



NATIONAL
ART EDUCATION
ASSOCIATION

BLACK LIVES MATTER

An Open Letter
to Art Educators
on Constructing an
Anti-Racist Agenda

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Dear NAEA Colleagues and Fellow Creatives,

In my dual role as the inaugural Chair of the Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion (ED&I) Commission and as President-Elect of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), I am compelled to share my heart with you in this open letter as our nation collectively mourns the murder of George Floyd and as protests are being organized all over the world demanding lifesaving reforms in policing practices. Sadly, I've seen this script before. In the past, the righteous indignation of the masses right after a heinous injustice has rarely led to social change. How might we, as an association, galvanize this present energy into meaningful action? In this communication, I will share where we've come from, where we are, and where I believe we must go as a professional association.

THE CRISIS OF THE MOMENT HAS BEEN A CRISIS ALL MY LIFE

Our lifelong commitments as artists and educators have taught us to discover, share, and then reinforce connections that others sometimes overlook. Over the last 2 weeks, it seems as if almost the entire nation has been jolted from its post-COVID-19 quarantine haze into a spontaneous state of wide “awakeness” that the casual murder of a litany of Black men and women like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery has been overlooked by too many for too long. Maybe the danger of the lurking pandemic has taught us all to empathize as never before with what it feels like to be exposed, vulnerable, and preyed upon every day.

As communities of color across the nation join with allies to resist the systemic racism that violently impacts the daily lives of those we are entrusted to teach and protect, I believe that NAEA is more committed than ever to be unceasing in our efforts to illuminate the necessity of greater equity, diversity, and inclusion. In the past, NAEA has often been complicit with those who are either dismissive of this urgency or who simply gain a career advantage from the inequitable status quo, by not being more forcefully anti-racist as an association in our policies and structures. We must acknowledge our failures and resolve to do better.

BLACK LIVES MATTER. Art matters. Toward the achievement of social justice and the work of shaping human potential, the value of each life and every creative act indispensably enriches us all. NAEA must now stand with those demanding swift justice for those individuals and institutions whose crimes against humanity and defiance of accountability will no longer be overlooked. If you are a creative leader, now is the time to stand together with NAEA and with your state organizations to create structural and systemic changes within your own workplaces and communities. But in order to strategize where we’re going, we must first recognize where we’ve come from and where we currently are.

IN THE FIELD OF ART EDUCATION, THE BACKGROUND ISN'T NEUTRAL

Frankly, the term *systemic racism* is redundant. According to environmental scientist and systems expert Donella Meadows, “a system is a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time.” Racism, all by itself, is systemic. That is its nature. It does not require a grammatical modifier. Therefore, to confront racism effectively is to attack the system that produced Archie Bunker’s thinking, rather than attacking Archie Bunker himself. Every system produces structures and behaviors to perpetuate itself. The chicken gave birth to the egg, not the other way around. That’s the reproductive nature of systems. Racist systems produce racist individuals, racist institutions, and racist policies as their necessary byproduct—not the other way around. And what is the purpose of such byproducts? Once again, the same as the byproducts of all systems: to collect or accumulate some sort of self-sustaining inflow and then maintain things just as they are through a kind of feedback loop so the DNA of its inherent systemic relationships lives on, undissipated and distinct over time. The more things remain as they are, the more they remain the same.

Racism, as practiced in the United States for centuries, has long distorted racial differences into divisions in order to systemize the collection of wealth, the plundering of land, and the accumulation of social power, effectively sustaining the slaveholding White supremacy present at the birth of this nation from generation to generation. That is the nature of racism. So when the practice of slavery was abolished and profiting from the unpaid labor of nearly 4 million Black bodies became illegal, slavery was replaced by targeted policing practices, the depiction of Black men and women as dangerous, and the incarceration of as many Black bodies as possible. African Americans were forced to provide free labor once again but in a new kind of bondage, one that denied their eligibility to vote as U.S. citizens upon release, and also barred their access to gainful employment and career advancement by branding them as convicted felons. Same system. Altered source of supply. Same White supremacy as its ultimate outcome.

Enter public education. Public and private education is a national institution. Naturally, any institution that is born within a racist society is going to show evidence of racist outcomes. Hence, in spite of the rhetoric of education as a tool for democracy and the investment of millions of individual professional educators who are literally working to save lives, the history of the establishment of K-12 schools across our nation *also* includes the story of enforced segregation and barricaded access to equal educational opportunity; government-run boarding schools and the whitewashing of the culture of Indigenous children; gerrymandered school districts and the preservation of White community tax bases and wealth legacies; high-stakes standardized testing and the discriminatory practice of tracking students of color away from college preparation and toward the low-wage job market; over-policed schools and higher rates of detention among students of color leading to a school-to-prison pipeline, among other injustices. From the start, public education in the United States has never been a neutral exercise.

