4

Encountering Others

OLIVIA GUDE

"Were I to teach again at a school like Sumner, I would want to have been born a person of color, and I would bring to the students artworks by contemporary American artists of color, especially those working with social concerns..." notes Terry Barrett, an art educator who writes immensely useful books about interpreting art with students, in his autobiographical essay in the *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education* (2004). Barrett's description of teaching in an inner city high school in St. Louis seems to reflect a lifelong sense of sadness about his early teaching experiences there.

I totally agree with Barrett's understanding of important curriculum content for students (of all colors), but his frank statement of ambivalence about his racial identity surprised me. First, I was shocked by my recognition that there was a time when I felt a similar unease. I desperately wanted to be a good and useful teacher for my African American students, but often I felt hopelessly cut off from being truly relevant and useful to them. Second, I was startled by the realization that after many years of work and study, I have overcome these feelings of disconnection and am comfortable with being who I am—an anti-racist White educator in a multi-colored, multi-cultural world.

As an urban working class kid growing up in St. Louis about five miles from Sumner High School, I lived in a Black and White world.[1] There were few other "minority people" in St. Louis in those days, so racial difference for me was coded solely as a Black and White issue. Historically, St. Louis was literally on the Mason-Dixon line (the boundary established between the slave states of the South and the free states of the North) and I lived on the edge of Black and White neighborhoods so it makes sense that as a sensitive and aware young person I thought a lot about race and difference. Like many artistic White folks, I was drawn to Black language and music—Blues, Jazz, Soul—so much more textured, complex, and deep than the vapid pop songs and patter played on "White radio." These were the years in which Martin Luther King, the Kennedys, and Malcolm X were assassinated; race riots rocked many American cities; and the Black Power movement advocated for a militant approach to bringing racial justice to America.

These were confusing times for a sincere White girl trying to figure out how to make a place for herself in the world, but not wanting personal success to come at the cost of joining an unjust establishment. I wasn't raised to be a racist. I remember an announcement at Sunday Mass that the pastor of our parish had gone to join the marchers in Selma, Alabama. Most of the nuns who taught at the high school I attended were Catholic radicals—against the Vietnam War and committed to social justice. Especially important, I never heard either of my parents use a racist epithet or make an explicitly racist statement. My Dad moved our large family to a large house, affordable because it was in a "changing neighborhood." My Dad said that it was ignorant to believe in segregation. Still I sometimes sensed in myself deeply internalized fear of others. In an odd way, my position was made more complicated by the good examples of my White elders because they opened a space for me to be more observant of the systemic racism of American culture and to notice how this was reflected in attitudes, values, and beliefs that I had absorbed from "mainstream" White America.

Now many years later, I am an artist/teacher/educator preparing university students of many different races and backgrounds to teach in diverse urban settings. I attempt to share with them a sense of how they can de-center themselves and become more aware of the many different perspectives from which people view the world, live their lives, make choices, make art. My goal is to challenge these bright, creative, and idealistic young teachers to remain certain of their vocations to teach while becoming increasingly uncertain about the cultural position from which they will teach.

In 1993, I was planning a mural for a Westside Chicago community with Dzine, a now well-known artist who began his career as a graffiti writer.[2] As part of our research, our youth team asked neighborhood residents the question, "What does it take to build a brighter future?" A man, recently immigrated from Africa, thoughtfully commented, "Americans are so direct. In Africa, we tell stories and assume that people will listen well and understand." Following this advice, I will use this essay to share stories, knowing that you will draw out understandings about how to build a brighter future by becoming a more culturally complex artist and educator.

How to Build a Brighter Future by Olivia Gude and Dzine with a team of Chicago teens.1993. Krylon spray paint and acrylic paint. Utilizing the design style of the Ndebele murals of South Africa, the mural drew community members into articulating what is needed to build a better life for individuals and community in the US, while contextualizing these struggles for social justice within the global issue of the (then still "legal") apartheid government in South Africa. Photo courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group.

Hearing Stories

Sometime in the 1970s, I surrendered to a longing to have curly hair and permed my own natural (utterly straight) hair into a reddish Afro. I wondered what it would be like if I also had dark skin—could I be Black? Would I then be able to cross boundaries and make connections? Even as this idea came to mind, I realized how silly it was. One couldn't become Black by painting the color of one's skin. Being Black meant shared experience and culture. Could I acquire Black culture? How could I understand the Black experience—at least secondhand?

I recalled a book I'd read years before, *Black Like Me*, in which a White journalist disguised as a "Negro" traveled in the South, relating the shocking story of how he was treated in that pre-Civil Rights era (1960). Even at the time, the story struck me as weird—why did it somehow matter more that a disguised White man shared these experiences of oppression? Didn't White people have enough sense to believe Black people when they told their own stories?

Sadly, the answer is still often "no." In Lisa Delpit's (1995) must-read book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, she quotes a number of African American and Native Alaskan educators who are frustrated by the lack of dialogue with White educators about the needs of the children of their communities. "When you're talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for *everybody*, for *everybody's children*. They won't listen; White folks are going to do what they want to do anyway" (p. 21). Delpit's examples particularly highlight the difficulty of speaking with White educators whose university training and position reinforce a sense of rightness and entitlement. Professional academics sometimes seem to be attempting to squeeze life experiences into reified categories, rather than reflecting on the observations of others by using categories derived from diverse cultural experiences. For example, art educators may argue about which theoretical paradigm will best inform the future of art education, rather than begin a discussion about curriculum with a student and community-based exploration to identify significant needs that culture and the arts can address. The question becomes not "What is the most correct way to analyze and organize reality as such?" but rather "What do *these* children need to know to survive and thrive?"

