Visual Art as a Race Making Technology: Implications for Education

Abstract

Visual art education must outline a defensible vision for our discipline that acknowledges that the arts are White property. In this paper, I argue that visual art itself should be recognised as a racializing technology that contributes to the production and ranking of human difference. I show how a previous iteration of visual art education, visual culture art education, also called into question the role of visual art in producing the cultural superiority of the Enlightenment subject who was key to the historical emergence of whiteness itself. However, this approach to art education was more concerned with the political ontology of the image rather than the human. Drawing on Al-an (Allan) deSouza's studio practice, negotiated refusal, I begin to outline a vision for visual art education that recognises the arts as White property and yet does not have to give up on either fine art or the human.

Keywords: White property, whiteness, aesthetics, refusal, racialization, visual art education

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Is there a viable case for teaching visual art in education once we acknowledge the claim that visual art is White property (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018)? I argue below that such a case, if there is to be one, must reckon with the fact that visual art emerged historically as a race-making technology. Put otherwise, the capacity to make visual art that could be judged as beautiful, and the capacity to judge the truthful beauty of visual art, was presumed to be a refined property of whiteness itself. This presumption emerged through a structured relation with those presumed to lack this same aesthetic capacity of reason. To recognise visual art as a race-making technology has significant implications for pedagogy and curriculum in visual art education. It requires engaging with visual art—apprehending it, making it, historicising it—in ways that reckon with the role of visual art in the production of human difference and value. In this paper, I show how a prior effort to counter the privileging of the Western European White propertied male subject in visual art education— visual culture art education—did not fully engage with the role of aesthetics in sorting and ranking humans. I then point to possibilities for visual art education that propagates ways of being and knowing that do not conform to the privileging of that White subject. In particular, I discuss a studio practice outlined by Al-An (Alan) deSouza that they calls "negotiated refusal" (deSouza, 2018, p. 282). Through deSouza's example, I make a plea for visual art education scholarship and practice that illuminates ways of engaging with visual art that reckons with its role as a race making technology.

Visual art as a race-making technology

In this paper, I argue that visual art should be recognised as a technology that makes race. This claim, of course, recognises that race has no material basis but that race itself is a significant factor in how state power distributes resources, opportunities, and threats. My theoretical orientation

is less concerned with the seemingly exceptional ways in which state institutions mobilise racist ideologies to repress and oppress people, such as Nazi Germany or the Jim Crow South of the United States. Instead, Critical Race Theory has advanced the argument for decades that state apparatuses such as the law and education not only discriminate on the basis of race, but are also fundamental to the project of race making. In legal studies, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas (1995) argue that Critical Race Theory as a project has been concerned with “uncovering how law was a constitutive element of race itself: in other words, how law *constructed* race” (p. xxv). This point of view counteracts the view that racist outcomes in the legal system are merely the product of racially biased judges or juries. Alternatively, Critical Race Theory has maintained that the American legal system, and other systems, such as education, construct and regulate race in dynamic ways to protect the value of whiteness as a form of property.

To support this claim, Cheryl Harris (1993) argued that whiteness should not only be understood as an aspect of identity. More than that, whiteness should also be understood as a valuable property interest that can be used and enjoyed. Through the example of the United States, Harris shows how whiteness was enshrined as a form of property through law—that is, how the law constructed (and protected) whiteness as a valuable form of property. From hypodescent laws of biological inheritance to segregationist laws in education, Harris (1993) argued that “the possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others form the privileges inhering in whiteness” (p. 283). This right to exclusivity increased the value of whiteness itself. George Lipsitz (2006) extended this important argument in the cultural sphere by showing how anyone can invest their time and energy in the property value of whiteness. He called this phenomenon a “possessive investment in whiteness” (2006, p. vii).

