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Melanie L. Buffington
Virginia Commonwealth University, mbuffington@vcu.edu

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Developing Multicultural Intelligence through the Work of Kehinde Wiley

Melanie L. Buffington

ABSTRACT
Through a review of current events, contemporary ideas on multicultural education, and the art of Kehinde Wiley, this article argues that using the work of contemporary artists is one way to introduce pre-service teachers to the complex issues of multiculturalism, race, and culture in contemporary society. By learning about contemporary artists whose work overtly relates to race and culture, pre-service teachers may become more comfortable with the realities of the multicultural schools they encounter throughout their careers. Additionally, the article introduces portraiture methodology as a means of understanding interactions in university classrooms, especially as they relate to pre-service teacher education. Thus, this article explores the roots of cultural violence through the lens of multicultural education and pre-service teacher education.

INTRODUCTION
Shortly after the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday in January of 2007, I read several news stories about theme parties at universities that were based on racially stereotyped activities, such as wearing blackface, drinking liquor from 40 ounce containers, eating fried chicken, and dressing in baggy 'gangsta' clothing. These parties, which were held over the holiday weekend celebrating Dr. King, occurred at several universities, including Clemson, Tarleton, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Connecticut (Black, 2007). In some cases, the universities became aware of these parties through photos the students posted of themselves on various social networking and photo-sharing sites (Clemson President, 2007; Gilman, 2007). As the universities investigated these incidents, they found that the students believed their actions were humorous and not offensive. At Clemson, university officials
met with students to discuss the events, and other students and community members held protests about the parties (Gilman, 2007; Schafer, 2007). Though the parties themselves may not constitute cultural violence, they certainly indicate a lack of multicultural awareness, and, cultural intolerance can lead to other incidents that overtly promote hatred or violence.

Other types of intolerant behavior on college campuses were also common during 2007, a year in which nooses were found hanging at several universities, including Columbia, Central Michigan, and the University of Maryland (Boxer, 2007; Cranmore, 2007; Four nooses found, 2007). Additionally in 2007, the highly publicized case of the Jena Six emerged because of numerous racially charged incidents at a high school, including the hanging of a noose (Roesgen & McLaughlin, 2007). This recent spate of incidents shows that students who enroll in and graduate from high schools in the U.S. may not have a sufficient understanding of multicultural issues and need to engage more with issues of race and culture. This holds especially true for the college students who will become teachers in increasingly diverse classrooms.

This article relates these current events to issues of multicultural education. Following a review of some contemporary philosophies of multicultural education and examples of comments from my students in reaction to learning about multiculturalism, I introduce the work of the contemporary artist, Kehinde Wiley. I discuss his work and its possibilities for introducing concepts of race, representation, power, and identity to pre-service teachers. In closing, I suggest that the methodology of portraiture may be useful to the field of art education as we research and develop additional ways to teach about race and culture, especially as they pertain to pre-service teacher education and developing multicultural intelligence in future teachers.

MULTICULTURAL INTELLIGENCE

I posit the term multicultural intelligence as a descriptor for the ongoing process of learning about cultures that should occur throughout our lives, drawing on Gardner’s (1999) exploration of the idea that an expanded understanding of intelligence is essential to developing more appropriate methods of assessing and educating students. Gardner described the criteria for an intelligence as

a set of skills of problem solving—enabling the individual to resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product—and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems—thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge (1983, p. 61).

More recently, Gardner (2006) specifically addressed what he termed “the respectful mind” (p. 103) and elucidated how humans learn about and respect cultures. He explained that by the time of adolescence, attitudes toward other groups seem to be set, and these notions are not likely to change unless there are significant intervening events. Therefore, many pre-service teachers may come to college with fixed ideas that do not reflect the cultural competencies that are essential in today’s multicultural United States. These students enter college with a need to further develop their multicultural intelligence. Further, if new teachers develop multicultural intelligence, they may go on to teach culturally relevant curricula and create classroom environments that affirm the home knowledge (Grant & Sleeter, 2007), backgrounds, and experiences of a wide range of students. As Knight (2008) argued, university programs that are meant to prepare pre-service art teachers
for their roles in the classroom have not responded in a timely manner to the need to embrace multicultural competence. She advocated for including multiculturalism throughout teacher preparation programs with the ultimate goal of moving K-12 education away from Eurocentric practices. I agree that the field of art education should take a more proactive approach to multicultural education and strive toward developing a greater level of multicultural intelligence in pre-service art teachers. Doing so may help art education become a vehicle for developing cultural awareness in K-12 students and for reducing cultural intolerance that may ultimately lead to reducing cultural violence.

**STUDENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF MULTICULTURAL ISSUES**

At first I found it hard to believe that the college students who participated in the racially-stereotyped parties did not realize how offensive their behavior was. But as I reflected on comments that my predominantly white middle class female students made when discussing race, I wondered how many of them would understand how and why these parties were offensive. Indeed, during class discussions of race and multiculturalism, my students shared ideas such as, “Racism is something from a long time ago—like in the 1960s” (personal communication). Another student commented that she could not be racist “because there were so many black kids at my high school” (personal communication). And a pre-service elementary educator expressed her fear of addressing race in the classroom because she worried that doing so “would make the black kids feel badly about themselves” (personal communication).