In the 1980s, a national network of community-based artists, the Alliance for Cultural Democracy, held a series of conferences in which a major focus was the possibility of creating authentic multi-cultural collaborative work (*Cultural Democracy*, 1988). Artists shared many examples of performance and visual art projects and frankly discussed the problems and limitations that they encountered when working cross culturally, such as blending varied artistic vocabularies or ensuring the continued participation of all members in interracial projects. Presumably all the participants in this dialogue had an active and ongoing commitment to ending racism, yet there was surprise when an African American woman (whom I have often quoted, but whose name I never learned) remarked, "White people are hard to work with because they don't know their own culture." Further insights contributed by members of the ongoing anti-racism workshops of At the Foot of the Mountain, a feminist theater based in Minneapolis, explained more about this issue: "Critical to unlearning racism is accurate information about one's own ethnicity and cultural heritage (no one

is 'just regular' or 'just plain' or 'just normal'" (Okerlund & O'Neill, 1987).

I began to understand that for many of the artists of color at this gathering, collaborating with White people had meant that often White artists would just assume that this or that way was the right way to conduct a meeting, organize a rehearsal, or plan an event. I thought about my own alienated experiences as a woman attending meetings run by *Robert's Rules of Order* (2000/1876). Who decided that these rules were the right way to organize a meeting? Did we ever discuss the fact that these rules privileged a particular notion of democracy—voting—that creates winners and losers, over participatory democracy—a style of consensus decision-making that emphasizes building win/win solutions to complex interpersonal, intercultural organizational problems?

Will you learn *the* right way of doing things by listening to the stories of others? Of course not, "difference" is not homogeneous, nor is it based on a series of simple binary oppositions. For example, being in touch with African American culture over the years has made me less impatient and more aware of respecting and listening to elders. Does this mean that I am less enthusiastic about youth movements? No. However, Black culture has taught me to think differently about relationships between generations. Dominant American media representations of cultural change tend to position conservative, "straight" older people against progressive "radical" kids who eventually themselves become conservative oldsters. Through the example of the African American community, I learned to think more subtly about how social conditions shape attitudes and about how working for cultural and political change can be a radical, lifelong commitment built on the strong foundations of earlier generations' thoughts and actions.

What will you learn by listening? You may hear an experienced educator explaining how indirect styles of stating behavioral requirements can unwittingly undermine effective discipline with urban children, you may come to understand connections between the improvisational style of African American quiltmaking and African textile traditions, or you may hear an intricate postmodern analysis of how tropes (metaphors) in African American literature can be understood through the "signifyin(g)" narratives associated with the tricksterish Orisha, Esu-Elegbara, in African and American folk traditions (Delpit, 1995; Wahlman, 1993; Gates, 1988). Listen with an open heart and mind and you will learn in unexpected ways that will enrich you greatly.

Shifting Discourses

As a teen perusing the blue velvet blazers and bellbottoms of *Seventeen Magazine*, I read this sub-heading on a self-improvement article—"It may be your parents' fault if you are the way you are, but it's your fault if you stay that way." This is particularly useful advice to consider in these postmodern times in which it is generally agreed that a person's sense of self and identity is formed in a complex array of family and cultural discourses. While it may be true that you are formed in discourses, it's critical to remember that one of the discourses that shapes you is the one that you, yourself, construct from multiple sources.

While attending graduate school in the 1980s, I took courses in women's literature. Immersing myself in women's studies was a wonderful, life-shaping experience. We read novels by contemporary writers such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Walker as well as recently re-published works such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Gilman, 1899/1999; Hurston, 1937/1990). All of these books were studied within the context of critical theory that explored women's attempts to forge an authentic language of self-exploration within a literary language shaped by canonical male authors (Woolf, 1929).

Reading works by Hurston, Walker, and Toni Morrison foregrounded race and culture as well as gender as significant facets of telling stories from diverse perspectives (Morrison & Taylor-Guthrie, 1994). I remember the shock of reading Jean Rhys' (1966/1982) *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, a book that tells the background story of Antoinette (Bertha) Mason, the "mad," imprisoned Creole wife of Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (Bronte, 1874/1996). As I began reading the novel, I remember thinking that it didn't seem likely that Rhys could successfully re-make my understanding of the pyromaniac wife while being faithful to the events as recounted in the original *Jane Eyre*—particularly Antoinette's stabbing of her own stepbrother when he comes to visit her in England. After reading Rhys' rendering of the visit, I could only think—"I'd probably have stabbed him too!" I was shocked that I could see an event so differently when it was presented with additional scenes in which Antoinette's brother (and only hope) complacently explains that as a wife she has no rights to her own fortune in English patriarchal society and then declines to involve himself in attempting to free her from being imprisoned by Mr. Rochester. For me, this was a revelation that struck at the core of self—a sane woman could be legally imprisoned! Could other selves really experience the world so differently? What scenes was I not seeing?[3]

To be an effective teacher in a global society, teachers must be willing to decenter themselves by questioning their deepest beliefs, consciously examining the origin of their ideas and interrogating these ideas within the framework of other ways of experiencing and knowing. This sounds like a rigorous and long route—and, indeed, it can be. The arts are means through which this process can be rigorous and also immensely pleasurable and immediately rewarding.

