



***Precarity in
Feminism and
Feminist Art
Education:***

*Decentering
Whiteness Through
Reproductive
Justice Activism*

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The Precarity of “We” Within Feminism

Feminist art education has undeniably contributed to the establishment of a new knowledge by introducing an alternative perspective centering on women’s experiences and concerns which disrupts male-dominated art making, research, curriculum, and pedagogy. By questioning whose knowledge matters, feminist art education brings girls’ and women’s stories, values, and ideas to the fore of knowledge production and identifies a breach in the dominant educational conversations on visual culture, material culture, and social justice art education by revising and expanding existing knowledge. It also adopts interdisciplinary frameworks such as sociology, history, and science to critically examine gender inequalities in diverse contexts of art education curriculum and policy making.

Nonetheless, feminist art education’s central critique of gender inequalities and capitalist patriarchy often overlooks a “complex confluence of identities—race, class, gender, and sexuality—systemic to women of color’s oppression and liberation” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 4). The dominant feminist art educational approach uncritically embraces the idea of sisterhood assuming that White women’s experience could stand for all experience (Haywood & Drake, 1997). By privileging the ideas of Whiteness—which has been recently identified as a major issue in the predominantly White field of art education as a whole (Acuff, 2019)—feminist art

education tends to use a collective language of “we” (*we, the feminists*) as unified, harmonious, and undisrupted. Yet, an emphasis on collective biographies of women artists/educators seems to be largely preoccupied with issues that mainly concern White women, which reflects a White-dominated field of feminism as a whole (Acuff, López, & Wilson, 2019). To give a simple example, feminist policy making has long been focused on income inequality by advancing a popular argument that (all) women make 79 cents¹ for every dollar earned by their White male counterparts in the U.S.; while, according to recent statistics by the National Partnership for Women and Families (2019), “Black women are typically paid 62 cents, Native American women 58 cents, and Latinas just 54 cents for every dollar paid to White, non-Hispanic men” (para 2). This iconic 79-cents-on-the-dollar argument was apparently crafted by White feminist activists and used as an overarching, collective statement which overshadows a much larger pay gap that many women of color face in this country. While working towards an important feminist goal of gender equality, the utopian ideal concept operating under the self-reference of “we” tends to obscure complex, contradictory, and multi-layered lived experiences of oppression of women of color whose race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status

¹ This number slightly fluctuates from year to year. We cite the most recent wages report by the National Partnership for Women and Families.

make their gender discrimination rather distinct and more complicated than the mainstream, White, middle-class women's experiences. Thus, the perspectives of non-White feminists remain merely a surplus, or an addition, to the mainstream feminism (and feminist art education); while the White feminists' knowledge and agendas are placed front and center (Ahmed, 2012).

We see this use of a collective "we" within feminism as a condition of precarity. In her essay on precarity and precarious life, feminist theorist Judith Butler (2009) states that within the mainstream political and institutional discourses, some human lives are systematically ignored and are essentially rendered as disposable and "ungrievable" (p. 31). Considering some of the most vulnerable populations such as refugees who flee their home countries in the state of war and political detainees in Abu Ghraib prison, Butler claims that although all lives can be considered precarious in the global neoliberal capitalist landscape, these populations have limited or no access to the "social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (p. 25). Furthermore, she notes that within a neoliberal capitalist nation-state, "the shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives" (p. 31). The condition of precarity then emerges as a deliberate omission and expulsion of human voices and experiences that seem foreign and marginal; which is akin to Stuart Hall's (1997) theorizing about the symbolic expulsion of the racialized Other. It is curious, however, that while recognizing the precarity in relation to undocumented immigrants and political detainees of color,

Butler did not explicitly acknowledge this condition being just as pervasive within a predominantly White feminism itself. While we recognize the significance of Butler's notion of precarity in relation to some disenfranchised populations, we believe that it needs to be challenged and reframed using an intersectional feminist thought by scholars of color who expose systematic exclusion, marginalization, and silencing of Black and Brown women's experiences within feminist theory and policy making (Collins 2002; Crenshaw, 1991).

