Americans. His contributions are the topics of recent exhibits and rereleases of films.

Assignment 3: Contemporary Artists for Critical preK–12 Curriculum

Translating conceptual antiracist, multicultural education into preK–12 curriculum and instructional possibilities. Investigate at least one contemporary artist's work by listening directly to the artist's voice. Select an artist listed below (or another of your choice). Search for podcasts, videos, and print media that document the artist speaking directly about their life and work. Consider how this artist's work calls for racial justice and represents Black bodies and Black lives. To decolonize curriculum, we deliberately listen to artists and communities speaking for themselves, rather than consuming their cultural production from our one-dimensional gaze. Consider ways this artist's work may spawn preK–12 curriculum and studio production that deliberately provides countermeasures to implicit bias and structural racism.

Learning objectives for assignments on contemporary artist and preK–12 curriculum. Create a slide with visual imagery and written or spoken text that demonstrates you can:

- consider studio methods employed by the artist and the influence of those studio practices on your interpretations of the work;
- compare and contrast the artist's work to the indictment of visual culture in the *Ethnic Notions* documentary;

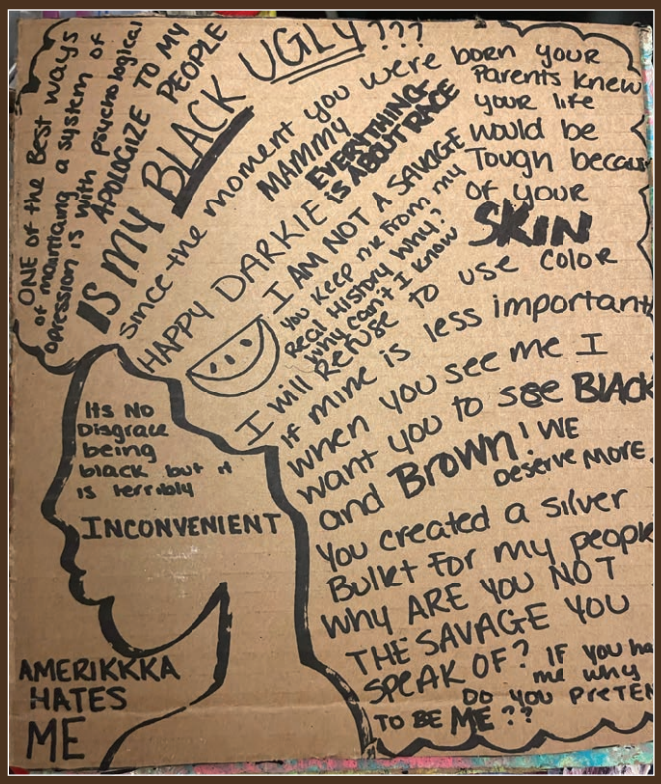

Figure 2. Shiyanne A. Dunkley, preservice teacher visual journal. I think after watching the documentary, that **everything** is about race.… It surprised me to hear "happy darky" and that white people truly believed and convinced themselves that black people enjoyed being slaves! Watching the video, I felt alone and singled out as if I lived during this awful time period.

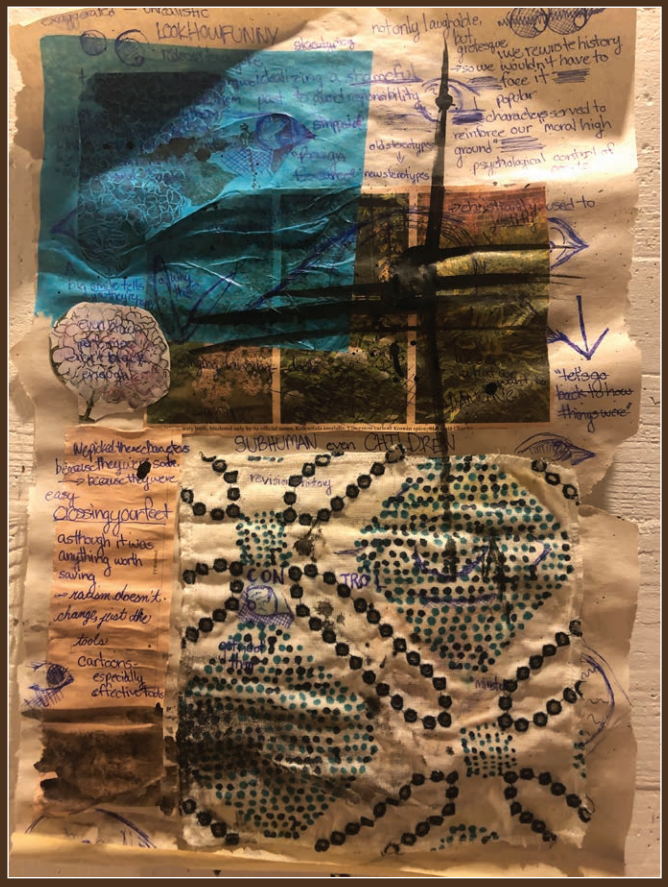

Figure 3. Rosemary Plaze, preservice teacher visual journal. It is not enough for me, as a white person, to know racism is wrong.… [I]t is not enough to simply be "not racist," it is time to be antiracist.