My use of "technology" slightly shifts attention away from institutional mechanisms of racial oppression to the auto-production of selfhood and political subjectivity. In the most generic sense, technologies are tools that people have made to help themselves and others make things. In critical theory, Michel Foucault used the term technology to describe a form of power in which people construct their selfhoods based on socially constituted norms about proper ways to be, which, in turn, reinforce (and potentially undermine) dominant social, political, and economic structures (Foucault, 2020, p. 249). To say then that art is a race making technology is to focus less on how the art world as an apparatus of state power penetrates individual consciousness, and, for example, implants racist ideologies. To say that art is a race making technology is to say that engagement with art—making it, appreciating it, learning about it—has historically been implicated in reinforcing norms that produce ideas about types of people and their relative worth. Below I argue that fine art emerges as a discourse that makes the Enlightenment White subject superior through a constitutive relationship with those deemed to lack the capacity for refined engagement with art.

Approaching art as a race-making technology builds on recent arts education scholarship that interrogates whiteness and racism in visual art education (see, for example, Denmead, 2021; Bae-Dimitriadis, 2020; Grant, 2020; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Lewis, 2018; Kraehe, 2015). In particular, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, Amelia Kraehe, and Stephen Carpenter (2018) make the important claim that the arts are White property. They make four points to assert this claim. First, they argue that "the objects and practices traditionally categorized as 'the arts' are those … presumed to belong to European cultural 'tradition'" and "also *serve as evidence of European cultural superiority*…" (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018, p. 17, authors' emphasis). Second, they argue that the historical emergence of the discourse of "the arts" was "*based on values* that, although framed as universal, are in fact particular to whiteness" (2018, p. 17, authors' emphasis). For

example, a painted image in the nineteenth century could only become a painting under particular discursive conditions that made whiteness happy, such as a canvas, oil paint, a frame, and a museum wall devoted to its contemplation. Third and relatedly, they argue that the arts are "*institutionalized within structures* that protect the property values of whiteness, such as schools, museums, and galleries" (2018, p. 18, authors' emphasis). For example, the nineteenth century art museum had a vested interest in protecting the value of the above paintings because they were necessary to the property value of whiteness itself. Such museums therefore set the terms for what visual images registered as visual art and what images registered as, for example, visual ethnographic evidence of a particular culture. This fact leads to their fourth point: when a cultural artefact never intended as fine art, such as graffiti, becomes treated as fine art by such institutions, Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter argue that the object in question has become "*whitewashed"*(Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018, p. 18, authors' emphasis).

I want to amplify this theoretical framework as I make the case that visual art is a race making technology. To state that that the arts are White property is also to claim that the arts have functioned historically as a race making technology that make people White and superior in relation to those deemed not to be White and therefore inferior. This language of race making does not accept "race" as an actual ontological thing. Instead the concept of race making draws attention to the ways in which humans are sorted and ranked at the intersection of variety of categories, including ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and physical differences. I am using the term *race making* rather than *racialization* because the latter, for me, is most effectively used to describe the process of dehumanization that occurs through race making. In his reading of Frantz Fanon's original use of the term, David Theo Goldberg argues that *to racialize* should be understood as antonym of *to*

humanize (Goldberg, 2002, p. 12, see footnote 1). But White people are humanized (not racialized) when they are *made* White.

Processes of race making can imagine race in both biological and cultural terms, floating between them to construct racial groups and hierarchies in contextually specific ways. Key to this foregrounding of race making over "race" is the idea that race itself should not be understood as generational, or simply passed from one generation to the next. Instead, race is is relational. Understanding race as relative means, as Brigette Fielder (2020) puts it, that race is "not simply embodied by an individual but constructed as racialized bodies are placed into relation with or comparison to one another" (p. 5). Gaztambide-Fernández, Kraehe, and Carpenter (2018) point to the arts as a race making technology as they assert the claim that the arts are White property. They argue, for example, that arts should be understood as discourse rather than an ahistorical or universal concept. This discourse of the arts, they argue, emerged "within the context of a specifically European social historical moment when concepts of the "human" came to replace "God" as central to human experience or what is better known as 'humanism'" (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018, p. 15). I want to amplify this point in order to illustrate how visual art can function as a race-making technology.