A major manifestation of precarity within White liberal feminism, which is also prevalent within feminist art education and multiculturalism, is that it unproblematically assumes that social justice can be achieved by addressing racial diversity and inclusion (Ahmed, 2012). In this case, a collective feminist "we" is disguised under the name of racial inclusivity to create an illusion of equity. It is necessary to open up a conversation to unpack what constitutes an inclusive practice and agenda of diversity. Feminists of color including Black, Indigenous, Latina, and Asian scholars claim that White feminists' inclusive approach positions the racialized gender issues of women of color as simply an addendum to feminist agenda and overlooks racial experiences they face in their daily lives (Ahmed, 2012; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Acuff, López, & Wilson, 2019). According to a multicultural feminist critic Sarah Ahmed (2012), mainstream feminism seeks to merely provide an "additional color" to its dominant Whiteness, which results in efficiently concealing the continuation of systemic racial inequalities (p. 53). Her critical investigation of the term and practice of "diversity" exposes the fact that the concept of diversity is used as a substitute

to that of anti-racism in order to cancel out the “noise of racism” (p. 61). She argues that diversity is framed as supporting “individuated differences,” yet “without a commitment to take social action” (p. 53). The comfort zone of diversity’s inclusive approach does not necessarily achieve gender equity for all women. Thus, a commitment to diversity and inclusion does not seem to carry the same weight as a commitment towards equity in both mainstream feminism and feminist art education. It is important for feminist art education to be aware of this problematic use of concepts of diversity and inclusion, which fundamentally centers on White women’s perspectives and agendas. A major emphasis should be placed not on inclusion, but rather on centering and elevating marginalized lived experiences and voices. If Black and Brown women’s perspectives are not intentionally placed at the center, social justice and equity within feminism cannot be achieved.

Our passion and insight on the subject of racial inequity within feminism, and the issue of reproductive justice in particular, is foregrounded by our intersectional identity positionalities. As a woman of color, Michelle experienced countless racialized micro-aggressions after immigrating to the United States from South Korea in 1990. Her immigrant experiences have been situated in multi-layered marginalization which involved gender, race, class, and language discriminations when working in service industries and education fields, particularly as a student and faculty in higher education. Olga is a White immigrant woman who has been evolving in her understanding of racism through close friendship and frequent conversations with Michelle. Having grown up with a universal health care in Belarus where all women had free and equal

access to reproductive care and abortion, she was disheartened to learn about the racial health disparities that exist in the United States.

Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism

To confront the precarity of systematic concealing of critical issues central to the lives of many women of color, we want to discuss a very prominent case of the reproductive justice feminist activism. Looking back to the history of reproductive justice in the U.S., Black and Brown feminists fought for the reproductive justice since mid 1990s, but their issues have not been paid great attention within the mainstream feminist movement (Ross, 2017). They encountered intersectional barriers which, at a greater level, prevented them from participating in the mainstream reproductive rights movement led by the predominantly White, middle-class feminists. Particularly, Black women’s painful history of having their reproduction measured and devalued by the social and economic policies is not a major concern of the reproductive rights movement’s agenda. Advocating for the pro-choice and reproductive rights, mainstream feminists traditionally didn’t speak out on the racism faced by Black and other women of color, and did not adequately address their unique and sometimes life threatening concerns such as forced contraception and sterilization, family caps on welfare benefits, and limited or no access to reproductive care (Gomez, 2015; Luna, 2009; Ross, 2016; 2017). According to Loretta Ross (2017), the concept of reproductive justice is much more urgent to focus on than the pro-choice driven reproductive rights, because many Black and Brown women are not treated as fully human in the

