

Confronting Woke Groupthink in Art Education

Michelle Marder Kamhi

When Irving Janis coined the term *groupthink* half a century ago, he warned that the phenomenon’s “concurrence-seeking tendencies interfere with critical, rational capacities and lead to serious errors of judgment.” Further, members of the group “believe unquestioningly in [their] inherent morality,” which tends to deter crucial “reality testing” of either the fundamental assumptions underlying their position or its actual consequences.¹ I’ve witnessed the truth of Janis’s insights in the field of art education in recent months.

Beginning with Racism

The dubious notion that the U.S. is a “systemically racist” nation has taken hold in art education, as in virtually every sphere of American life. Concern regarding its toxic effects led me to write “Poisoning the Well of Art Education” for *Academic Questions* (Fall 2021), and to begin a discussion thread about it on the Open Forum of the National Art Education Association (NAEA), of which I’m a longtime member.

The NAEA response was overwhelmingly negative—a defensive circling of the wagons by teachers who subscribe to the prevailing view.² Virtually no consideration was given to the substance of my contrarian view or to the relevant facts I cited. Still worse, after two days of heated exchange, the entire thread was removed from the NAEA website, for alleged “violations of the community Rules and Etiquette.” A comment by me in response to a related thread was also removed, on the same grounds.

1 Irving L. Janis, “Groupthink,” *Psychology Today* (November 1971): 84–90.

2 There were just two notable exceptions—both of them high school teachers who came to my defense on the forum. If others shared their view, they lacked the courage to say so in the current environment.

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The questions I posed in the original thread were: “Is America systemically racist? And are art teachers morally obliged to be ‘*actively* antiracist?’”

By framing the questions in those terms, I was directly challenging an open letter sent to NAEA members last year by James Haywood Rolling, Jr., then president-elect of the association and inaugural chair of the organization’s Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission. Based on the premise that America is mired in systemic racism, Rolling (who is black) had asserted a need for the organization to focus on “constructing an [actively] antiracist agenda.” I therefore linked my discussion post to my *AQ* article, which not only presented facts disputing his basic premise but also critiqued recent “antiracist” approaches to art education.

Stonewalling, Not Reality Testing

As evidence against systemic racism in the U.S., I cited the two-term election of a biracial president and the more recent election of a biracial vice president—as well as countless blacks serving in high levels in government, the armed services, and other spheres of American life, both public and private. Such facts were peremptorily dismissed by a professor of art education, who argued that they do “not cover the multitude of ways this nation has and continues to maintain a caste system with peoples of color—especially African-Americans and Native Americans—at the bottom of the heap.” In reply, I suggested that what she viewed as a “caste system” holding peoples of color down was due to cultural factors other than race—as black scholars such as Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele (whose work I cited) have compellingly argued.

Reality testing would have required examining those scholars’ ideas and the abundant empirical evidence in support of them. Instead, they too were dismissed out of hand. One teacher triumphantly posted an excerpt from a negative review in *The Daily Beast* of Shelby Steele’s *Shame* (2015) as if that settled the question. When I pointed to *The Daily Beast*’s far-left media bias rating and cited, in contrast, a favorable review of the same book in the *Wall Street Journal*, there was no response.

Another educator found my ideas suspect because they had been published by the National Association of Scholars, “a conservative advocacy group . . . founded on the ideal of preserving the ‘Western intellectual heritage’ . . . and [America’s] historic ideals.” In reply, I asked: “Since you appear to reject the

ideals of ‘Western intellectual heritage’ and America’s founding, what ideals do you embrace in their place?” Again, no response.

In reply to repeated assertions by teachers wanting to make a “real difference” (as one professor put it) by combating the systemic racism they assume to be the cause of social and economic inequities, I argued that “as [Thomas] Sowell has shown through ample data, the root cause of the poverty and related problems you point to is not racism. And as long as you promote the claim that it is, the real difference you are making is, ironically, only to make matters worse.”

That was the final post before the entire thread was deleted from the NAEA website.

Assuming the Moral High Ground

Rather than deal head-on with substantive points I had raised, a museum art educator in the mid-West initiated a new thread, titled “WHY Antiracist Education is Important in Arts Education.” She began by declaring: “I understand the U.S. to be systemically racist, and as an educator, I feel a responsibility to be antiracist: to actively work against the systems, beliefs, and behaviors that benefit cis, white, hetero, able, thin, male people.”