Humanism was only possible through relative race-making. Individuals who were imagined to be human at the centre of the universe were constructed in relation with those deemed to not have the same capacity for being human, a relation that was established in and through transatlantic slavery, imperialism in Asia, and colonialisms in the Americas and Africa (Lowe, 2015). This racial and colonial Other functioned as what Grace Hong calls "the structuring exception" (2015, p. 29).[1] That is to say, the racial and colonial Other is not placed outside the figure of the human as a thing

[1] Grace Hong attributes this term to Hortense Spillers. However, Hortense Spillers wrote "significant exception" not "structuring exception." So, I am attributing these words to Hong and not Spillers (see Spillers, 2003, p. 224).

that is not human. Instead, this figure is always and continuously being brought into being so that dominant subjects can become human in relation. This figure as a structuring exception provides the conditions for particular individuals to be deserving of liberal rights, and indeed, to become White. Put otherwise, there is no way for the human to become human and deserving of liberal rights without a constitutive relation that is continuously being established with figures who are deemed to be undeserving of such rights and therefore disposable. Yet, this relation of violence that brings the liberal subject into being must be disavowed in order for that dominant subject to be constructed as if he is superior and deserving of those rights (Hong, 2015).

There are a variety of ways in which this relational race making can occur. Denise Da Silva (2007) has argued that one crucial way in European history occurred through a relational construction of mind. It was the European subject's presumed superior capacity for reason, his capacity for enlightenment, that entitled him alone to historical self-determination. It was his capacity for reason, which could only be understood in relation to a structuring exception who was denied that same capacity, which entitled him to possess the earth in the name of what he thought was progress. This focus on the the mind, rather than say other race analytics such as skin or blood, points to the significance of aesthetics in the hierarchical construction of human difference. Several scholars from a variety of fields have advanced this analysis in recent years, from Kandice Chuh in American Studies to Monique Roelofs in Philosophy (Chuh, 2019; Roelofs, 2017). Their analysis draws attention to the ways in which the European Enlightenment subject was presumed to be superior based on his unique capacity for aesthetic judgement, his capacity to determine the truthful beauty of an object such as the arts. He alone had a special capacity to become further refined through aesthetic experience. He alone could judge the truthful beauty of something without any concern for its immediate material consequences or self-benefit. Those who were dehumanised

(racialized) in relation to this subject were simultaneously brought into being as someone who lacked such capacity to the same degree, if at all. Perhaps they might be recognised as subjects who could benefit to a lesser degree from aesthetic experience. This relation subjected them to imperial benevolence through, for example, colonial forms of education. Nonetheless, their ascribed diminished aesthetic capacity meant that a logic was established in which they could never catch up. Their potential to be as civilised as the European subject through aesthetic experience would always be deferred (see Nguyen, 2012, pp. 83–132).

Kandice Chuh (2019) points out that this relational and hierarchical construction of human difference could be understood as aesthetic in two applications of the term. First, as I have outlined above, the relative capacity for aesthetic judgement as a structuring relation was entangled in "imperialism and colonialism, White supremacy and capitalism, environmental devastation, patriarchy and compulsory normativization of multiple kinds" (Chuh, 2019, p. 3). Second, this political process of constructing and ranking human difference can also be understood in and of itself as aesthetic. In other words, Enlightenment thought made race, racial difference, and racial hierarchy *sensible*. Chuh draws on the philosopher Jacques Rancière to argue that Enlightenment thought made human sorting and ranking both available to apprehension and common sense (Chuh, 2019, pp. 18–19, 43). Constructing this common sense required disavowing the constitutive relationship with the racial and colonial Other that made the cultural superiority of the Enlightenment figure apprehensible. Otherwise, he would be recognised for the fact that he was only a particular genre of being human, not the universal one. Moreover, he would also be recognised for the barbaric subject that he was and is rather than the civilized and tolerant subject that he claimed to be.