first place, and are lacking the same reproductive care—and consequently the same human rights—as White, middle- and upper-class women. She notes that the focus on individual choice to have an abortion ignores the complex systems of oppression and social inequalities that obstruct many disenfranchised women's right to choose. For example, Black women on welfare "have been forced to accept sterilization in exchange for a continuation of relief benefits and others have been sterilized without their knowledge or consent" (p. 295). Ross is one of the twelve other African American reproductive justice activists who crafted the term after attending a reproductive rights conference in Chicago in 1994. They confronted White feminists' main focus on abortion rights stating that "abortion advocacy along inadequately addressed the intersectional oppressions of white supremacy, misogyny, and neoliberalism" and that the systemic inequalities such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and poverty have historically shaped women's "decision making around childbearing and parenting" (pp. 290-291). Furthermore, they urged the pro-choice abortion rights advocates to consider not only the intersecting racial and gender factors, but also immigration status, sexuality, ability, age, and carceral status all of which greatly impact marginalized women's access and decisions regarding their reproductive care. After a growing frustration with their intersectional agenda not being recognized within the mainstream feminist pro-choice movement, women of color started forming their own activist coalitions (Bond, 2001; Luna, 2009; Ross, 2016). The oldest and largest activist organization, *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Coalition*, was formed in 1997 using reproductive justice as its central concept. SisterSong defines reproductive

justice as "the complete physical, mental, spiritual, economic, and social well-being of women and girls," which can be achieved only when they "have the economic, social and political power and resources to make healthy decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and reproduction" (Ross; 2016, p. 13). SisterSong, like many other smaller coalitions by women of color formed over the last two decades, focus on advocating for most pressing reproductive care concerns and injustices experienced by Indigenous, Black, Latina, and undocumented immigrant women, as well as specific economic and institutional policy changes which have been overlooked by the mainstream White, middle-class women's reproductive movement.

One of the most pressing issues recognized by reproductive justice advocates is an intersectional struggle by undocumented women of color who are particularly vulnerable to human rights (and consequently reproductive rights) abuse due to their immigration status, which adds yet another axis of oppression to their racial and socioeconomic hardships. While immigration has not been traditionally considered a feminist issue within mainstream feminism, intersectional reproductive justice feminist activists and scholars have paid close attention to it because they saw women's immigrant status and reproductive health as inseparable (Gomez, 2015; Gutiérrez & Fuentes, 2009). While the forced and coercive sterilizations of low income Puerto Rican and Mexican-origin immigrant women (both legal and undocumented) implemented by the U.S. government in 1960s and 1970s have been well documented, most recent abuse of the detained undocumented Latina women at the Mexican border is a new emergent

issue, which a few activist organizations like SisterSong and Center for American Progress call attention to as being most egregious human rights violations. Women placed in the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody have no access to menstrual supplies, contraception, or counseling services for sexual assault and rape (Ross, 2017); while some women who are pregnant experience bleeding, miscarriage, and consequent life-threatening health complications are denied appropriate health care or have to choose an abortion in fear of their newborn child being taken away from them due to ICE family separation policy (Illmann, 2019a; 2019b). As Nora Illmann (2019a) notes, "The [Trump] administration's anti-immigrant agenda, grounded in a white supremacist and misogynistic worldview, normalizes the dehumanization of immigrant women of color. From family separation, to attempts to erode asylum protections for families and domestic violence survivors, to inaction on reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act, immigrant women live at the crux of the Trump administration's anti-women and anti-immigrant agendas" (para 5).