Considering how my sense of life had been transformed and enhanced by reading almost exclusively fiction and critical writing by women, I decided to conduct an experiment on

myself. For 2 years, most everything I read—fiction, nonfiction, critical writing, magazine articles—was by a Black writer. (I use the term Black as a useful inclusive descriptor of writers who are African American as well as writers from Africa and from throughout the African Diaspora.) I made a point of visiting local Africentric bookstores as well as the African American studies section of the library. I read well-known magazines such as *Ebony* as well as small multi-cultural publications such as the excellent Canadian magazine, *FUSE*.[4] It's interesting to note that when I told people about my all-Black reading plan, a number of White people expressed impatience with what they saw as a simplistic strategy. I don't remember encountering that reaction from a person of color.

Looking back it's difficult to sort out all the ways in which this intensive reading program changed me. The readings are, of course, interwoven with a myriad of other experiences. There are, however, moments that come to mind that suggest that this focused reading served to reorient me in a number of important ways. As I was speaking with my high school students about a group of enchained figures in an Aaron Douglas painting, I referred to the figures as "the slaves." It suddenly occurred to me how the use of this term suggested that the ontological (essence of being) status of these people was inherently one of "unfreedom." If my family and I were captured and forced into labor for decades would we become "slaves" or would we be "enslaved human beings?" This semantic distinction no doubt arose from reading a number of first person narrative accounts of African-heritage people enslaved in America (Douglass, 1845; Jacobs, 1861; Truth, 1850/1993). Questioning my terminology suggested that I was now able to understand on some deeper personal level the magnitude of the crime of slavery.

Discussing color symbolism with kindergarten through 12th grade classes, I recognized that students' analysis of the meaning of dark and light in paintings, literature, and movies often echoed the inherently racist aesthetic tradition of associating light with goodness and knowledge, darkness with evil and ignorance. I thought about what effect this kind of talk had on the White as well as the Black students in my classroom (2000).[5] I confess that at the time it did seem to me that this symbolism was natural, but I began to question myself—wondering if these seemingly inevitable dark/light associations were truly universal as had been communicated to me in my aesthetic education or if they were culturally determined. Later this led to more directed reading about color and symbolism, including an amazing essay by bell hooks (1992) in which the blending of personal narrative and scholarly analysis convinced me that dark/light associations were indeed profoundly culturally determined. I was the White person hooks describes who had not considered that White could be an everyday symbol of fear for a Black child traversing a White neighborhood to get to her grandparents' home. Later, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) introduced me to a fascinating analysis of how the metaphor of Whiteness in much traditional American literature is inflected with complex, often ominous meanings connected to America's history of slavery and segregation.

I began to look for examples in art and language that did not privilege light over dark (2000). Tom Feelings' *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* (1995) is a book of pictures without text that tells the story of the enslavement of African peoples and their transport to the Americas. Throughout the book the color Black is used symbolically to suggest comfort, familiarity, and safety. White colors (in the form of a slaveholding fort, the transport ship's sails, the White soldiers) represent terror and oppression. It totally makes sense that in this historic context Feelings chose to give the colors White and Black these connotations, yet a White student in one of my teacher education courses became very agitated when we studied this work—accusing Feelings and me of reductively (and with prejudice) reversing the "normal" meaning of dark and light symbolism. I don't think that that is what was happening at all. I think that we were being "deprogrammed" from years of assuming that our color associations were natural and normal.

In *White* (1997), Richard Dyer, a White writer, explores how representations of "extreme Whiteness" (such as Nazis or KKK members) serve as a cultural counterpoint to "ordinary Whiteness," allowing White people to see themselves as speaking and acting "disinterestedly as humanity's most average and unremarkable representatives (1997, p. 223)."[6] Race is thus not seen as a White issue because only extremist Whites and people of color are seen as "raced." It can be very difficult for White people to accept the notion that they are as culturally specific as a person of color. I've often encountered this attitude in my career as an artist. When told that I make artworks about race, people (and I am sad to say it's always White people) often ask, "But what is your *personal* work about?" The implicit assumption is that race is not a personal issue for a "generic" White person.

The 4th graders participating in my artist residency at Amelia Earhart Elementary School on Chicago's Southside were big fans of the African American modernist "folk art painter" Horace Pippin (Stein, 1993). These bright and engaged African American students noted that the painting, *Cabin in the Cotton III* of 1944, depicted the time of repose at the end of the work day—the color white of the fluffy clouds, the abundant cotton fields, the man's white shirt, and chickens playfully pulling on a string—all suggested harmony and prosperity. In *Cabin in the Cotton IV* also painted in 1944, the white clouds, cotton fields, and daisy-like flowers again suggested pleasant associations. However, the meaning of the color white shifts because these items now form the backdrop for a scene in which a Black man carries a basket loaded with white cotton and a Black women spins white cotton into thread as a very pale white woman stands primly nearby in a white dress and bonnet. Here the white cotton

becomes associated with ownership and exploitation. The students and I experienced the cognitive dissonance generated by these widely varying associations of the color white within a single artwork. The result was not a symbolically meaningless use of color, but a complex artwork that led to nuanced reflections on personal and collective experience.

Later in the semester we studied another work by Pippin, *Temptation of Saint Anthony* from 1946. In this work, a black-bearded, white-skinned St. Anthony peers into a dark chasm dotted with dainty white flowers and skeletal remains. We discussed the dark shadowy depths as a place of knowledge and destiny and marveled at the way in which our eyes were repeatedly tricked into seeing the scattered bones as pleasing decorative floral motifs. By this time, these young students were comfortable with not latching onto a single symbolic meaning for a given form or color. They had become aware that in interpreting a work of art they were not looking for a single, correct meaning, but exploring a range of meanings that were put into play by the text.[7] I believe that it's my job as an art teacher to lead my students in such discussions about the complex ways in which symbolism and meaning are generated in works of art; I also believe that I wouldn't have chosen these artworks and structured these discussions if I haven't myself encountered and re-considered how the meaning of value is culturally determined.