The analysis of the arts as White property must therefore not be limited to values, objects, practices, and institutions. It is also necessary to attend to the figure of the human, and in particular,

the relational and racial construction of the human through aesthetics and as an aesthetic process in and of itself. Through the aestheticization of racial difference, we recognise how the arts are implicated as a technology in the construction of a particular genre of being human that is understood to be White and superior. Visual art education requires a vision for apprehending and making art that recognises this historical fact and the continual presence of that history.

From everyday sensory experience to the aesthetics of race-making

Previous iterations of visual art education have reckoned with the haunting aesthetic legacy of the Enlightenment subject. In the later twentieth century, postmodern and sociological schools of thought challenged conceptions of art curriculum and pedagogy that were oriented towards producing subjects in the mould of the Enlightenment conception of the human. The main target of these postmodern and sociological criticisms was Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE). DBAE de-emphasised the making of art in the name of self-expression for understanding art historically and appreciating art aesthetically. Post-modern and sociological criticisms challenged this approach to education. It disapproved of its division between high and low culture, highlighted the politics of constructing the canon, and reframed artworks as cultural texts to be read and decoded just like any other image found in everyday life.

Visual culture art education (VCAE) was an important intervention in this debate. This intervention is relevant to this discussion because VCAE scholars sought to transform how our field understood aesthetics. Particularly influential at that time was Ralph Smith who argued for the study of exemplary works of art as the primary source of aesthetic experience (see Smith, 2004). VCAE quite rightly drew our field's attention to the discursive construction of the arts as a particular effect of Western European bourgeois sensibilities rather than an ahistorical and universal phenomenon

(Duncum, 2002). VCAE was also critical of modernist aesthetics that carried forward Enlightenment ideas. Modernist genres of art and literature, such as abstract expressionism, were conceptualised as if they occupied a disinterested privileged position from which they could resist the intrusion of politics or commerce (and therefore provided a means for children to express their authentic selves).

VCAE therefore turned to a conceptualisation of aesthetics that was not predicated on a false separation between aesthetics and politics, or low and high culture. Instead, it recognised that the distinction between high and low culture had “imploded” in this post-modern world as members of different social classes could “borrow freely from one another and both producers and audiences move between them” (Duncum, 2001, p. 103). This recognition led to the reframing of aesthetics as everyday sensory experience amidst a highly saturated visual field that was principally organised to teach people to consume. From this point of view, consumer capitalism *bombarded* children and young people with visual images encoded with meaning in service of legitimising inequalities structured in and through capitalism itself (see Eisenhauer, 2006 who discusses this vocabulary of "bombardment"). VCAE was arguably motivated by the paranoia that children and young people lacked the epistemic resources to critique these ideologies, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Through a social reconstructionist lens, it was therefore the job of the visual art teacher to help children and young people see what they could not see in order to break this cycle of cultural reproduction (Freedman, 2000).

The conception of aesthetics as everyday sensory experience does not necessarily help us see the function of aesthetics in the relational production of racial difference and hierarchies. Indeed, this orientation to aesthetics has been largely concerned with how racist ideologies bombard people through visual images and then are warehoused in tricked minds. From this point of view, visual art teachers must concern themselves with teaching students to recognise in grown-up ways how their

everyday aesthetic experiences are always already ideological, how they are saturated, for example, with racist imagery and messages. That task, of course, remains important. However, this visual culture education approach to aesthetics springs more from a concern with the political ontology of the image rather than the political ontology of the human. In other words, VCAE has been more concerned with how aesthetics as a discourse produces an arbitrary construction between everyday images and fine art that has since imploded. It is not concerned with how aesthetics as a discourse has made racial difference and hierarchies. Following F. Graeme Chalmers (1992) important, but under-appreciated, intervention in the early 1990s on the origins of racism in the public school art curriculum, I am arguing here for an approach to aesthetics that recognises how this Enlightenment discourse has been implicated historically in sorting and ranking humans based on differential assumptions about their relational capacity for reason, which is thought to be determined by biological and/or cultural factors.

