

# Drawing Color Lines



Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, 1.343 x 1.977 (52 7/8" x 77 7/8"), National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

“What we call laws of color, obviously, can be no more than fragmentary, given the complexity and irrationality of color effects.”

*The Art of Color*  
by Johannes Itten

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

*The Souls of Black Folks*  
by W.E.B. DuBois

“From that time I looked out through other eyes, my thoughts were colored...”

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*  
by James Weldon Johnson

BY OLIVIA GUDE

The students are analyzing the *Childhood* and *Manhood* paintings in *The Voyage of Life* series by Thomas Cole. In *Childhood*, a boat emerges from a dark cavern into a serene dawn landscape. A golden haired baby, accompanied by an angel in white with a glowing halo of light, holds out his arms, joyfully welcoming the glowing, beautiful world. In *Manhood*, the child has lost his youthful innocence—his hair has turned dark. The verdant landscape has given way to bare rocks and black, gnarled trees. It is no longer smooth sailing—the water has grown dark and treacherous; the upper sky is ominously dark; the fiery lower sky is streaked with inky rain. Far away, the angel of light is hidden from the desperate man by a ring of dark clouds.

The students discuss the emerging patterns of symbolism. In *Old Age*, near death, the now whitehaired man in his battered boat rests on dark waters as the dense, dark clouds part and rays of light engulf him. A guiding angel of light gestures towards other beckoning white angels, each smaller than the last, disappearing into unfathomable distance, into the glowing white space which is, presumably, heaven.



Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Manhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, 1.343 x 1.977 (52 7/8" x 77 7/8), National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.



Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Old Age*, 1842, oil on canvas, 1.343 x 1.977 (52 7/8" x 77 7/8), National Gallery of Art, Gift of the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

For many years I used Cole's intricate American landscapes to introduce students to symbolism and allegory in painting. Students see how the artist used the time of day, the season of the year, and the darkness or lightness of sky, vegetation, hair, and water to construct meaning. In Cole's allegory, light and white are associated with innocence, joy, beauty, and transcendence; darkness symbolizes trouble, sin, fear, and evil. Studying this work, students learned a pattern of symbolism which is useful for interpreting much Western art and literature. I now believe they were also learning a pattern of interpretation which has deep symbolic and actual connections to the tradition of Western racism.

Consider for example, Joseph Conrad's classic novel of a European's encounter with Africa, *Heart of Darkness*. Here darkness is associated with the unknowable, the irrational, the primitive, and the chaotic; light is a symbol of reason, order, and progress. Such associations created the historical concept of "the white man's burden" to bring order and reason to "dark places" and thus the justification for the

dominance of white cultures over the civilizations of people of color.

#### TEACHING COLOR SYMBOLISM

In American elementary and high schools, teaching about color usually begins with students painting color wheels and value scales. This paradigm of teaching, based on such color theories as those of Josef Albers (1963) and Johannes Itten (1961), emphasizes a systematic and experimental approach to studying the effects of color.

There is a strong tendency for teachers to continue speaking in the language of scientific certainty when discussing the symbolic meanings of colors. Blue is described as peaceful and soothing, red as stimulating, yellow as cheerful and eye-catching. Black is said to mean somberness and death; white is viewed as the essence of purity. Particular color preferences and associations are thus validated in the students' minds as not merely habitual and customary, but as natural and instinctive. While scientific evidence may confirm some such propositions—yellow, for example, is at the middle of the visible spectrum and thus does

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draw our attention—there is no anthropological or biological evidence which confirms the universal validity of commonly taught color symbolism.

Opening our classrooms to learning about other cultural constructions of color meaning may sometimes provide surprising information. Recently in a college seminar, a student shared her discomfort with the use of yellow in a design because in her native Korea a strong, bright yellow is associated with unease and foreboding. The other students were shocked to discover that their sunny and cheery yellow associations were not universal connections.

When students learn that brides do not wear white in all cultures, that white is associated with mourning in India, or that in the Mexican festival of Dia de los Muertos bright colors are used to celebrate the dead, they broaden their understandings of the symbolic use of color. However, these alternate color associations are still often perceived as invented iconography in contrast to the more familiar, seemingly natural, symbolic associations of Western culture.

