

**Cite this article:** Kimberly Orcutt, “But Who Will We Be?,” Talk Back (letter to the editor), and Editors’ Response, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/talk-back-issue-7-1>.

## ***But Who Will We Be?***

**Kimberly Orcutt, Independent Scholar**

It was a pleasure to read the responses of colleagues to the seminal question “who will we be?” on the occasion of AHAA’s fortieth anniversary and *Panorama*’s fifth. As a longtime member and past chair, I too have warm memories of our wonderfully dynamic and collaborative scholarly community, and I applaud the efforts of the many dedicated colleagues who have given unstintingly of their time and energy toward our shared enterprise. I appreciate the opportunity to add my voice and to open a dialogue on an issue that has significant ramifications for the future of our organization and our field.

I read in the spring 2020 issue of *Panorama* the editors’ statement positing that we know that systemic racism was intentionally constructed as a successor to slavery, and I noted more mentions in the most recent issue of systemic racism as a basis for studying the history of the United States. It is an approach to history that I find difficult to grasp. The traditional definition of racism, as I understand it, is words, actions, or attitudes that show prejudice based on race. And, as all of us are aware, racist words and actions can be found in individual behavior and in institutional policies both in the past and in the present. However, if I understand it correctly, systemic racism is considered to be embedded in the structures of society, invisibly permeating power dynamics across institutions and shaping interactions between people.

This represents a methodological problem: while evidence of racism most certainly can (and should) be identified in the words and actions of individuals and in the policies of organizations, attempting to identify racism in a complex system involves documenting purposely built-in incentives and disincentives and tracing how they override individual will and unconsciously shape peoples’ thoughts and attitudes in the past and up to the present day. Structures of power, particularly when diffused across a network of people and institutions, are vague and ephemeral by their nature, and it is hard to visualize a scholarly, evidence-based way to do this. Of course, the 1619 Project<sup>1</sup> is a key example of this type of effort and it has inspired vigorous scholarly conversations<sup>2</sup> about methodology.

Whether systemic racism can be documented and studied is a crucial question for our field, since United States history is the medium in which many of us work. If racism is defined by words, actions, and attitudes, it can be identified (and in the present day, hopefully remedied). If it is simply assumed to be ever present and irremediable, there is no room for dialogue, persuasion, or mutual understanding. It puts scholars in the position of adopting a premise and then looking for proof of it—something that I trust my colleagues do not engage in or encourage in their students. On a personal level, it asks us to assume the worst about

the people around us, a prospect that I find heartbreaking in a field that has always been marked by a unique spirit of collegiality.

I raise these issues in order to start a dialogue, but also with an eye to the larger question. We have seen in other professional and academic forums that attempts to question systemic racism, or even innocent but ill-considered remarks, have resulted in personal attacks, threats, and people being hounded from their jobs. Will AHAA members and *Panorama* readers encourage scholarly discussion or suppress it? Who will we be?

## Notes

1. [https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full\\_issue\\_of\\_the\\_1619\\_project.pdf](https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf).
2. [https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/public\\_affairs/american\\_civics/1619\\_project](https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/public_affairs/american_civics/1619_project).

## *Editors' Response*

### Naomi Slipp, Jacqueline Francis, and Keri Watson

The Journal's Executive Editors welcome this opportunity to engage in a dialogue about systemic racism, Critical Race Art History, and its applications within the field of American Art.