WHERE WE STAND AS A NATIONAL ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Any national organization that is not *actively* anti-racist is complicit with the outcomes of a society that has long institutionalized its racism. This complicity with the outcomes of the status quo is quite evident. NAEA recognizes that of the 26 members of our Association's current Board of Directors, I am the only person of color represented. We can do better. NAEA recognizes that in a profession where about 20% of the general workforce are persons of color, teaching a population that is well over 50% students of color, the presence of art educators of color among our membership is sorely underrepresented. Once again, we can do better. Yet I can also say that in the effort to do better, we have already turned an important corner.

From January 2018 through March 2019, a specially appointed national ED&I Task Force undertook the urgent charge to thoroughly examine the demographics and histories of NAEA, as well as similar initiatives by other organizations, so as to assemble a research-based report of practical recommendations to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout the NAEA community. The first of those 16 recommendations was to "create a standing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission similar to the NAEA Research Commission to ensure the sustainability" of our collective ED&I work. Since we first convened in December 2019, I've been honored to serve as the inaugural chair of the NAEA Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Commission. As I envision it, our two top priorities are to:

- 1) carry forward each of the final recommendations of the NAEA ED&I Task Force toward decisive actions aimed at dismantling structural and institutional inequities within our national association and beginning a long overdue cultural shift that centers upon greater equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility; and
- 2) serve as a catalyst for the work of our affiliated state organizations, art education partners, and individual members in similarly prioritizing, brainstorming, and enacting sustainable structures and systems for infusing greater equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility into their local workplaces, arts institutions, and communities of creative practice.

And this brings us up to this very moment as we contemplate a way forward. The nation is clearly at a tipping point. We are beyond just making statements. What are the *actions* our field must take next? Fortunately, art education is well-suited to help craft an anti-racist agenda. Here's why.

AN ANTI-RACIST APPROACH TO ART EDUCATION

According to systems theory, separate and distinct systems can sometimes be nested within one another—either parasitically like an infestation of fleas on a dog, or symbiotically like clownfish seeking protection among the stinging tentacles of a cluster of sea anemone. There is at least one other such relationship—one system can also be a catalyst for change within a larger system that it nests within, working from the inside out. While racism is a system for White supremacy and rendering Black lives meaningless, the arts are a meaning-making system. For some, the purpose of the arts is to render beautiful forms. For others, the purpose of the arts is to communicate life-affirming personal and cultural information. For others, the purpose of the arts is to ask questions and instigate urgent transformation. For still others, the purpose of the arts is improvisation—generating inventions, expressions, and questions that lead to new social innovation. This is why there will never be a single definition of art—art has always been a set of diverse making practices, interconnected to produce a wide spectrum of outcomes and byproducts that render us ever more human and communal.

So, *what if?* What if art educators associated with NAEA honed in on this broadest definition of art as a meaning-making system—well-suited to generating new understandings in the face of senseless acts of violence and inhumanity? What if art teachers taught students not only to make the world more beautiful, not only to express their ideas and emotions, not only to ask provocative questions, not only to solve problems creatively—but also to design an anti-racist world? Like Harold and his purple crayon, perhaps it only starts with an unbounded imagination. Using my own purple crayon at leverage points suggested by Donella Meadows to “change the structure of systems to produce more of what we want and less of that which is undesirable,” here are some initial ideas for applying the arts as a catalyst for anti-racist actions and outcomes. It won't be easy. **Remember, systems resist change.** I've listed my framework of suggested interventions in reverse order—from those more basic, attainable, and likely to leverage only modest changes within a complex system, to the hardest kinds to engineer yet which are likely to yield the most enduring and widespread effect. Utilizing this framework, I invite each reader to draw a local doorway to social justice with your own purple crayon firmly in hand.

FRAMEWORK OF SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

Each leverage point for intervention concludes with an action step in **bold type**.

ALTERING PARAMETERS

12. Constants

A constant defines the rate at which something happens in a system. For example, change the constant rate of fuel consumption per mile in a car, and you fundamentally change the way that vehicle operates in traffic.