Students (and many other people) will argue that the privileging of light over dark is not culturally determined, but is a universal tendency. The “black is beautiful” slogan of the 1960s and 1970s Black Power movements brought the racial implications of this symbolism to public consciousness and reinforced Black pride by challenging the symbolism of value. Unfortunately such challenges to the habitual devaluing of blackness did not result in overall cultural change in the way dark and light are symbolically perceived.

As a teacher today I am faced with a quandary. Deliberately avoiding teaching artwork utilizing dark/light symbolism leaves students unprepared



Tom Feelings, a painting from the book, *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*. Dial Press, 1995.

to understand much traditional and contemporary culture; uncritically teaching such work encourages students of all races to internalize and perpetuate a symbol system of racial hierarchy which supports cultural, political, and economic injustice.

We could easily drop Thomas Cole paintings from the curriculum, but can we exclude Goya's *The Execution of the Third of May* in which the brightly lit, vulnerable and individualized victims are contrasted to the firing squad of dark, menacing, undifferentiated figures? Even if we exclude from the school curriculum all artworks and literature which rely on offensive symbolism, our students will still encounter such symbolism daily in cartoons, traditional fairytales, and everyday expressions.

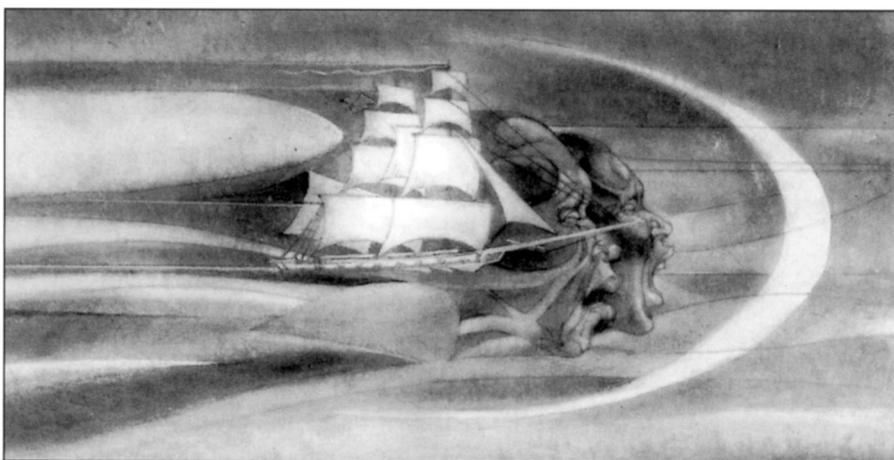
### **WHOSE CULTURE? WHOSE CONNECTIONS?**

Sometimes it is difficult for white students and teachers to understand how culturally specific their color associations and reactions are. In bell hooks's fascinating essay “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination” (1961), she describes her terror as a black child having to traverse a white neighborhood and the relief of seeing her darkfaced grandfather sitting on his porch waiting for her. hooks discusses how

presenting a black perspective causes anger in some white people, “because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal conviction that it is the assertion of universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that will make racism disappear.”

hooks believes that this suppression of difference, of not acknowledging widely varying responses to a situation, is yet another form of oppression. She quotes Richard Dyer's (1988) observation in “White” that, “Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior” (p. 340). Thus, unexamined and unchallenged assumptions about the normalcy of color associations become a vehicle for reinscribing racially charged symbolism into current consciousness.

*The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo* (1995) by Tom Feelings vividly presents another sensibility regarding dark/light symbolism. Feelings spent 20 years creating a masterful series of narrative drawings which tell the story of the capture and enslaving of African peoples and their terrible enforced journey across the Atlantic Ocean. All of the images are black and white shaded drawings which skillfully reinterpret conventional western black and white symbolism from an Africanist



Tom Feelings, a painting from the book, *The Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*. Dial Press, 1995.

perspective. The book shows scenes of the encroachment of white terror on a peaceful black village, vulnerable black bodies before a looming white fort, white clad African collaborators with the European slave trade, and Yemaya, the comforting dark spirit mother of the sea, cradling her black children enclosed within the horrific pale slave ship. One of the especially interesting cultural twists is a reworking of Goya's *Third of May* composition in which dark humans are victimized by the lighbathed enslavers.

There are no words in *The Middle Passage*. Its story is told in pictures alone. Tom Feelings explained this choice: "I realized that there were inherent problems in dealing with words to describe the Black experience. If you pick up a dictionary there are over 90 negative connotations for the word 'black.' It's the opposite for 'white.' I wanted to see if, as an artist, I could use images to get past the racist programming" (p. 6). Feelings' images help students to rethink the naturalness of conventional black and white symbolism. In the context of this story, it makes sense for them to see black as sympathetic and familiar and to associate whiteness with an the alien other who brings fear and destruction. Students thus challenge the inevitability of particular iconographic conventions.