In her letter to the editor, Kimberly Orcutt writes, “The traditional definition of racism, as I understand it, is words, actions, or attitudes that show prejudice based on race.” While it may be true that this is in some respects a traditional definition of the term, it is equally true that it is a somewhat flattened one. By focusing on *instances* of racism enacted or espoused by individual people or institutions, it ignores the *systems* of power that support inequity. Systemic, structural, or institutional racism, unlike traditional definitions of racism, offers a corrective by opening up the conversation to include discussion of the accumulated beliefs, policies, practices, and patterns of discrimination that have assumed the superiority of white people and devalued and threatened the lives of people of color. Or as best-selling author of *So You Want to Talk About Race* Ijeoma Oluo succinctly puts it: “racism [is] a prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power.”<sup>1</sup> Art, as a social system, participates in the exploitation, minoritization, and marginalization of people of color, and therefore its study engages in this discussion, as well. As noted by Director of the Peabody Museum Jane Pickering, “Museums and archives today are in the throes of profound change as they grapple with the fraught legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery—all of which played fundamental roles in building cultural institutions of the Western world. Exploring and acknowledging the complex histories of their institutions, scholars and museum professionals are scrutinizing with new eyes the objects, documents, and photographs housed and curated in these collections.”<sup>2</sup> We at *Panorama* are a part of this re-evaluation and reassessment, as we publish scholarship that engages with museum collections, institutions, and archives.

In this atmosphere, many scholars of American history and culture may consider themselves not only justified but duty-bound to speak to the construction of race as

difference and the ramifications of racialization. Throughout much of US history, the power of proclamations of white superiority, the attachment of ethno-cultural expressions to a forged category of whiteness, and the persistence of racist attitudes have not been fully examined. Nor has the impact of such phenomena on individuals, institutions, traditions, and cultures that are not white received the attention it deserves. Such historical constructions and their legacies can be charted, examined, and more thoroughly understood through the study of art, architecture, visual and material culture, and institutions, which help to construct, perpetuate, and affirm these biases.

There is a deep generational legacy of scholarship on the histories of racialization and systemic racism within the field of American art. Recently, there is an increasing recognition that such inquiries might be more centered within our discipline, with such methodological questions shifting from the peripheries into mainstream museum practice and academic inquiry. The growth of this scholarly conversation is demonstrated by numerous calls for papers, conference sessions, symposia, and content in our peer journals dedicated to the topic of racialization and its legacies from an abundance of perspectives. For example, in 2020 both *American Art* and *Art Journal* engaged this conversation directly. In the Fall 2020 issue of *American Art*, Kirsten Pai Buick—looking back on her Fellowship tenure at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1994–95 and her study of Mary Edmonia Lewis (Ojibwe/Black)—commented: “there remains a terrible silence—abetted by the more recent attempts to be inclusive (both textually and departmentally)—around what these narratives actually enshrine, which is the history of the visual cultures of White Racial Formation. . . . My hope for SAAM’s fellowship program is that more attention be paid to the construction of race in the museum’s canonical Anglo-American collections, and that the paintings and sculptures that share space with Lewis’s Hagar are made answerable to her.”<sup>3</sup> Buick’s call for proposals that account for “how the art of the United States . . . has enshrined White Racial Formation through a dialectic of presence and absence,” aims to mount an intervention into the canon of American art. Similarly, the Winter 2020 issue of the *Art Journal* focused exclusively on “Blackness,” the first in the journal’s history to expressly turn its attention to “the experiences, expressions, and theorizations of Blackness.” And, as Executive Editor Jordana Moore Saggese notes of her intentions, “in editing the first issue of *Art Journal* to focus exclusively on Blackness, I have provided a counterweight to the ideology of white supremacy that has infected our political landscape in the United States and (in so many ways) the history of art itself.”<sup>4</sup> These are just two examples of the many recent conversations aimed at dismantling white supremacy and addressing and redressing the impacts of racialization on our field. Such work is ongoing and diverse, as indicated by and reflected in the many submissions we at Panorama receive and publish.

Of course, this does not mean that it is essential for every scholar of American art to address the existence of structural racism, particularly when it falls outside of their primary area of inquiry. But many scholars of American art who deal explicitly with racialization take great pains to document and articulate the racial caste systems that have surrounded the production and interpretation of the visual culture that they examine. This is sound methodology, rooted in the examination of primary documents and the analysis of visual information. Subsequent scholars who build upon their work should, it is true, acknowledge the scholarship that underpins their own and cite their sources, but it is unreasonable to expect each one to relitigate the dominant presence of white supremacy and systemic racism in American history, art, and culture. Race (like other social categories) is an ideology made and remade in everyday life, and present, not just in the work of BIPOC artists and scholars,

but in all cultural production. As a growing number of scholars have demonstrated over the past fifteen years, race is there because we are there, and far from issuing a call that scholars apply a restrictive and marginalizing race-centric lens to the study of art, *Panorama* seeks to participate in a discourse that responds to the fluidity and performativity of identity formation.