- reveal self-knowledge by naming your hopes and concerns about using this artwork in your preK–12 classroom;
- support the countermeasures of *mindset*, *debiasing*, and *decoupling* (in Kang's 2016 seventh video) by including these artists in your preK–12 curriculum;
- develop an analysis of how the artist's work may help preK–12 students understand implicit bias and structural racism;
- create a curriculum that provides countermeasures to implicit bias through analysis and interpretations of intent and meaning of contemporary artists' messages;
- design lesson plans that affirm racial identities of BIPOC students through studies of contemporary art; and
- respond to peers' slides with deliberate solidarity and empathy.

Read this article in ARTnews, "Artists Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, and Renee Cox Called for Aunt Jemima's Liberation Years Ago," by Maximilíano Durón (June 19, 2020).[7]

View this video (1 hour and 15 minutes), September 3, 2020, "RING THE ALARM… A Conversation With Derrick Adams & Renee Cox" (by Guild Hall of East Hampton, NY).[8]

Select one or more of these and other contemporary artists born between the 1920s and 1990s. The birth year provides some insight into the artist's sociopolitical context:

Betye Saar (born 1926).
Derrick Adams (born 1970).
Dawoud Bey (born 1967).
Jordan Casteel (born 1989).
Renee Cox (born 1960).

Figure 4. Gordon L. Jones, preservice teacher visual journal. These images are intentionally meant to give us a sense of comfort, the assurance that nothing bad is actually going on, when underneath that veneer the message is this: [B]lack people enjoy serving you, they are comfortable being in servitude.

Figure 5. Gabriela Marroquin, preservice teacher visual journal. Because of these images it is easier for people to dehumanize Black people.… It's easy to cover up the truth behind them.

One learning module is not exhaustive and cannot accomplish the full transformation of critical racial consciousness, a complete reversal of anti-Blackness, or a thorough infusion of visual culture art education.

Barkley L. Hendricks (1945–2017).
Kerry James Marshall (born 1955).
Titus Kaphar (born 1976).
Mickalene Thomas (born 1971).
Kara Walker (born 1969).
Carrie Mae Weems (born 1953).
Fred Wilson (born 1954).

This course module concludes with preservice teachers presenting a curriculum lesson or unit that engages the work of at least one of the artists in Assignment 3 while employing vocabulary and demonstrating consciousness developed in Assignments 1 and 2.

Conclusion

This article describes practices to cultivate preservice art teachers' critical racial consciousness rooted in CRT and educational research. The examples in this article build on the unique position and responsibility of art educators to leverage visual culture's expansive power to generate dialectical classroom practice and commitment to a justice-centered curriculum. The course module combines three assignments that explicitly address the goal of raising and expanding our critical racial consciousness as a lifelong goal, following the analysis advanced in education research:

1. the objectives of each module assignment make explicit learning expectations of critical consciousness,
2. the three learning activities provide opportunities to reflect on one's beliefs and privileges, how one's knowledge or lack of knowledge is shaped, and to recognize power structures, and
3. the activities guide students to translate conceptual antiracist, multicultural education into preK–12 curriculum and instructional possibilities.

One learning module is not exhaustive and cannot accomplish the full transformation of critical racial consciousness, a complete reversal of anti-Blackness, or a thorough infusion of visual culture art education. However, every lesson counts, and every day matters in our collective work to take responsibility for our uniquely powerful position as art educators. ■

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Endnotes

[1] See more about the goals and practices of VCAE in *Art Education*, *56*(2), edited by Pat Villeneuve (2003), and *Art Education*, *58*(6), edited by B. Stephen Carpenter II (2005). See also Keifer-Boyd's (2018) commentary, "(re)Vision Visual Culture" in *Studies in Art Education*, which provides a succinct overview of its historical conceptual framework.

[2] https://www.pbs.org/video/pov-implicit-bias-peanut-butter-jelly-and-racism.

[3] Find it on the University of California, Los Angeles web page by scrolling down and see it under "Additional Videos." https://equity.ucla.edu/know/implicit-bias.

[4] https://equity.ucla.edu/know/implicit-bias.

[5] http://newsreel.org/Riggs.asp.

[6] https://www.frieze.com/article/marlon-riggs-signifyin-works-2021.

[7] https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/betye-saar-faith-ringgold-renee-cox-aunt-jemima-1202691661.

[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0cusZ0aQRg.