This is not just a Black and White race issue. While engaging in one of my favorite pastimes—watching Bollywood movies—I was struck by a scene in the classic Hindi film, *Sholay* (Sippy, 1975), in which an ex-policeman and his sidekick free an Indian village from being terrorized by a gang of bandits. In an early scene, a beautiful young woman dressed all in white appears in a second story window of the family compound. My first reaction was "Ah, here is the virginal, marriageable daughter of the family," but my memory of Indian culture kicked in and I recalled that in India widows wear white. In this film, a Westerner might gather the exact opposite meaning of that intended because this woman in white represented not promising virginity, but the sorrow and waste of human life caused by the bandits who made her a unmarriageable widow at such a young age. Part of the transgressiveness of this 1970s movie is the liberated hero's willingness to become romantically involved with a widowed woman despite traditional taboos. It's important to recognize that remaining confined in a mono-cultural White paradigm can isolate one from understanding other stories from cultures and communities around the world.

I remembered back to a time when I was a very young teacher and an African American girl told me that she was planning to attend Spelman College in Atlanta. I regarded her choice as quite curious and questioned her, "Why would you want to put yourself in a segregated Southern school when you have had the experience of being educated in the integrated North?"

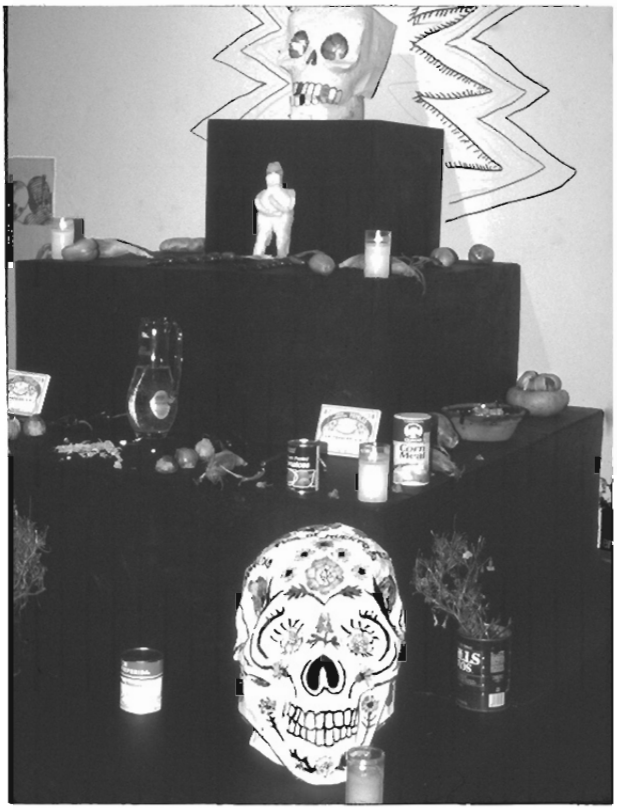
Since that unfortunate comment, I have read many works by African American writers and have met many educated Black adults, and I have heard many stories of young people leaving their homes to attend Black colleges (institutions founded primarily for the education of African Americans, although their charters were never racially exclusionary). I came to understand the importance of these schools for providing education and cultural affirmation for African American youth embarking on important work in the world. I thought back to my insensitive question to my former student. Why attend a historically Black college? Perhaps to get an experience of not being taught by bright, but clueless White folks such as myself? Perhaps to experience being educated in a place where she was not cast as an "other" whose main task was to adapt to middle class White values? Perhaps to have the opportunity to learn about the rich history of political, artistic, and literary accomplishments of Black Americans?

Mourning Losses

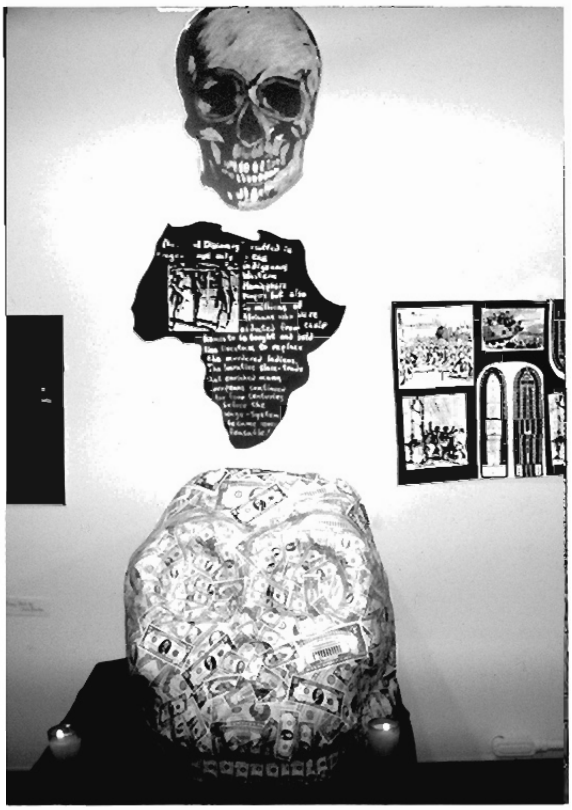
Indifference to the experiences and troubles of others can be a comforting shield from the stress of encountering difference. It's easier to pursue one's own agenda if one's notion of what ought to be done or how to behave is not complicated by the concerns or worldviews of others. When I think about my reaction to the girl who planned to attend a historically Black college, I feel sad and ashamed. I don't know how she felt. I hope that she felt sure of herself and felt only irritation or anger with me. I worry that she may have felt disoriented and undermined in her choices and in her desire to more fully understand her heritage. I could not have publicly acknowledged this story two decades ago when I first understood the cultural blindness of my response to the student's college plans because I would have been too painfully embarrassed. Now time and maturity allows me to see that people make mistakes and that we enter into adult life shaped by many cultural experiences that we do not control. I believe that acknowledging and reflecting on mistakes and misunderstandings, rather than spending psychic energy hiding or rationalizing them, is the best way to change and grow and, one hopes, to make amends by being a better teacher for current students.