“Instead of engaging with those that have demonstrated . . . that they do not want to have a meaningful conversation about these issues,” she added (no doubt alluding to me, as if I had not been aiming for meaningful conversation!), members should “use this space to share with one another WHY antiracist arts education is important and necessary along with examples of what it can look like in practice.” I retorted:

[I]t’s important to distinguish between those who “do not want to have a meaningful conversation about these issues” and individuals who seriously question the crucial underlying assumption that America is systemically racist—as I have done.

Your new thread on the topic simply assumes that the crucial premise in question is valid. The attached article, by Wilfred Reilly, is the latest of many studies casting considerable doubt on that fundamental assumption.³

3 Wilfred Reilly, “Testing the Tests for Racism,” *Academic Questions* (Fall 2021):17–27.

Any truly meaningful discussion of these issues cannot responsibly dismiss such doubts out of hand. Nor should it ignore the concerns I (and others) have raised about grave unintended negative consequences of current antiracist efforts [more on which below]—which flow from the dubious assumption that racism is *systemic* in America.

That comment was promptly removed by the NAEA webmaster, for “one or more violations of the community Rules and Etiquette.” Tellingly, other responses to the thread consisted mainly of passionate declarations of commitment to the cause of combating the racism the writers “knew” to be systemic.

Distorted Sense of American History

As indicated by the aspersion cast on America’s “historic ideals” noted above, art educators have largely subscribed to the simplistically distorted view of history presented by the likes of Howard Zinn and Nikole Hannah-Jones. That view has been ably deconstructed in Mary Grabar’s *Debunking Howard Zinn* (2019) and Peter Wood’s *1620: A Critical Response to the 1619 Project* (2020), as well as vigorously countered by Thomas Sowell in “The Real History of Slavery.”⁴

The nuanced perspectives on the complexly fraught issues of slavery and racism presented by these and other contrarian thinkers are what informs my own view of the subject. Yet, ironically, my critics on the Open Forum claimed that it is I who holds a “simplistic and narrow” view, on the “wrong side of history.”

“Lived Experience” vs. Objective Analysis

Invariably, the evidence cited for systemic racism boiled down to disparate social and economic outcomes (as noted above) and minority students’ “lived experiences.” I by no means deny the importance of personal experience. What I question are the societal inferences that are drawn from it.⁵ In this regard, Thomas Sowell sagaciously instructed his students: “Please don’t tell me how you feel. I don’t care how you feel. What I want to know is, when you

4 Thomas Sowell, “The Real History of Slavery,” in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (Encounter Books, 2006), 70–111.

5 For an astute analysis of the various fallacies involved in generalizing from such particulars, see W. Alexander Bell, “Motte-and-Bailey: The Academic Threat from ‘Lived Experience,’” *The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal*, April 2, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/ykuszdfh>.

reach a conclusion, what evidence and what stages of reasoning led you to that conclusion.”⁶

As it happens, my own lived experience—as a Jewish child growing up in a New York State backwater in the 1940s—includes considerable antisemitism. Moreover, my fellow Jews continue to be the frequent targets of hate crimes. For example, when the 2019 FBI hate-crime figures are analyzed in relation to percentage of the U.S. population, Jews (who constitute less than 3 percent of the total population) were 2.6 times more likely than blacks to be hate-crime victims.⁷ Yet neither I nor anyone else I know is, or should be, arguing that antisemitism is currently systemic in America.

In addition, my lived experience includes warm friendship with three generations of the black family who have been my next-door neighbors for half a century. I should add that their lived experience has included the tragic murder of one of them—a vibrant young teacher brutally slain not by a white man but by a fellow black who worked in the school where she taught. As I documented in “Poisoning the Well of Art Education” (*AQ* Fall 2021) black-on-black crime is, lamentably, a problem that affects black communities far more often than white-on-black crime but is conveniently ignored by “antiracist” warriors.

Unintended Negative Consequences

Why is it crucial to distinguish between individual and systemic racism? Because they call for vastly different responses. The charge of systemic racism has naturally prompted systemic approaches to remediation—from affirmative action in hiring and admissions to defunding the police. The negative consequences of such approaches have been analyzed in various reports. For example, the NAS’s *Neo-Segregation at Yale* and the Heritage Foundation’s *A “Dubious Expediency”: How Race-Preferential Admissions Policies on Campus Hurt Minority Students* shed light on the actual effects of race-based college admissions favoring blacks. And the “Ferguson effect” (increased crime following reduced policing), though questioned for a time, was ultimately affirmed by the very criminologist who initially debunked it.⁸

Moreover, systemic narratives and “solutions,” and the sense of victimhood they foster among blacks, distract from the personal choices and actions

⁶ Thomas Sowell, Interview with Erika Holzer, *Conservative Digest*, April 1987, 11.

⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, FBI, *2019 Hate Crime Statistics*, Table 1, <https://tinyurl.com/4ej9ztzd>.

⁸ Lois Beckett, “Is the ‘Ferguson effect’ real? Researcher has second thoughts,” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2016.

that would most improve black lives—in particular, hard work, education, and refraining from out-of-wedlock births. Middle-class blacks recognize these universal truths. But “antiracist” warriors tend to dismiss such middle-class values as mere reflections of “white supremacy.”

The negative impact on students who are not black should also be considered. Most obviously, advantages provided to blacks by affirmative action tend to disadvantage Asians, Jews, and individuals in other groups passed over despite higher test scores and other objective measures. This inequity, in turn, has, not surprisingly, prompted some applicants to misrepresent their racial identity—as evidenced by a recent survey.⁹

Also troubling is the sense of unearned guilt imposed on whites simply for having been born white. “Poisoning the Well of Art Education” noted such feelings in the case of a white teacher concerned with “unpacking [her] White privilege.” Such unearned guilt is likely to be exacerbated by NAEA initiatives such as a recent webinar titled “Thinking With, Through, and Against Whiteness.”

Challenging Groupthink on Transgenderism

The NAEA’s LGBTQ+ Interest Group—formed in 1996 “to make visible lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues within the field of art education”—sponsored eight sessions in the 2021 NAEA convention. My attempt to stimulate debate on the issue of transgenderism fared even worse than that on racism, however. I initiated a new discussion thread titled “Dealing with Transgenderism,” in which I recommended Abigail Shrier’s “Gender Ideology Run Amok” as offering “crucially important information and insights regarding recent trends on this controversial issue.”¹⁰ The article presents compelling evidence that the recent worldwide surge in transgender identification among teenage girls with no childhood history of gender dysphoria is unprecedented. Yet it was dismissed as a mere “‘opinion’ piece” and an “anti-trans screed.” Moreover, I was accused of using the discussion forum “as a place to invite members into divisive and inflammatory conversation” and of attempting to beat “others into submission” regarding my viewpoint.

In response, I questioned characterizing Shrier’s piece as an “anti-trans screed.” As evidence, I quoted her praise of transgender adults as “some of the

9 Wilfred Reilly, “Affirmative Action Privilege, and Other Reasons Human Life Is Complicated,” *Fair for All*, November 16, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/525cz2ck>.

10 Abigail Shrier, “Gender Ideology Run Amok,” *Imprimis*, (June/July 2021).

soberest and kindest people” she has met in her work as a journalist, to which she added: “Many of them seem to have been helped by transition, and they are leading admirable and productive lives.”

To that point, a professor of art education who was an “Art Educator of the Year” honoree in her mid-Western state a few years ago retorted that I had merely “cherry pick[ed] one sentence from a long diatribe of venom.” I then asked: “Which sentences of Shrier’s support the charge of ‘a long diatribe of venom?’”

Sidestepping my question, the award-winning professor replied (citing no evidence) that Shrier “is well known for her anti-trans hate speech” and that she “sits on a board that is anti- Black Lives Matter.” Further, she informed me that the discussion forum had been created as a “safe space” for “supporting, sharing and networking with art educators” and was “not the place for extreme political opinion pieces.”

When I then asked if she had considered what the BLM movement actually stands for—with a link to an article titled “The Agenda of Black Lives Matter Is Far Different From the Slogan”—and why someone might legitimately oppose it, the professor accused me of “political baiting.”¹¹ Soon after, the entire discussion thread was removed by the powers that be.

Further Debate Foreclosed

The NAEA webmaster then informed me that my membership in the NAEA Collaborate Community, with access to the Open Forum, had been terminated because three of my posts had violated the group’s Rules and Etiquette (which aimed “to preserve an environment that encourages both respectful and supportive dialogue”) and/or had “prompted numerous concerns and complaints from community members.”