As an anti-racist artist, you can disrupt racism by viewing social justice and community-engaged scholarship to be as fundamental to your creative processes as your chosen craft. Likewise, as an anti-racist art teacher or museum educator you can recalibrate the parameters of both your public pedagogy and curriculum themes to be centered on effecting social change, while also holding space for your learners of color to express their own experiences and thoughts when talking about and making art.

11. Buffer Sizes

Buffers are stabilizing elements within a system. Big buffers make the system more stable, and small buffers make it more subject to change. For example, the larger the amount you have in your savings account, the more likely your lifestyle will remain unchanged when faced with unexpected or exceptional expenses.

As an anti-racist artist, you can disrupt racism by depicting more figures, symbols, and artifacts celebrating the identities and cultures of persons of color in everyday life. Likewise, as an anti-racist art teacher or museum educator, you can: 1) intentionally reconfigure the parameters of the typical canon of artists and artworks represented in your classroom resources or museum exhibitions; 2) eliminate terms like *primitive*, *aboriginal*, and *Oriental* from the *language* you use to talk about art; 3) abolish the practice of jamming the distinct experiences of living as Black or Latinx or Korean, etc., in America all under the single umbrella term *minority*, thereby further “othering” these diverse ethnicities and their subcultures; and 4) inform your own anti-racist and postcolonial worldviews by reading books and articles on the privileges of Whiteness and on the lives of people who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color.

10. Physical Structures

Rebuilding a system’s physical structure and the way it takes in the resources it uses to sustain its functioning can have an enormous effect on its operations but can also be difficult or prohibitively expensive to change. For example, when the loss of life and destruction of property in an urban center is caused by regular, uncontrolled flooding, the streets might be ripped up to install a major stormwater drainage system as a means to mitigate the problem and change the batten-down-the-hatches behavior of city residents when heavy rains are forecast.

As an anti-racist artist, you can disrupt racism by presenting more of your work independently as street art or public art like Banksy—outside the boundaries of moribund cultural institutions with classical facades yet steeped in distorted racial hierarchies.

9. Delays

A system's functioning is determined by how much lag time passes between the summoning of new resources and the intake of that regulating inflow. For example, imagine stepping into a shower in an old hotel where the water temperature takes at least a minute to respond to each faucet twist, oscillating between an overcapacity of hot water and an undercapacity... with lots of involuntary yelps and expletives in between!

As an anti-racist artist, art teacher, or museum educator, you can disrupt racism by contributing your creative efforts to *positive* media portrayals of Black lives that matter—allowing no lag time for TV audiences to imprint biased messaging and dog whistles from opinion-based media efforts to stereotype Black lives as dangerous.

8. Negative Feedback Loops

A negative feedback loop *slows down* a process to preserve the optimal functioning of that system. An example is when a thermostat calls for more heat in a room, and the boiler responds by sending hot water to the room's baseboard heaters, which in turn begins to heat up the air in that space over a period of time. The slow loop will keep the system's functioning optimal and keeps the room from getting overheated too quickly depending on established parameters of the boiler and the accuracy and speed of the feedback.

As an anti-racist local art council, art teacher, or museum educator, you can disrupt racism by *speeding up* the process of including the contemporary work of artists who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color in your curricula, collections, or public parks without waiting years for them to be sanctioned as important or famous by the gatekeepers of the powers that be.

7. Positive Feedback Loops

A positive feedback loop *speeds up* a process that regulates the optimal functioning of that system—the more it works, the more it gains power to work more. For example, the success of pyramid schemes depends on the ability to recruit more and more investors. Since there are only a limited number of people in a given community, after the initial rush of success, all pyramid schemes will ultimately collapse. The only people who make money are those few initial investors who are on the top of the pyramid. Donella Meadows suggests that in most interventions, it's preferable to slow down a positive loop rather than speeding up a negative one.

As an anti-racist art collector, patron, buyer, or seller, you can disrupt racism by *slowing down* the rush to overprice the work of White artists to far exceed the valuation of their artist contemporaries who happen to be Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color.

6. Information Access

It is easier to change the flow of information about what is happening within a system and where it is happening, than it is to change the structures that constitute that system. For example, it is easier to count calories and carbs on food labels, keep track of steps taken throughout the day on your pedometer, or to monitor your heart rate on your iPhone, rather than to try to improve the health of your body through an invasive gastric bypass operation that physically shrinks the size of your stomach.

As an anti-racist artist, you can disrupt racism by drawing upon a history of racist artifacts and images, whether intended to injure or intentionally forgotten, thereby *increasing* their accessibility through contemporary works of art intended to inform anew. Likewise, as an anti-racist art teacher or museum educator, you can *decrease* the accessibility of misinforming, Eurocentric, or “color-blind” resources in your classrooms and collections.