### DECONSTRUCTIONIST PRACTICES AS RECONSTRUCTIONIST CURRICULUM

In 1995, I worked with two eighth grade classes at Washington Irving School on Chicago's west side to explore whether middle school age students could use current methodologies in art and cultural studies to examine the symbolism of black and white in contemporary culture. The students' superior knowledge of the texts of popular culture combined with my knowledge of cultural theory and critical investigation to produce some sadly expected and some unexpected insights into the construction of meaning through color symbolism.

As a visiting artist, I couldn't come into a classroom and begin an examination of such a potentially charged subject without first getting to know the students and establishing a climate of trust. Because I believe that successful cultural investigations must be embedded in studio art investigation and learning, throughout the project art lessons were introduced to give the students the skills needed to conduct their aesthetic and cultural inquires.

During the first two weeks of the residency, students studied *value*, the darkness or lightness of a color. The students drew geometric solids and

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*It's Not Just a Black and White Issue: How Does This Culture Value "Value?"* created by Olivia Gude with eighth grade students of Washington Irving Elementary School in Chicago, 1996. Acrylic and Krylon paint on canvas; each banner 72 inches by 42 inches. Photograph courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group.

children's book, *The Lion King*. We discussed the difference between imputing significance to an isolated example of color use and seeing significance in the use of color in a number of related instances.

Over and over, we discovered that lightness is associated with good and darkness with evil. Simba and his father, the true king of the lions, have light manes; the evil brother who wants to usurp the throne has a black mane and nails. We contrasted the good

light animals with the threatening dark ones; the high chroma kingdom with the dusky and fearsome land of the marauding hyenas. We considered what this means in a story which opens with the lines, "...every living thing has its place in the great circle of life." Of course, we could not help but hear an echo of the traditional racist exhortation to "know one's place."

As part of our visual investigation we mixed colors to match Simba, the hyenas, and the various lions and then painted projected versions of the drawings in the "wrong" colors. We spent time looking at these new images—considering whether the different values caused us to see the story differently. We noticed how

strange it seemed to see the "blonde" hyenas attacking the little dark cub or how the perception of the bad uncle was softened when he took on the coloration of his good brother. The revised images seemed highly charged and unfamiliar.

In another aspect of the project, the students made lists of familiar cultural icons and everyday sayings which utilize dark and light symbolism. From this list we created a series of questions, "Which witch is the good witch?" "Which horse has a better chance to win?" "Which angel is the devil?" that caused us to think about what messages we absorb from everyday sayings.

Our visual investigation at this stage of the project involved the study of graphic symbolism. The students drew and cut out silhouettes and pictograms of the various language images: angels, horses, witches, cowboys, birds, airplanes, etc. Each image was painted in black and in white so that we were able to experience the psychological impact images in different values had on our consciousness.

The final presentation of the project called *It's Not Just a Black and White Issue* consists of four large, canvas banners which hang permanently in the school's hallway. The banners include stories about racism and resisting racism based on interviews students conducted with adults in the community. The ability to draw geometric solids became the basis for developing cartoon characters who enact the community's stories. For me, the most touching aspect of the project is the language of everyday urban life used to describe struggling with day to day issues of external and internal racism—quite different from the Disney movie in which the moral voice of the lions (who according to the

then used their knowledge of making value gradations with oil pastels to create convincing three-dimensional forms. Developmentally these students are striving to master adultlike skills in drawing. This highly successful exercise set a tone of significance for our further studies and convinced many students of their ability to do high quality work in an art project.

In the second phase of the project, we began the study of *value* as the criteria by which people judge the worthiness of objects, ideas, and even, of other people. Our focus question was, "How does this culture value *value*?"

We began by thinking of ourselves as investigators, detectives looking for clues in the popular movie and

students “talk like the teachers”) is contrasted to the wicked hyenas who speak in clever, colorful street slang.

One section of the banners includes student responses to the question, “What effect does this symbolism of dark and light have on children?” The Mexican, Puerto Rican, and African American youth discussed the implied messages about their future and possibilities; several students mentioned that they had been uncomfortable with this imagery in the past, but had not known how to articulate or discuss what they were seeing. It was particularly fascinating to hear these students of color discuss the way in which white children would be affected: “It might make it seem natural

to them if they are in control or have more advantages.”