Orcutt raises a legitimate concern in her conclusion that “We have seen in other professional and academic forums that attempts to question systemic racism, or even innocent but ill-considered remarks, have resulted in personal attacks, threats, and people being hounded from their jobs,” and asks, “Will AHAA members and *Panorama* readers encourage scholarly discussion or suppress it?” Let us be clear that both *Panorama* and AHAA, in their stated missions and in practices, encourage and do not suppress scholarly discussion. At *Panorama*, we do not support the defamation or persecution of individuals based upon accusation or innuendo. We do, however, support critical scholarship based upon sound methodologies and argumentation, including instances in which the author’s conclusions are provocative, controversial, or discomfiting. We aim to make space for all types of difficult discussions including ones that engage with systemic racism in the western hemisphere and its legacy and impact on our field, our nation, and its art and culture.

As Executive Editors, we aim to recognize how the content of the journal but also its organization, management, and structures either benefit from or support racialized, class, and gendered forms of privilege that are inherent to the fabric of this country. As teachers, curators, and scholars, we attempt to be present and honest about our own structural and individual biases and the racialized forms of privilege that we embody and/or operate under. And when we make missteps, we strive to accept, acknowledge, remedy, and (hopefully) learn, adjust, actively question, read and question again.<sup>5</sup>

We therefore invite our readers to explore the ACRAH Bibliographies, the University of Winnipeg’s Library Research Guide on Race, Racialization, and Racism, the Association for Art History’s Resource Portal on Anti-Racism and Decolonial Approaches to Art History, and CUNY Professor Claire Bishop’s public syllabus on Methods of Art History, and to read, share, and apply these critical methodologies in your practice and teaching.<sup>6</sup> We hope that you will join us in this dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Seal Press, 2019), 27.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Pickering, “Preface,” in *To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes*, eds. Ilisa Barbash, Molly Rogers, and Deborah Willis (Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press, 2020), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsten Pai Buick, “Seeing the Survey Anew: Compositional Absences that Structure Ideological Presences,” *American Art* 34, no. 3 (2020), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Jordana Moore Saggese, “Now’s the Time,” *Art Journal*, 79, no. 4, 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1846983>.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, the Guest Editors’ Note dated June 29, 2020, in Naomi Slipp, “‘Little of Artistic Merit?’: The Art of the American South,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of*

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*American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.9932>; and Anne Monahan and Isabel L. Taube, introduction to "Self-Criticality," Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10949>: "Perhaps counterintuitively, self-critique is often a collaborative practice, because we cannot discern our own perceptual deficits without help. We quickly became an object lesson in that regard when Ellen Tani . . . alerted us to the ableist connotations of our chosen title, 'Blind Spots.' In settling on its replacement, 'Self-Criticality,' we aimed to shift our analytical register from a metaphor of enduring incapacity to a generative process of agency and opportunity."

<sup>6</sup> ACRAH Bibliographies, <https://acrah.org/bibliographies>; University of Winnipeg guide, <https://libguides.uwinnipeg.ca/c.php?g=370387&p=2502726>; Association for Art History Resource Portal, <https://forarthistory.org.uk/latest-news/resource-portal-on-anti-racism-and-decolonial-approaches-to-art-history-and-visual-culture-2>; Claire Bishop syllabus, [https://www.academia.edu/44194368/Methods\\_of\\_Art\\_History?fbclid=IwAR3F\\_oeIPz-zLujHqZ6\\_igUTboG57nodwBG7LnYfPzDov\\_xPL-YO-1C1P\\_Q](https://www.academia.edu/44194368/Methods_of_Art_History?fbclid=IwAR3F_oeIPz-zLujHqZ6_igUTboG57nodwBG7LnYfPzDov_xPL-YO-1C1P_Q).