In the years preceding 1992, as Spain and the United States geared up to celebrate the "coming together of two cultures," indigenous people from throughout the Americas joined with other artists and activists to create events and artworks that foregrounded the brutal realities of colonization (Call to a Campaign for a Post-Columbian World, 1989). By 1992 "counter-Quincentennial activities" were as big a news story as official Quincentennial celebrations.[8] Pr[illegible]ve artists and organizers with relatively slight resour[illegible]ere able to create an international conversation surrounding the history of Columbus' "discovery" of America. This is an amazing cultural success story that should be remembered when artist activists feel overwhelmed by the sometimes

1492~1992 Ofrendas by Carlos Cortez, Olivia Gude, and Lonnie Poco. Beacon Street Gallery. These altars were created for Dia de los Muertos 1992 to contemplate the effects of Columbus coming to the Americas.



Detail of the *La Raza Ofrenda.*



Detail of the *African Ofrenda.*

seemingly invincible power of official sources to dictate media content.

In 1991 Carlos Cortez (may he rest in peace in a Wobbly heaven[9]), Lonnie Poco, and I created a Dia de los Muertos installation at Beacon Street Gallery to raise interest in the upcoming events of the Quincentennial. Our plan included a huge papier-mâché skull covered with dollar bills for an altar to commemorate the African slave trade, a text installation that drew attention to the horrific practice of retaining the skeletons of Native American people (even people who were identified as named individuals) in ethnographic collections in U.S. museums, an altar for barrios in the US by Carlos, and an altar with a wonderful model of an ancient Mayan site by Lonnie Poco. When I disclosed my plan to make an altar dedicated to Columbus, my fellow artists were surprised and somewhat disconcerted, questioning why I would honor such an infamous character. I explained my concept and they agreed that this was an important idea to investigate publicly.

At the center of my ofrenda, a calavera (skeleton figure) with a Columbus hat and sword was labeled with the words "Cristoforo Colombo a.k.a. Cristóbal Colón a.k.a. Christopher Columbus." These various names used for Columbus (the original Portuguese with standard Spanish and English variations) foreground the desire of White America to claim Columbus, not merely as a European explorer, but as a very Anglo, generic (non-ethnic) "White guy." The draped black banner at the base of the altar read, "Death of illusion, of innocence, of isolation."[10] I made this piece for White people to mourn the illusions that we were taught in our schools and communities as well as through mainstream media.

It's more comforting to believe an inspiring story about a man who convinced the king and queen of Spain to bankroll his almost mad, idealistic desire for geographic exploration, than to face the reality that Columbus himself assumed that he would conquer and subdue native peoples to gain power and riches. It's also more inspirational to believe the conventional U.S. school explanation that the 1823 Monroe Doctrine was an altruistic move to keep all the countries of the Americas safe from European intrusion, rather than to consider that the doctrine served as a warning to Europe that the Americas were now being claimed for the influence and/or domination of the United States. It's so difficult psychologically—not just to correct this or that particular historical inaccuracy—but also to internalize that many of our heroes may not be heroic by standards of ethics and ideals in which we believe today. Such discoveries are often disorienting and can bring real psychological pain. One feels grief and often the pressure to repress and obstinately screen out the implications of new insights. In some ways the task at hand is inherently one of

Detail of the *Columbus Ofrenda*.

symbolization—how can one retain ideals while letting go of empty or distorted symbols?

It makes sense that White folks (like all peoples) should be decentered intellectually and psychologically because there is no good reason that White people should conceive of themselves as central or as a norm of all humanity. I also know that one can feel simultaneously convinced and empowered as well as mentally disorganized and frightened when coming to terms with historical facts, psychological insights, and observations about one's own culture and background. Race is intricately interwoven into one's sense of self and personal subjectivity. As with any deep psychological change—reconsidering the meaning of one's racial identity and unconscious discriminatory patterns—requires time, effort, and support.

A prayer card at the altar reads: "Who am I to say to you, 'Christopher Columbus, Rest in peace?' Who am I to forgive and forget? Remembering is the task of this time." As the altar banner drapes onto the floor, its words reference a famous poem of Langston Hughes, *Let America Be America Again* (1938)[11]—"The land that never has been yet—And yet must be..." The buoyant hope of this poem by a man who was oppressed for his race and for his sexuality is an inspiration to all to not be embittered and despairing when acknowledging the gap between the reality and the ideal of America. Organizers and everyday citizens can be change makers, but to make change we must first have a vision. We can get such a vision from deep thinkers and artists. "O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath—America will be!"

Reconstructing Selves

I recognize that much of what I have written here refers as much to "secondhand" experiences of Black culture through the arts as it does to experiences with actual people. A novel, a painting, or an eloquently written essay may be more likely to penetrate one's consciousness and change one's way of thinking than a dryly written history text, scientific statistics, or a remark by a colleague. The great novelist Leo Tolstoy described art as a kind of "infection," allowing others to feel what the artist has felt (1898/1980).