The posts cited pertained not only to racism and transgenderism but to an earlier thread in which I had touched on the essential nature of visual art—the proper subject matter of art education. In response to a teacher who had defined art as “anything that causes a response from you,” I had observed that the cell-phone video of Derek Chauvin with his knee on George Floyd had surely caused a response from lots of people. I then argued that if that wasn’t art in her view,

11 Michael Gonzales, “The Agenda of Black Lives Matter Is Far Different From the Slogan,” *Heritage Foundation commentary*, July 3, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9y48ky>.

she would need to revise her definition. That post was soon removed. It even prompted a phone call from the NAEA's executive director, Mario Rossero.¹²

In my response to the webmaster regarding termination of my membership in the NAEA Collaborate Community, I copied both Rossero and Rolling (as current NAEA president). As I stated, the termination had come as no surprise, given the generally hostile response to my comments on the Open Forum.

I further wrote:

Nor will I miss access to that community as presently constituted. My only reason for participation was in the hope of stimulating serious discussion of major issues affecting both art education and the larger American society. It has become clear that such discussion is impossible in a community dominated by individuals incapable of civil debate with those who disagree with them.

No doubt the “numerous concerns and complaints from community members” that have prompted my termination have come from the same individuals who hesitated neither to impugn my motives and grossly misrepresent my point of view nor to dismiss out of hand the substantial body of work by estimable conservative thinkers whose ideas challenge them. Their ad hominem attacks have surely not been “respectful.”

The article I cited by Abigail Shrier, for example, reports on the recent worldwide “spike in transgender identification among teenage girls with no childhood history of gender dysphoria” (a historically anomalous pattern) and powerfully argues that it is a “social contagion” readily exacerbated by “a school environment where you can achieve status and popularity by declaring a trans identity.” She further notes that “teen girls are now the leading demographic claiming to have gender dysphoria” and “are in the midst of the worst mental health crisis on record, with the highest rates of anxiety, self-harm, and clinical depression.”

12 While Rossero valued the “healthy dialogue” promoted by my sometimes “provocative” posts—he explained—he had yielded to “a number of” complaints about my reference to the Floyd video, which was an upsetting reminder of the event for the complainants. Though a prior email from him had claimed that my reference “did not honor the culture of respect outlined in the . . . community guidelines,” he now acknowledged that it was not my intent to cross the line “to disrespect.”

Yet a presumably “respectful” member of the NAEA Collaborate Community maligned Shrier’s work by dismissing her article as “a long diatribe of venom.” When pressed, however, she would (or could) not cite any passage supporting such a charge.

Quite by chance I recently received a message from a well-known contemporary painter whose teen-aged granddaughter is sadly caught up in the spreading gender dysphoria. Though at opposite ends of the political spectrum from me, he holds that she has fallen victim to a “transgender fad.” Most important, he further observes the following: “All teens go through a phase of sexual identity questioning. They are vulnerable to cajoling and overly sympathetic people, *often including their teachers who want to be open-minded and blindly encouraging* [emphasis mine]. . . . [T]oo many teachers are pushed to be supportive of every overly generous view.”

As for the many destructive effects of the “antiracist” craze, those noted in my recent *Academic Questions* article were entirely ignored by the NAEA Collaborate Community. I will be dealing with them further in a forthcoming piece.

No one at the NAEA saw fit to respond to that message.

Lack of Critical Thinking on Critical Race Theory

Equally unsurprising in the current climate was the rejection of a proposal I submitted (blind) for a session titled “Critical Thinking on Critical Race Theory in Art Education,” for the 2022 NAEA convention. As outlined in my proposal, the session aimed “to provide a balanced, historically grounded view of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives that have flowed from it in the field of art education.” It further stated: “To avoid presenting students with a skewed perspective on this crucially important aspect of American life, responsible educators should be aware of both sides of the question, and critically assess their respective assumptions, goals, and outcomes.” The session would therefore compare and contrast the now-prevailing views of CRT proponents with the less-well-known views of their critics, both black and white, and would discuss “their relevance to, and impact upon, the present realities of American society.” In addition, it would critique several

examples of how EDI and CRT are being implemented in art education—drawing on recent articles in the NAEA journal *Art Education* and sessions at the NAEA21 convention. Handouts would list readings on both sides of the issue.

Wouldn't such a session have contributed to a healthy debate? And might such debate have led at least some teachers to subject their ideas to the reality testing on which truth ultimately depends? Sadly, we will never know.