Contemporary artists such as Titus Kaphar have challenged this relational construction of the human through destabilising the presumed viewer of art that emerged in the early modern period and still haunts the present. For example, in his 2017 painting, "Shifting the Gaze," he loosely copies a seventeenth century family portrait by Dutch Artist Frans Hale (see figure 1). With excessively broad brushstrokes, he then whitewashes the White subjects in the painting, leaving a Black boy, presumed to be the family's servant, as the only person visible. In so doing, the role of painting itself as a technology that enables the White viewer to make themselves superior (and therefore White) is both illuminated and under-mined.

The aesthetic process of race making may still be in play whether one is teaching "low" or "high" culture (or images that were once considered "low" or "high"). It ultimately does not matter. For example, teaching a White student to decode racist imagery and messages in advertising may

enable him to imagine that he has a superior aesthetic capacity to another White subject who has failed to do so. That White subject, an inferior one who is not quite White because he has betrayed norms associated with whiteness, including tolerance for difference, becomes the *real cause* of racism. Relative processes of racialization may contribute to that assigned blame. As Shannon Sullivan has argued, "good" White people—that is relatively affluent White people who believe they are anti-racist or non-racist—tend to distance themselves from people they construct as not-quite-White, or an abject form of whiteness, through processes of racialization that account for class (Sullivan, 2014, pp. 23–58). She calls this relational distancing strategy "dumping on White trash" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 23). This same process of abject race making might occur as White teachers teach White children critical race media literacy skills through decoding racist images circulating in advertising or on the internet. Of course, I do not want to suggest that children should not learn how to decode or jam, say, racist imagery in a Super Bowl commercial or on food packaging. However, the aesthetic capacity to recognise beauty *or* critique beauty for its ideological investments can both be entangled in human sorting and hierarchization through its modern investments in reason.

This analysis shows that reckoning with the arts as White property cannot be as simple as, say, recognising that the arbitrary distinction between "high" and "low" culture has imploded or transforming studio practice into cultural criticism and media literacy. Moreover, it is not as simple as thinking about aesthetics as everyday sensory experience rather than a refined capacity of reason that is aware of the truthful beauty of something. To claim that the arts are White property is to claim that visual art is a racial technology that has been historically used to sort and rank humans based on their ascribed relative capacity to make, judge, and critique images for their aesthetic value. This aesthetic capacity is presumed to be the property of whiteness too. As a result, justifying visual art

education today requires developing pedagogic and curricular practices that recognise the role of fine art and aesthetics, no matter how everyday, in the making and ranking of human difference.

In some ways, my call for this vision resonates with Arthur Efland's (2004) search for a visual art education that recognised the "entwined nature of the aesthetic" (p. 234). In this paper, Efland explored "a middle ground between two rival visions of art education" (p. 234). These two competing visions were found in, for example, Ralph Smith's investment in refined aesthetic experience "as the point and purpose for the arts and thus a major purpose for arts education," and in that of Visual Culture Art Education, which sought to "transform art education into a form of cultural study" (Efland, 2004, pp. 233–234). Efland was ambivalent about a vision for art education that made a hard choice between studying art that had been assigned exemplary value *or* studying everyday visual culture. Instead, Efland (2004) argued for a model of visual art education that gave students the "*freedom of cultural life*, that is the freedom to explore multiple forms of visual culture to enable students to understand social and cultural influences affecting their lives" (p. 250). I am interested in how this freedom of cultural life is differently constituted through aesthetics itself. Indeed, I share Efland's ambivalence because choosing to approach art as a form of cultural study does not necessarily overcome the ways in which cultural study remains implicated in the construction of racial difference through the capacity for aesthetic reasoning. So instead, I am calling for a vision for art education that engages with multiple forms of visual culture as a means of reckoning with, to paraphrase Kandice Chuh (2019), the difference that aesthetics makes.