There's another reason that I concentrate on secondary (artistic) experience in my story. It's not the role of people of color to educate and cajole White people into changing their beliefs and attitudes. It's not the task of youth of color to re-educate culturally less aware White teachers. It's hard to form good personal or working relationships with people if you have little in common or if you frequently insult them in small unconscious ways. If you truly want to live a multicultural life, take the responsibility to be someone who other folks will want to relate to. Do your cultural homework.

Most White folks have been raised in environments that don't reinforce being aware of the nuances of the cultures of others. Sometimes a defensive White student will counter this observation with the remark, "That may be true, but 'they' also don't know much about 'us.'" In "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," bell hooks (1991) succinctly gives a different account of the knowledge Black people typically have of White people, "Although there has never been any official body of Black people in the United States who have gathered as anthropologists and/or ethnographers whose central critical project is the study of Whiteness, Black folks have from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations 'special' knowledge of Whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny... its purpose was to help Black folks cope and survive in a White supremacist society" (1991, p. 338). Many African American writers have written with grace, anger, and humor about the ways White folks think and behave (Fanon, 1952;[12] hooks, 1992; Hughes, 1933; Wright, 1957). The information is there for those who for personal or professional reasons are willing to work to enlarge their cultural understandings.

I've seen numerous instances of consciousness changing in which a young White artist/cultural worker, suddenly aware of the magnitude and meaning of that which has been unseen and unacknowledged, is overcome with sadness and turns for comfort to the person of color who may have

initiated these new understandings. Sometimes these young folks are shocked at being rebuffed when an African American person quite reasonably responds with a remark such as, "I've been the victim of privilege and ignorance and now I'm asked to comfort the person whose people have perpetrated this oppression? Forget it." Yet people do need support as they change their worldviews to be better in tune with reality and with the possibility of justice for all. Without such support some people may withdraw into denial and shame. It's the job of White folks who've been on this journey to provide assistance and comfort for those on the path, rather than to stand on the sidelines and deride those who haven't been fortunate enough to yet encounter the knowledge and resources they need to gain their full anti-racist humanity. Though I'm firmly convinced that White folks must consciously accept the responsibility of supporting other White folks in the transition to non-racist thinking and reconstructing a positive sense of self and community, it's important to acknowledge the goodness and grace with which many people of color patiently assist and support White people in examining their beliefs and shifting to new paradigms.

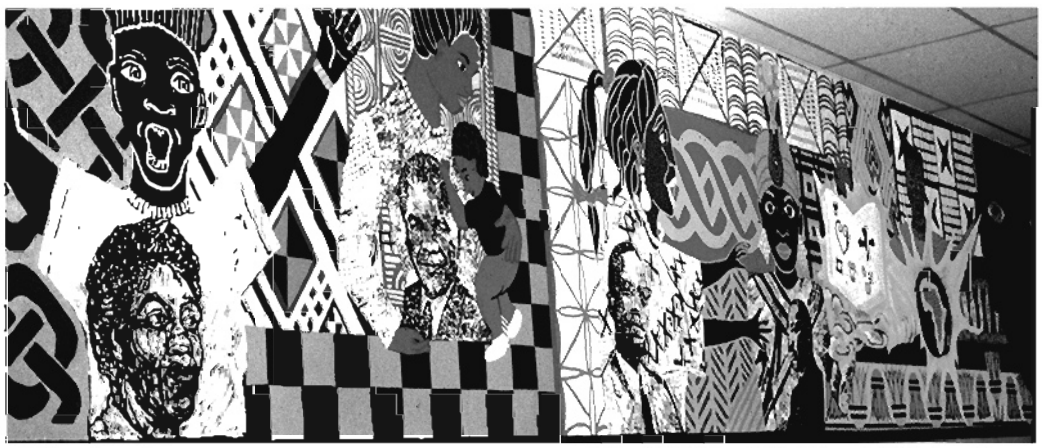
Connecting

While I was observing a class at a Chicago magnet high school, filled with a diverse group of very bright students, an African American young man was called on to read aloud from a *Scholastic Magazine* article on Alice Neel (*Scholastic Art*, 2001, p. 2). As he read the sentence, "She painted portraits of her neighbors, *especially the Black and Hispanic children* who lived nearby," I thought that I detected a slight lilt in his voice and a twinkle in his eye. Later in the class, I asked him if I was correct in noticing a change in his inflection as he read that sentence and if he was making an ironic comment on the "othering" encoded in the words. The sentence suggested it was somehow exotic or unusual to paint "colored children." He good-naturedly acknowledged his joke and a class discussion began about how many school materials, perhaps especially those materials on "multicultural" content, are written from the implicit assumption that most of the writers, teachers, and students are White.[13] A conversation such as this, that foregrounds the students' cultural experiences within the school, can be the beginning of trust building—allowing students to express subtle observations about how they experience the culture of the school, thus creating opportunities for the class, curriculum, and school community to become more authentically culturally diverse.[14] Students from many different cultural backgrounds can thus talk about such issues as building relationships among communities of color without their cultures being first filtered through White cultural paradigms.

I specifically chose to tell this minor meaning-making story, rather than a tale of a dramatic, highly charged incident. Big moments do happen, but change is made and personal/political relationships are formed by many small, effective exchanges of understanding. When I've talked about these issues with students and fellow teachers, I am sometimes asked (rather impatiently), "Are you saying that the ideas of others are somehow always better than the perceptions that I (as a White person) have?" I don't think that's true, but I do think that it's hard to make changes together unless one understands the complexity of what's happening from as many perspectives as possible.