The Eurocentric knowledge base of many teachers is not a form of cultural violence. But I believe that at the root of cultural violence is cultural intolerance, and what underlies intolerance may be fear and lack of experience with or knowledge of a variety of people and cultures. Because many students attend what are, in effect, segregated schools, live in segregated neighborhoods, and participate in homogenous religious groups, they may develop a sense of cultural apathy or a blase approach to issues of race, representation, and culture. Additionally, because many pre-service teachers come to universities with limited direct experience with cultures other than their own, they may have a significant lack of knowledge and may tend to rely on stereotypes of cultural groups that are perpetuated by society and the media. Until university teacher preparation programs offer significant and sustained multicultural education, pre-service teachers may continue entering public school classrooms lacking cultural knowledge and the ability to work with diverse students.

Many authors have posited the notion that art educators play an important role in introducing students to concepts of race and culture through multicultural art education (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Chalmers, 1996; Erickson & Young, 2002; Knight, 2006, 2008; Lovano-Kerr, 1985). Additionally, throughout the field of education, many scholars have observed the disconnect between teachers and their students when it comes to race (Banks, 2008; Delpit, 2006; Howard, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). For a variety of reasons, the type of frank and open dialogue about race and culture that Bolgatz (2005) and others advocate is not something that many of my students experienced in their K-12 education. Additionally, the culturally relevant teaching practices that Ladson-Billings (1994) described, including teachers, parents, and community members sharing responsibilities for student success and valuing and acknowledging student diversity, are not the norm. Though Banks (2008) has advocated for multicultural education for years and recommends teaching
students to think about Eurocentric concepts from different points of view to learn more about the underlying perspectives, few of my students recall using this type of thinking in their K-12 experiences. Many of my students indicated that there were no discussions of race in their K-12 schooling and that they are not comfortable with the topic. Their primary idea for addressing race in the classroom is to completely ignore it and act as if all students are the same. In my college classroom, fear and apprehension about race and multiculturalism is palpable, and students who are often chatty become quiet when we discuss race.

One of my goals as a teacher is to prepare pre-service teachers for the diversity that they will encounter in their classrooms in public schools, so I employ many strategies to infuse multiculturalism throughout the curriculum. One strategy that has worked well is introducing them to contemporary artists whose work relates to race and culture in the United States. Perhaps because my students are already familiar with interpreting artworks, they seem to be relatively easily engaged in critical discussions of race as it relates to contemporary art, and approaching the subject this way is a good starting point. By integrating multicultural educational practices throughout my teaching, I work with pre-service teachers on developing their awareness of their own cultures and those of others. Banks (2008) argued that respect for cultures may come from learning about and understanding a variety of cultures, including one’s own. When pre-service teachers develop an understanding of how all cultures are constructed, including their own, and can move away from the notion that their culture is “normal” and other cultures are “different,” they are developing the type of multicultural intelligence that is essential for contemporary classrooms. Discussing the art of Kehinde Wiley may be one way for students to develop their multicultural intelligence.

KEHINDE WILEY

Kehinde Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977. As a young man, he attended San Francisco Art Institute, and then went on to earn his MFA from Yale in 2001. Wiley’s current body of work includes large portraits of African American men in proud poses that are inspired by paintings by the Old Masters, including David, Titian, Van Dyke, Rubens, and others (see Figure 1). Through these portraits, Wiley confronts the power and identity of his models and the models in the paintings he uses as historical referents (Houston, 2006). By putting images of young African American men in such poses, Wiley challenges the traditional representation of African American men as subservient or backward. His portraits, which often feature historical figures, are a form of rebelling against the stereotypes that have been used to define African American identity. Wiley’s work is a form of multicultural intelligence, as it challenges the notion of “normal” and recognizes the diversity of cultures.

FIGURE 1

Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps
9’ x 9’ Oil on canvas – Kehinde Wiley, 2005
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American men in poses that were previously reserved for saints, nobles, and royalty, he questions conventional portraiture and societal representations (Jankauskas, 2007). Additionally, because African Americans are absent in the history of Western portraiture, Wiley’s work challenges this tradition. His work goes further to disintegrate the boundaries that separate different eras of art history, and through his practices, he creates new meanings that may not have traditional referents (Miller, 2007).

To enlist models, Wiley often approaches young African American men on the street, shows them his art, discusses his techniques with them, and invites them to pose for a portrait (Houston, 2006). The men may also choose the pose they want to use from Wiley’s art history books. Like the reference paintings, the clothing and stance of Wiley’s models position them as powerful and invite viewer interpretation. The men pose wearing contemporary urban fashions and twenty-first century accessories. Though the faces and bodies are full-modeled with photo-realistic shading and shadows, the backgrounds are usually devoid of shadows. Instead, they are covered with organic vegetation and flowers that often creep over the bodies of the men depicted in the images. According to Colvin (2006), Wiley calls these decorative background surfaces “floration,” and the imagery is Wiley’s interpretation of Rococo, Baroque, and Islamic patterns. This play of foreground and background creates an interesting tension that invites the viewer to linger over the painting (see Figure 2).