Despite an intersectional feminist activism's efforts to call attention to critical concerns of disenfranchised women discussed above, the mainstream pro-choice feminist movement continues to treat women's right to have an abortion as a central issue, while neglecting lived realities of many women of color whose reproductive autonomy and choices are obstructed by racial, economic, and institutional factors ranging from mandatory sterilizations, to lack of access to reproductive care, to forced family separation. As Gomez (2015) contends, instead of

focusing on a single issue of abortion and "isolating [it] from other areas of social and reproductive oppression," an emphasis should be placed in the fundamental human right to have the procedure as a "constitutional right," as well as "link[ing] this right to a larger discourse about reproductive autonomy, dignity, and a right to health" to ensure that it benefits all women (p. 112). In complete agreement with this statement, we also believe that the fact that women of color are continued to be seen as "invited guests" in the reproductive rights movement with their concerns being viewed as secondary to a pro-choice argument (Bond, 2001, p. 3), contributes to further divisions of feminist agenda and activism and suspends feminist coalition and sisterhood. We also see the case of reproductive justice activism as symptomatic of the fracturing of feminism as a whole, where many Black and Brown women tend to dissociate with the mainstream feminist movement or leave the movement to form their own activist coalitions, because their voices and agendas are being disregarded. Creating a unified multicultural feminist coalition where diversity and inclusion is not simply used as a token, requires a complete rewriting of the dominant feminist script and activism to decenter White power hierarchy by focusing on the intersectional struggles, experiences, and perspectives of disenfranchised women of color. Without placing marginalized women's voices, concerns, and agendas *at the center of feminism*, social justice and equity are not attainable (Ross 2016; 2017). Precisely because these agendas deal with much broader fundamental issues of human and constitutional rights, both national and global, they have a much greater potential of benefiting *all women* instead of just the privileged few.

A Challenge to Feminist Art Education

Based on a prominent case of the reproductive justice activism which confronts the dominant feminist scholarship and practice, we would like to raise a few challenging questions for feminist art education that could help recognize an existing precarity towards minoritized women's voices in our field. For instance, the recently updated mission of National Art Education Association Women's Caucus, which serves as a major feminist organization in the field of art education, is still grounded in a White-centered notion of gender equity, stating that the group "represent[s] and work[s] to advance art education as an advocate of equity for women and all people who encounter injustice, and shall work to eliminate discriminatory gender and other stereotyping practices for individuals and groups, and for the concerns of women art educators and artists" (see <https://naeawc.net>). From this statement, it is evident that gender discrimination is placed *before* other forms of oppression, particularly racial discrimination, which masks and conceals the struggles and concerns of Black, Brown, and Indigenous women and immigrant women of color. In the same fashion, the generalized language such as "equity for women and all people" and the "concerns of women art educators" does not explicitly acknowledge lived experiences of art educators of color (as well as of those with disabilities, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, of non-binary sexual orientations, etc.) which are much more complex and challenging than experiences of White, middle-class, able, heterosexual women in the field. This colorblind mission of Women's Caucus appears symptomatic of the field of feminist art education as a whole, where minoritized women's perspectives

are still treated as supplementary to the dominant narratives and agendas under the slogan of diversity and inclusion (Acuff, López, & Wilson, 2019; Bae-Dimitriadis, 2019). Particularly given most recent establishment of the NAEA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) Commission, whose major goal is to promote voices and issues of marginalized art educators and students, the task of confronting these issues has never been more urgent in our field (ED&I Commission Press Release, 2019).

The first and necessary step in decentering Whiteness in the field of art education in general, and feminist art education in particular, requires a radical acknowledgement of its own White supremacy. In doing so, the following basic questions may help reshare our field towards equity and social justice: What voices, issues, and experiences by minoritized female art educators are neglected and invisible in our field or viewed as peripheral? What steps do we need to take to position these voices and issues at the center of feminist art education scholarship, professional discussion, and curriculum? What theories, narratives, and art making and teaching practices should be used in our field to ensure that minoritized perspectives are always acknowledged and emphasized? As feminist art educators and long-standing members of NAEA, we believe that grappling with these questions can bring us closer to an ambitious goal of social justice and ending racialized gender discrimination. We should always be mindful of the precarity of "we," where our predominantly White organization's policies and agendas can overshadow, silence, and disregard voices and perspectives of art educators of color, thereby rendering them disposable.

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