A number of years ago I was doing an artist residency at an all African American high school in an impoverished neighborhood. As my artist team and I worked on a mural in the school entranceway, I noted that a gregarious coach/P.E. teacher would often greet many of the boys in a good-natured tone with a comment such as, "They're letting you work on this—whew, you'll mess it up." The young men would invariably reply with a snappy, funny retort.

After a couple of weeks of this, I finally took the coach aside and asked that he stop distracting the mural team. He first replied that I didn't understand that this kind of repartee was an intrinsic part of Black culture. I was able to respond



African American Mindstorm by Olivia Gude with students of Wendell Phillips High School. 1991. Acrylic paint on plaster.

by signifying my understanding of the tradition and verbal creativity of "playing the dozens," but also by expressing my concern that his exchanges with the students were distracting these talented young artists. It always took some time for them to re-concentrate themselves on doing their best painting after one of these encounters. Their creativity had been re-directed into a verbal game that wasn't helping them to make the best use of the opportunity at hand. Our conversation came to an amiable conclusion—one that resulted in the coach spontaneously and creatively praising aspects of the mural team's work each day. When discussing this incident years ago with the artist, Marcus Akinlana, he commented that some aspects of a culture might need to develop and change in order for people to prosper and succeed. Writer, actress, filmmaker, and broadcast journalist S. Pearl Sharp, author of books such as *Black Women for Beginners* (Sharp & Hall, 2007) and *Typing in the Dark* (Sharp, 1991), has asked, "What do you pack when you pursue a dream and what do you leave behind?"

In 1983, when a member of the Chicago Mural Group saw a non-permission street art installation made by my partner, Jon Pounds, and I, we were invited to attend some meetings and eventually to become members of the Group—now called Chicago Public Art Group because of the many media in which we work.[15] CPAG artists are an eclectic group, now including an early muralist who literally "wrote the book" documenting early mural organizing (Cockcroft, Weber, and Cockcroft, 1977/1998), a minister/naprapath/musician/poet/mural painter, two "street-trained" spray can artists who have now received major public art commissions, a David Alfaro Siqueiros-workshop educated Mexican muralist, public school teachers utilizing critical pedagogy approaches in tough schools, a former Spiral Workshop kid who is now a sophisticated contemporary artist, and an artist organizer who worked with Paulo Freire in Brazil. I like to think those years of listening, reflecting, researching, and interacting made Jon and me ready to respectfully join and later to help shape and recruit others to this multi-racial, inter-generational community of artists. Through CPAG's inter-generational dialogue, older and younger artists consider how ethnic, racial, and aesthetic identities have differed greatly over decades and how these changes might be reflected in structuring investigations with communities. As noted by Senior Artist Mirtes Zwierzynski, "We, ourselves, are a collaborative project."

Learning firsthand from the elders who founded the street mural movement in Chicago, I was encouraged to re-think and expand my own practice as an artist. I was introduced to the concept that an artist need not be an alienated loner, but can be faithful to his/her personal aesthetic mission while being rooted in the community or in multiple communities. The notion of the avant-garde artist intent on shocking the bourgeoisie became tempered with knowledge of how the early street muralists invented a form that physically and psychologically reclaimed public space in collaboration with communities. Community-based art (a postmodern practice) evolved out of progressive modernist art of historically oppressed peoples. Great artists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros or Jacob Lawrence shaped the emerging modernist artistic practices of their times to tell their own compelling stories—reconstructing lost histories and reclaiming and reinterpreting the meaning of cultural symbols and traditions (Bearden & Henderson, 1993; Charlot, 1979).

As an artist and educator, I humbly work within this great tradition of innovation and recuperation. As an art educator, I recognize that teaching isolated formal exercises of elements and principles is a mis-reading and mis-teaching of the historical complexity of modernism and is not an adequate preparation for students to access local and global cultural discourses of contemporary art. I know that as a dedicated White educator my job is the same as that of a dedicated educator of color—to share with my students the best practices of artmaking from many traditions, especially those traditions of making and telling that arise out of the vital energy and needs of the communities of the students we teach. All state and national art standards have a "culture clause" that directs that students should be taught about the uses of art in cultures past and present. Committed artists/educators take this mandate seriously and place this standard at the center of their educational work.

As an artist, I have developed my practice as maker and documenter of collaboratively designed and made public art. I have been inspired by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's dictum that "no one can say a true word alone" (1970/1981, p. 76). I believe that what I say as an artist and educator is more useful, more accurate, more beautiful, and more compelling (and ultimately more the best me) because it is a voice crafted from the contributions of many others.

As I am typing these last paragraphs, Marcus Akinlana calls from the cooperative Galerie Cayenne in New Orleans' French Quarter. He's back living in the Jentilly neighborhood—rebuilding his home and studio with his wife, Fatu, and six children—after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. He updates me on the latest political and practical news regarding the rebuilding of New Orleans. I fact-check the remembered quote from earlier in this article.

I tell Marcus about what I'm currently writing and we talk about the many angles from which we've discussed race and culture over the years—often in 100-degree-plus heat while 20 feet in the air with paintbrushes in our hands.[16] Marcus suggests that it's essential to remind artist/educators of the importance of doing work in their home communities as well as in the communities of "others."

Many artists leave their communities of origin, perceiving them as racist, sexist, homophobic. As youths they often felt alienated and excluded in their home communities and sought places of greater openness and understanding to do their work. Yet, it's the mission of each of us to

Where There Is Discord, Harmony: The Power of Art by Olivia Gude and Marcus Akintana and a teen painting team. Acrylic paint on brick. Photo courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group.

practice "conscious belonging"[17]—to remain in connection and communication with our origins, even as we become increasingly multi-cultural people. Artists/educators have the capacity to create artistic investigations that can guide communities in enlarging their understandings of themselves and others—to rethink and remake their identities by affirming strengths, examining internal stresses, recovering hidden or unexamined histories, and expressing their highest ideals. Through such art—art that explores the life of the individual in community—communities can become more thoughtful, more generous, more just, and more complex—more able to reach out and form greater communities of hope and possibility.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article is dedicated to two dear friends, Marcus Akintana and Lucia Espinosa, who have each brought much joy and knowledge into my life.