5. Rules

The rules by which a system operates define its scope, its boundaries of growth, its degrees of freedom within certain habitats. Unfulfilled needs, pressure points, pain, and mobility constraints are all rules of a system. These are strong leverage points for change inasmuch as they can be written and unwritten. For example, there is a group of scientists currently at work on a project in the field of genetic engineering with the goal of recoding human cells both to resist viruses and have less risk of transforming to become cancerous.

As an anti-racist artist, art teacher, museum educator, or other kind of creative leader, you can disrupt racism by rewriting the rules that render folks who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color as dangerous or invisible, or last to be hired/first to be fired. You can go out of your way to support their businesses, seek their sponsorships, invite their presentations, collect their arts and crafts, and hire them at top dollar for their goods, services, and consultancies.

4. Evolution

This is the power to insert rogue elements into a system which can then mutate, evolve, or self-organize—just like a virus—in a way that radically changes the functioning and constitution of that system. For example, in a highly regarded episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Captain Picard and his crew saved an injured member of the Borg—a relentlessly marauding “Collective” of humanoids who had been taken captive from across the galaxies, assimilated as cybernetic organisms, and then linked to a single hive mind. When this isolated Borg drone, who originally identifies himself as Third of Five, unexpectedly begins to show the characteristics of an individual and takes the new name of Hugh, Captain Picard makes the decision to return him to be re-assimilated into the Borg hive mind with the hope of infecting the entire Collective and disabling its threat with the traits of individuality and the personal agency to make independent decisions.

As an anti-racist artist, art teacher, or museum educator, you can disable racism by working to seek out, develop, and closely mentor the next generation of artists, art teachers, museum educators, and other creative leaders who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color to enter and spread throughout our various professions.

ALTERING INTENT

3. Goals

Changing the goals of a system changes its parameters, its feedback loops, and the inherent design of its information flows and self-organization. An example is when a city council changes the goal of a local lakefront from a free facility for public and private use, to a conservation area for the protection of endangered wildlife.

As an anti-racist artist, art teacher, or museum educator, you can disrupt racism by exchanging the goals of the current paradigm from more White supremacy and its history of hoarding wealth and power, to a love supreme and the distribution of reparations, equal access, and mutually beneficial creative opportunities.

2. Remodeling Paradigms

A paradigm is a model or a pattern to live by. Paradigms are the sources of systems. Goals, mindsets, values, beliefs, and social contracts for ethical interactions all arise from the prevailing communal paradigm. For example, there is a pivotal point in popular sci-fi film *The Matrix*, when our hero, Neo, is confronted with a choice between a red pill and a blue pill. Consume the red pill and Neo joins a rebellion, the familiar framework of his identity catastrophically falling away as he is irrevocably expelled from his disabling containment. Consume the blue pill and Neo wakes up comfortably un-intruded upon by alternative realities, firmly wedged along with the other captive inhabitants within the energy-sapping cradles of their familiar worlds.

As an anti-racist artist, art teacher, or museum educator, you can disrupt racism by dropping inauthentic and unhelpful platitudes proclaiming your “color-blindness,”—firstly, because the history of art has always seen color, and secondly, because people who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color are generally proud of our ethnic distinctions and only ask that folks stop actively or benignly attaching negative stigmas to surface identifiers like skin color or hair texture. What if we instead saw and taught color for what it is—just an extended palette to represent our shared humanity?

1. Transcendence

Like being born-again into newfound purpose, this is an “all-of-a-sudden” intervention that comes out of nowhere and changes everything. It is akin to an eruption, an earthquake, or a revolution. For example, in the movie *Avatar*, a disaffected mercenary soldier named Jake Sully is converted by his experiences with the Na’vi people from understanding nature as only a stock of resources to be conquered and exploited, to understanding nature as a life-giving source, a biological network to become one with.

Any anti-racist artist can disrupt racism simply by forming lifelong local collectives with artists who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color. Likewise, anti-racist art teachers and museum educators can disrupt racism by “all-of-a-sudden” recruiting one another to serve in leadership roles in professional membership organizations like NAEA or its state affiliates, nominating one another to receive key awards and recognitions, and fund-raising to one another’s shared professional advantage.

These are my initial ideas for where NAEA and the field of art + design education might go from here, given the urgency to become an anti-racist organization and do better. These won’t be my only ideas, and they certainly leave all kinds of room for you to come up with ideas of your own.



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