

Cite this article: Eddie Chambers, "It's Time to Share," Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10957>.

It's Time to Share

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As someone who came into academia fairly late in my working life, I was struck by the fiendish entanglements and constraints that race played within university art history departments. There is, however, always a danger that individual, somewhat anecdotal experiences become extrapolated and regarded as having a wider, near-universal application. Looking around at the art history departments across the United States with which I had varying degrees of familiarity, I perceived that African American faculty were frequently, somewhat predictably, there to teach African American art. It was similarly apparent that African faculty were there to teach African art; Chinese academics taught Chinese art; and so on. In other words, there existed the appearance of a pronounced and decidedly unsubtle *stay in your laneness* that was applied to art history faculty of color.

When I became a field editor for *caa.reviews*, the online review portal of the College Art Association, what started as an impression rapidly became a cast-iron certainty. In looking to assign books and catalogues for review, I took to the Internet, perusing the faculty pages of university art history departments across the nation, looking for people whose areas of scholarship might make them suitable for reviewing a particular book. Of course, questions of agency and choice in what led faculty to their areas of expertise and research interests are open-ended inquiries that necessarily complicate these considerations. That said, it rapidly became apparent to me that even the most cursory scrolling through such faculty pages confirmed that faculty of color were indeed tied to teaching art history that was in effect bound up with perceptions of and attitudes toward ethnicity and race.

This contrasted, dramatically and markedly, with white academics, who without exception taught the subjects they had chosen, and/or had been interested in researching for their doctorates. Scrolling through faculty web pages, it didn't take much to guess the subject areas of faculty of color, but contrastingly, it was pretty much impossible to guess, or even speculate, on the subject areas taught by white scholars (a number of whom also had responsibility for teaching African art, African American art, or African Diaspora art). White academics taught the widest range of art history topics, while academics of color were shackled (if that's the correct word) to a much narrower band of subjects that were in turn aligned with the worth with which faculty of color were perceived.

I should of course stress that there is nothing the least bit "narrow" about the teaching of African art, African American art, or African Diaspora art. Yet there is no getting away from the extent to which certain subjects are regarded as central and foundational to art history and art history departments, while some subjects are not. This, what might be referred to as a racialized schism, is a faithful reflection, or barometer, of the respective opportunities

afforded scholars of differing ethnicities and backgrounds. It is also, in turn, an indication of what is wrong with art history. "Modern and contemporary" has long been presupposed to be Eurocentric, a palpable nonsense that downplays or ignores those immense contributions to modern and contemporary art by Black, Brown and other practitioners of non-European backgrounds.

What must be noted here, however, is the noticeable and growing attention being paid by museums, and also the academy, to areas such as Indian, Latin American, First Nations, and other non-European modernisms, for example. We now see, springing up as university offerings, courses such as "Contemporary Art and the Global," "The Global Contemporary," "Contemporary Art in a Global Perspective," and "Photography, Film, and Video in Global Contemporary Art." It remains to be seen if new courses such as these will displace or interrupt the hegemony of white artists in modern and contemporary art history, or, if they will function as little more than embellishments, decorations of diversity, or politically motivated add-ons. We are perhaps in a moment of change, in which the teaching of modern and contemporary art is no longer deemed, by default, to lie beyond the interests and abilities of scholars of color. This might, at long last, be bringing to an end the subjects of African Art, African American Art, and African Diaspora Art being invariably treated as peripheral or secondary within the teaching of modern and contemporary art. We'll see.

Grounds for optimism need to be tempered by ongoing manifestations of the particularly troubling ways in which American art and African American art are, or have been, consistently perceived as different and mutually exclusive subjects. It is as if African American art historians cannot, or could not, be trusted to teach American art, presumably out of a fear that they would teach it in racially skewed and lopsided ways. This might strike us as a mockery, given that that is precisely how American art has tended to be generally taught, privileging as it does white artists or artists of European background. Some of us might have sneaking suspicions (or suffer the misfortune of being blatantly told) that our scholarship is regarded by our white colleagues as being of no great merit or worth, when set alongside the "real" art history that they pursue or represent. In sum, the histories of African art, African American art, and African Diaspora art are treated as *less than*, when compared to what really, in many respects, ought to be baldly referred to as white American art history, or the art of white America.¹

This much was clear to Kirsten Pai Buick, who, in her text for the *Routledge Companion to African American Art History*, recalled the skepticism and the unsubtle pathologies of race that she encountered within the academy and its job markets. Some of her work as a researcher and scholar had centered on the life and work of nineteenth-century American sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis, born of mixed African American and Native American heritage but frequently designated as an African American artist. Buick writes:

As a black scholar working on a black artist, I once again found myself unwelcome in an area, this time when I went on the job market as an "Americanist." . . . During interviews, two department search committees, one on the East Coast and the other on the West, asked if I was "sure" that I could teach "American" art since I had worked on Lewis and my publication record focused on African American artists; according to their logic, African American art was separate from "American" and my scholarly work somehow left me unprepared to communicate the larger context in which these artists lived and worked.²

Never in a million years would a white scholar who focused on the life and work of, say, the Hudson River School and Asher Brown Durand be asked if they were “sure” that they could teach “American” art—simply because Durand (a somewhat art-historically dated figure, admittedly) has a settled, undisputed, unquestionable place within, and proximity to, American art. Edmonia Lewis does not.

This is grubby, uncomfortable stuff. We need to ask ourselves, and in so doing, confront, the question of what accounts for these alarming but deep-seated pathologies. It ought really to go without saying that the question addressed to Buick was offensive, disrespectful, and extraordinarily prejudiced. And yet, the question reflects a systemic and ingrained pathology that consistently disadvantages scholars of color within the academy and whatever aspirations they might have to not being regarded as offering boxed-in teaching. To what extent might this kind of nonsense experienced by Buick persist in some form today? Let’s hope it’s on the wane. There is certainly a recognizable sting in Buick’s recollections, because as a scholar of African Diaspora art history, I might feel myself coming up short within academia, in terms of the ways in which my subject area is predominantly perceived as an add-on, something there to append an aforementioned smattering of diversity.

Those job seekers on the market at the present time might well be expected to answer interview questions such as how they will foster inclusivity in the classroom. There may well be a growing trend in which interview panels perform an interest in diversity, even if that interest is only a micron deep and manifest in obligatory, often scripted questions. Several decades ago, institutions adopted, or were obliged to adopt, equal opportunity policies. We have good reason for judging such policies to have had, at the very best, only a marginal effect. It is to be hoped that increasingly familiar questions to candidates on diversity have markedly more substantial outcomes than those we have seen with equal opportunity policies, simply because the deficiencies of such policies strike me as being self-evident at every turn.

There was, during the 1960s and 1970s, a hard-fought struggle within universities to win respect for the various strands that together were deemed to comprise Black Studies. I am a beneficiary of that struggle. Had those battles not been waged, it is doubtful that African art, African American art, and African Diaspora art would have places within academia. The struggle is, of course, far from over; there are art history departments across the nation, beyond number, that still present art history in stiflingly Eurocentric terms, having made little to no genuine room for diversity in its multiple forms. At this point in 2020, though, I must believe the struggle takes on important and much-needed new dimensions. White privilege manifests itself at every turn, within just as much as beyond academia. The previously mentioned manifestation of white tenured and tenure-track academics teaching the subjects they have chosen (rather than the subjects with which they might be ethnically associated) is certainly a glaring example of white privilege. A great many academics of color love their scholarship and love their teaching on subjects that they may regard as growing out of, and having a direct correlation with, their individual personhood, identity, biography, and so on. But this must not, does not, and should not preclude aspiring or emerging art historians from a wide range of ethnicities—those undertaking programs at the BA, MA or PhD levels—from studying as their primary fields whatever areas of art history to which they are inclined.

Toward the tail end of my time as a *caa.reviews* field editor, while doing my customary trawling of art history faculty pages, looking for potential reviewers, I came across a tenure-track African American professor whose area of teaching was Medieval. Suffice it to say, she was that rarest of academics—an African American art historian whose area of teaching and specialization was not a branch of African American art. She must surely represent the progressive future of art history. Our challenge is to see to it that faculty of color teach on all sorts of specialist subjects, and not just on African art, African American art, and African Diaspora art. White professors have jealously guarded that privilege—to research and teach on specialist subjects not constrained by their ethnicity. It is time to share that privilege and to make it more widely known to aspiring and emerging art historians of color that they have every right to pursue whatever branch of art history interests them. That will surely mark a decisive step toward implementing genuinely antiracist, or nonracist, art history departments and the curricula they offer.

Notes

¹ See Eddie Chambers, “The Difficulty of Naming White Things,” *Small Axe* 16, no. 2 (2012): 186–97, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-1665623>.

² Kirsten Pai Buick, “Confessions of an Unintended Reader: African American Art, American Art, and the Crucible of Naming,” in *Routledge Companion to African American Art History*, ed. Eddie Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2020), 84.