![FIGURE 2](image-url)

*Three Graces
6’ x 8’ Oil on canvas – Kehinde Wiley, 2005*

Because his paintings are larger than life, use bold colors, and include engaging images of young men in urban fashion, my students easily become engrossed in Wiley’s paintings. Additionally, the students bring their extensive knowledge of other aspects of contemporary
culture gleaned from the media and popular music to their interpretations of his work. Their knowledge informs my understandings of Wiley’s art. Analyzing and interpreting Wiley’s portraits bring up many issues including representation, identity, race, and power. In class discussions of Wiley’s work, students make comments such as, “It’s odd to see a portrait of an African American man looking proud and powerful” (personal communication) (see Figure 3). We discuss the absence of African Americans from the European tradition of portraiture and how Wiley’s work actively subverts this tradition. When looking at an image of the rapper and actor Ice-T in a Napoleonic pose, one student interpreted him as being threatening and looking violent. Other students disagreed and argued that the pose was regal, powerful, and proud. The ensuing dialogue among students delved into ideas of race and representation in Wiley’s paintings. Additionally, this led to a discussion of Wiley’s use of traditional poses from other portraits and how depictions of power change with time and are culturally specific.

Raising these topics helps pre-service teachers think about strategies that they may use in their classrooms to educate students about larger societal issues such as equity, privilege, and identity. Because these issues are inherent in Wiley’s work, addressing them furthers their understanding of his contemporary works, the historical references of his paintings, and the world in which we live. Additionally, interpreting his art can help pre-service teachers address how cultures are constructed. My use of Kehinde Wiley’s portraits is just one example of how scholars in our field can affect pre-service teachers’ multicultural intelligence so that they can teach from a more informed and nuanced perspective.

**PORTRAITURE METHODOLOGY**

In the field of education, the qualitative research methodology of portraiture is often used in conjunction with critical race theory (Chapman, 2007) to understand the interactions between teachers and students. In art education, Grube (2008), used portraiture to understand three students’ approaches to artmaking. Through her careful study and observations, she learned about how the three students in her study made art, what their influences were, and how they used their artmaking to understand the world. Her thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the learning environment and the interactions between and among the students shows how the students co-constructed meanings and how shared conversations and imagery affected their
works of art. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) described portraiture methodology as a means to understanding the "richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences" (p. 3). Because portraiture methodology emphasizes understanding, it may be an important methodology for art educators to embrace as we continue to develop our multicultural approaches to education. Often used in classroom settings to understand interactions between and among teachers and students, portraiture may help us develop a deeper understanding of how university level art educators work with pre-service teachers to develop an increased multicultural intelligence.

In addition to best practices in K-12 art classrooms, art educators need to develop multicultural teaching strategies for university-level pre-service teacher preparation programs. Using portraiture methodology in conjunction with teaching about the work of contemporary artists, as Knight (2006) and I advocate, may be one way of developing a deeper understanding of multicultural art education at the university level. Research shows that many pre-service teachers come to college with only surface-level knowledge of cultural issues, so university teacher education programs need to work toward fostering appreciation for and acknowledging the importance of a wide variety of cultures in the U.S. (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Whittaker, McDonald, & Markowitz, 2005). In addition to traditional methods of multicultural education that focus on the contributions approach (Banks & Banks, 2000), which primarily addresses heroes and holidays, we should move our practices beyond that approach to help pre-service teachers develop a greater understanding of how their cultures and those of others are constructed. This needs to be an ongoing development of multicultural intelligence “that entails a lifelong commitment to continuous improvement, constant review, and consistent refinement” (Knight, 2006, p. 40).

At the university level, we need to make a commitment to conducting research and modeling practices that deepen multicultural intelligence in pre-service teachers. The methodology of portraiture may offer one way to investigate this topic. Other potential areas for research could include longitudinal studies that follow groups of pre-service teachers as they make the transition from college students to teachers. Through studying their successes and challenges implementing multicultural curricula, we may gain useful information for our field. Another option may be to conduct a case study of a particularly effective art teacher education program that emphasizes multicultural education. Through such a case study, we may learn about successful ways to infuse multiculturalism throughout a pre-service teacher preparation program.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, those of us who teach pre-service art educators must accept responsibility for developing the multicultural intelligence of the next generation of teachers. Addressing this topic in one class or in one day is not enough. A sustained approach to the multicultural education of pre-service teachers is essential and may be one way to address the issue of cultural violence. Teachers who have a complex understanding of cultures may be able to foster tolerance in their own classrooms through developing inclusive curricula and classroom environments. Additionally, they may be able to help their students and fellow teachers develop curious yet respectful attitudes toward their own cultures and their peers' cultures. This type of mindset may allow art teachers to take a leading role in advocating for the importance of contemporary art and multicultural education in their schools.
References


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Melanie L. Buffington is assistant professor of art education at Virginia Commonwealth University, and she can be reached at mbuffington@vcu.edu.