Redacting Man through Visual Art Practice

Kandice Chuh, a scholar of English and American Studies, has been a key voice in the critical analysis of the role of the aesthetics in making and ranking human difference. Chuh is not

ready to give up on the idea of the human, humanism, or the study of the humanities. Instead, she seeks methods of engaging with arts and letters in ways that, as she puts it, “proliferate(s) ways of being and knowing radically disidentified from its liberal iteration” (Chuh, 2019, p. 4). Through this approach, Chuh is neither theorising possibilities for life after or post the human nor is she decentering ways of being and knowing associated with the human. Instead, she sees a role for the arts and humanities in proliferating ways of being and knowing that do not conform to the norms of this particular iteration of being Human. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, this “genre” of being human has “overrepresented” itself as the universal figure of the human when in fact it is a particular genre of human imagined through and for whiteness itself (2003, p. 317). As a result, Kandice Chuh is motivated by the need for “more rather than less attention to and accounts of human activity and behaviour” (2019, p. 4).

Chuh’s contribution is an important reminder for visual art educationists at this moment in time. To reckon with the arts as White property, and the ways in which aesthetics produces and ranks human difference, we should be seeking to understand and establish imaginative learning environments that allow for the proliferation of ways of being and knowing that are radically disidentified from its liberal iteration. This liberal iteration, this particular genre of being human, is autonomous, possessive, and accumulative. Human life is deemed to be protectable through a constructed relationship with other forms of human life that are deemed to be disposable. Through a biopolitical framing, Grace Hong (2015) argues that this subject is always predicated on a structuring relationship “between two existential states of enslavement and freedom, social death and social life” (p. 27). Those are the stakes. We must imagine a visual art education that divests in the arts as White property. And this vision must be committed to generate expressions of human life that are not predicated on that relation and those values.

Of course, articulating this vision is the collective responsibility of all those who are invested in the future of art education, including those scholars who, like me, are White. However, it is always risky, and potentially counter-productive, when people in my position attempt to do this kind of envisioning. White scholars who do anti-racist scholarship can be more concerned with making being White a tolerable place for them to dwell, not transforming systems of meaning and control that make whiteness a valuable form of property. This non-performative approach to scholarship, as Sara Ahmed has called it, often features a rhetorical pattern that she calls "stealth narcissism" (Ahmed, 2004, para 12). Here, White scholars acknowledge their complicity in interpersonal or institutional forms of racism to distance themselves from those other White people who fail to do so, and therefore must be the cause of racism. This non-performative approach to anti-racist scholarship follows a liberal script in which racism is framed as an individual problem requiring an individualized cure. By contrast, the intellectual and political challenge that I have posed for myself, as a White scholar, is to think critically with concepts and pedagogic approaches that trouble and move beyond liberal framings of racism and anti-racism.

Indeed, in this paper, I want to call attention to one studio practice that illuminates the possibility of visual art education that seeks to proliferate ways of being and knowing that breaks from the liberal genre. Curiously, this studio practice is neither dismissive of modernist aesthetics in art nor does it imagine modernist aesthetics as a sacred, incorruptible, and disinterested space for human experience. Moreover, this studio practice does not simply replace artworks made by White people with artworks made by people who are not White. Instead, this studio practice, articulated by Al-an (Allan) deSouza in their book *How Art Can Be Thought* (2018), recognises the claim that the arts are White property and that fine art has always been a race making technology. Yet, deSouza's practice, which they call "negotiated refusal," also allows those who historically have been

minoritized and dehumanized (or racialized) through the discourse of the arts to find pleasure and possibility in and through the arts (2018, p. 282). This account then does not merely deal with the damage done by the arts as White property. It also holds firm to the notion that studio art practice remains an unpredictable site for desiring and enacting possibilities for being human that do not conform to this liberal iteration that Chuh (2019) and Hong (2015) so forcefully critique.