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ENDNOTES

1 I am concerned that the text of this article tends to highlight and thus potentially reinforce divisions by articulating contrasts between White and Black culture or between white and "people of color" culture. I've struggled to find language that respectfully describes differences. I believe that fellow/other (us/them) thinking must be overcome to create a more harmonious and just society. I've tried to describe gaps of understanding while communicating that these are culturally encoded and over time can often be bridged with good will and hard work.

2 Images of the mural *How to Build a Brighter Future* and many other classic Chicago murals can be seen on the Chicago Public Art Group website: www.cpag.net

3 Some early answers to this question came when my new neighbor Lucia Espinosa (now a beloved friend of 20-plus years) lent me a copy of the now classic *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies*.

4 *FUSE Magazine* is a great resource for encountering art that is included for its cultural significance and not for its marketability. Many of its articles would be suitable for high school level classes. For folks in the US it's also a good way to break through the one-way information barrier between the US and Canada. www.fusemagazine.org

5 The article "Drawing Color Lines," documents the making of "It's Not Just a Black and White Issue," a project in which a diverse group of children explore the symbolism of black and white in popular culture, is posted on the Spiral Art Education website: spiral.aa.uic.edu

6 *White* by Richard Dyer is a great example of a thoughtful white man crafting a language that allows him to explore the construction of his own subjectivity as a white person, as well as to identify how, as a queer man, he is marginalized in the discourse of white maleness. This is a smart and accessible book that will give teachers many illustrations to use in visual culture curriculum of how whiteness is constructed through visual representation.

7 The classic essay "From Work to Text" by Roland Barthes offers clear and useful explanations of the difference between traditional and contemporary notions of engaging an artwork. "The work is normally the object of a consumption. . . The Text (if only in its 'unreadability') decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice" (1971, p.173). Studying this essay will greatly assist art teachers in understanding and explaining to students the concept of meaning making in contemporary times.

8 For example, a search for articles concerning the Quincentennial on the *Time* magazine website—http://www.time.com/time/—listed 7 articles in 1992, only one of which was solely devoted to covering an official Quincentennial event. The other articles with such titles as "Strike Against Racism," "Take That, Cristoforo!" and "The Trouble with Columbus" focus on activities designed to reconsider standard Eurocentric and white interpretations of 1492.

9 Carlos Cortez was a long-time Wobbly, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, now in their 100th year. The IWW has a long and rich tradition of using the arts to support union activities. In some ways they were proto-performance artists—Carlos loved to tell a story (perhaps apocryphal) in which workers threatened with a 25% reduction in wages said that they would cut 25% off the area of their shovels. In 2007, the IWW surfaced throughout the US as the union organizing Starbucks employees. http://www.iww.org/en/node

10 My use of black for the banner is a sure sign that despite several years of participating in Dia de los Muertos events with my Mexican colleagues, I was still psychologically stuck using the gloomy, dark colors that people of European extraction typically associate with death.

11 "Let America Be America Again" was originally published by Langston Hughes in the Wobbly pamphlet, *A New Song* (as well as in *Esquire Magazine*). In my research for community projects, I am consistently surprised by unexpected connections between white and black progressive artists and cultural workers. The multi-cultural content in school curriculum has a tendency to downplay the political aspects of work by artists of color, with the unforeseen consequence that such curriculum does not inform students about historical inter-racial alliances and thus does not provide models of possibility for contemporary inter-racial work.

12 Fanon's book, written from a psychoanalytic perspective, is primarily about the construction of black subjectivity, however, has insights regarding the ways in which white, colonial attitudes shaped black sensibilities are powerful and sadly still relevant over half a century later.

13 *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education* is one of the few art education books in which the students are clearly from culturally diverse communities. The artworks and artist statements are a great resource for introducing artists from diverse communities into the school curriculum. Unfortunately, the art lessons tend to be underdeveloped, focusing on simple directions such as "make a collage about..." rather than articulating the development of nuanced aesthetic strategies. However, the curriculum theme suggestions provide excellent examples of linking personal and cultural content and can be used as the basis for developing more complex studio projects. This book is a must-have for every art teacher's bookshelf.

14 The project *Elementary "I" School* on the Spiral Website is an excellent activity for drawing out students' experiences of the psychological and cultural space of the school. Because the project is focused on things that happened in the past, students are often willing to share stories about lack of connection and miscommunication, creating possibilities for connecting and communicating in the current classroom. http://spiral.aa.uic.edu

15 See the Chicago Public Art Group's Community Public Art Guide for comprehensive information on organizing, designing, and making mural, mosaic, and sculptural collaborative public art projects. A special section deals with making public art with children and teens in school settings. www.cpag.net

16 Marcus Akinlana and I first worked together on *I Welcome Myself to a New Place, the Roseland Pullman Mural Project*. For more information, see www.cpag.net

17 I am indebted to dancer and cultural theorist Liz Lerman for the concept of "conscious belonging," a radical alternative to typical avant-garde artistic alienation. Be sure to check out the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Toolbox at http://www.danceexchange.org/toolbox/ for excellent cross-disciplinary suggestions on teaching and making art with groups.