deSouza is a Professor of Art at the University of California Berkeley. They are a Kenyan-born American of Indian descent. In their book, *How Art Can Be Thought,* deSouza outlines their studio practice of "negotiated refusal" through their discussion of their vexed relationship with Mark Rothko (2018, p. 282). On the one hand, they learn from and find pleasure in Rothko's treatments of surface and colour. On the other hand, they recognise that Rothko's position as a modernist painter depended upon their own professed kinship with what they called "primitive and archaic art" (2018, p. 282). Rothko's own mythology as a modernist painter, who constructed abstract colour fields for aesthetic contemplation, hinged upon their self-proclaimed capacity to inhabit the position of the primitive. This kind of leap into otherness is a familiar racist and colonial trope (Morrison, 1992). Here, the modern subject becomes modern through claiming other people's bodies, identities, and resources as his own, without any regard for their histories or desires. Maile Arvin (2019) refers to this phenomenon as the logic of possession governing whiteness. The capacity to don this otherness temporarily becomes a mark of universality. This universality is constructed in and through a relation with "primitive" subjects who are denied the capacity to leap out of their own bodies or experience disinterested aesthetic contemplation. deSouza therefore challenges Rothko's claim that his relationship with the primitive is based on kinship. They argue that Rothko's relation with the primitive is based on *kingship* (2018, p. 282).

To deal with his vexed relationship with Rothko, deSouza proposes a studio practice of what they call *negotiated refusal*. deSouza argues that their relationship to fine art is always a negotiated one. They claim the right to knowledge, pleasure, and experience through art even as they must also refuse what they describe as "assimilation's active forgetting" (p. 282). Through referencing assimilation's active forgetting, deSouza's concept of refusal is in conversation with Lisa Lowe's (2015) concept of the "economy of affirmation and forgetting" (p. 39). Lowe introduced this concept to describe how liberal humanist understanding is predicated on affirming ways of knowing and being that do not threaten its logic, and forgetting the racialized relations of possession, violence, and death that threaten the very construction of liberal humanism as a force of historical progress. We see this economy of affirmation and forgetting in the valorisation of Rothko. For Rothko to become celebrated for his capacity to create refined moments of aesthetic contemplation, we must forget his self-professed relationship with the primitive that is based on *kingship* rather than *kinship*. He cannot come into being as an artistic genius unless we forget the very epistemic and ontological conditions of his own making. deSouza refuses to assimilate into the logic of the arts as White property through forgetting this fact. And yet, while they refuse to forget, they do not let go of the possibility that Rothko's color fields still might open up new vistas of knowing and being for them.

Crucially, deSouza enacts this practice of negotiated refusal through the practice of painting, and looking closely at deSouza's paintings becomes a means to affectively apprehend this practice of negotiated refusal. In an image titled *Calypso (wmnndchldrn)*, an artwork that is part of their *Rdctns* series, deSouza selects a sample from the furthest point in one of Paul Gauguin's Tahitian paintings (figures 2 and 3). Gauguin, like Rothko, repeated the same leap into otherness through his Tahitian paintings by exotifying and fetishizing the magic power of the primitive Other amidst his disillusion with modernity. deSouza then uses digital tools to redact elements of this furthest point of the

painting, a point that symbolises the distance that Gauguin presumes he can cover but the subjects of his paintings cannot. deSouza (2012) describes this process of redaction "as a process that falls somewhere between the accumulation of a rubbing—where the textures and contours of a surface beneath are "rubbed" onto a surface above; and a rubbing out, or an erasure" (*no page number*). This erasure becomes an act of refusing to forget the primitivist relation that Gauguin established for himself, while, at the same time, learning closely from how Gauguin applied paint to the surface. There are, of course, other examples of artists who erase or rub out other artists' work. For example, Rauschenberg erased a Willem de Kooning drawing in 1953. However, in deSouza's case, they are reckoning with the exotic distance that Gauguin established between himself and the Pacific Islanders of Tahiti through his racial and colonial imaginary. Gauguin imagines that he can make this leap in time and space to know and occupy their bodies without regard for their futures. In this sense, rubbing the furthest point in the Gaugin painting redacts, or refuses, how Gauguin claimed Tahitian islanders as far from modern and, yet also, fetishized them with their potential to save him from modernity.

deSouza's studio practice is an illustration of how artists negotiate and refuse the arts as White property and visual art as a technology of race making. This studio practice shows how one artist attempts to proliferate ways of knowing and being that are disidentified from liberal iterations of the human. Yet, crucially, it does not rely merely on a strategy of simplify diversifying the curriculum or forgetting problematic images. In other words, deSouza still finds possibility through looking at Gauguin's paintings closely from a negotiated stance. This stance reckons with visual art as a racializing technology without eschewing "high" culture for "low" culture. Moreover, they do not abandon studio practice for cultural study and criticism. Instead, they hold on to the possibility of fine art as a technology that proliferates possibilities of knowing and being, while, at the same time,

refusing to forget the fact that fine art has been and remains instrumental in the division between those lives deemed protectable and those lives deemed disposable. They do so through recognising from the start that the arts are White property, that the making and appreciation of visual art has always been, and therefore remains, entangled in the sorting and ranking of human difference. Yet they do not give up on art or the human as they seek to articulate other possibilities for being and knowing.

Conclusion

Art education has struggled with disciplinary anxiety for decades (see Siegesmund, 1998). Once modern assumptions about visual art and why art mattered became no longer tenable, the very question of why art should be taught, or whether art should be taught at all, has been a perennial question for scholars of visual art education. Without a viable answer, the foundation for our field seems indefensible. This disciplinary anxiety is not particular to art education even if the stakes are unique due to our precarious and vulnerable position within the hierarchy of disciplines in this scientific age. This disciplinary anxiety has also been compounded in a moment that has also been defined by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM has played an important role in sparking scrutiny within our field of how and why art should be taught, if at all, once art is recognized as White property. In this paper, I have argued that understanding art as White property also means understanding how visual art has been used historically as a technology to establish norms for being human that are then used to create, sort, and rank human difference. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this argument makes me ambivalent about simply turning away from studio practice in art education or turning away from Western and European artworks that are so clearly entangled in these historical processes of race making. I have looked back at the turn to transform art education into cultural

study to show how the field of art education, in forging its futures, must not only critique the ontology of the image, but also the construction of ontological human difference through aesthetic reasoning. As such, my attempt to find a way forward for visual art education has tried to dwell in, rather than resolve, the disciplinary anxiety that is raised through recognising that the arts are White property. That is why I admire Al-An deSouza's images and their theorization of their artistic practice, which I believe, holds such valuable lessons for us as visual art education scholars, teachers, artist-mentors, and students. deSouza offers a model for making and studying art that still seeks to learn from a long and vexed history of artistic production, while, at the same time, explicitly refusing the ways in which artistic production has made people objects of racial and colonial knowledge in ways that have legitimized their exploitation, dispossession, and death. This history of art is the history that has made our discipline. Rather than being frozen with anxiety or guilt when facing that history, or dismissing it all together, as a White scholar, I am attempting to turn towards it, through this negotiated stance of refusal, in ways that might be generative of studio and educational practices. These new practices, we must always hope, can both refuse and reshape the surrounding cultures of racialization from which they emerged and therefore potentially contribute to the cause of racial justice.

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Figure 1: Titus Kaphar behind the scenes at TED2017 - The Future You, April 24-28, 2017, Vancouver, BC, Canada. Photo: Bret Hartman / TED

Figure 2. Al-An deSouza, *Rdctns*, 2010-2011, digital prints, courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi.

Figure 3. Al-An deSouza, *Calypso (wmnndchldrn)*, from the *Rdctns* series, 2010-2011, digital print, 140 x 102cm, courtesy of the artist and Talwar Gallery, New York and New Delhi.