Through the public art project, the students’ investigations were shared with the larger school community, thus drawing other students and teachers into the discussion of color symbolism in popular and school culture. Initially it seemed odd to be seriously discussing the symbolism of a Disney movie, but it became increasingly clear to us all how racially charged symbolism is an unchallenged part of our everyday culture.

### CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGES OF COLOR: CULTIVATING NUANCE AND COMPLEXITY

It’s relatively easy and comfortable to investigate value symbolism in popular culture or literature. It may be less comfortable to examine the nuances of language within our own classrooms. For example, in a typical classroom, students will be disappointed to receive *low* marks; pleased to discover that they have achieved a *high* standard. In a typical art education curriculum, students studying value scales will be taught to call dark values “low values” and light values “high values.”

What messages are we sending to our students?

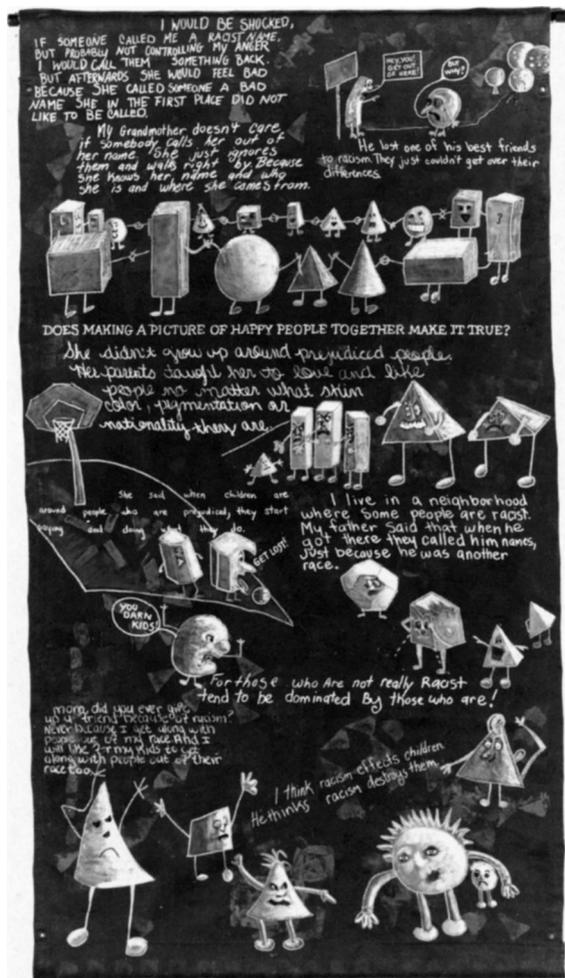
Some may argue that analyzing language in this way is getting too touchy, that I am too quick to look for insult and injury where none is intended. Yet it is important to remember that being oblivious to the racial implications of situations or language is a luxury of being white in a society which privileges whiteness. It is precisely this covering of difference which as artist educators we must investigate and foreground.

Kerry James Marshall creates complex, layered text and image paintings which reflect upon the lived experiences of African American people. The skin tones of all of his figures are a saturated black. Marshall describes his work as a “reclamation project”:

It’s a reductive strategy, but it’s also an idealizing strategy after a long period of black people thinking and assuming that to be called black was a negative designation. In that way a lot of people fall into Eurocentric notions that black is bad.

I chose that blackness as an emblem. It’s not a negative reduction because when you look at the images they are not drawn in a simplified, flattened way. I always try to imbue the figures with incredible resonance and density so that they seem to have a certain kind of life force. Their differences are articulated even as they are reduced in terms of color to a single cipher. They’re not all the same. They may look all the same at a distance—they are not all the same. (personal communication, March 1996)

Discussing his reflections on black and white symbolism as a thoughtful youth, Marshall commented,



*It's Not Just a Black and White Issue: Does making a picture of happy people together make it true?* created by Olivia Gude with eighth grade students of Washington Irving Elementary School in Chicago, 1996. Acrylic and Krylon paint on canvas; each banner 72 inches by 42 inches. Photograph courtesy of Chicago Public Art Group.



Kerry James Marshall, *Knowledge and Wonder*, 9.5 feet by 23 feet, acrylic on canvas commissioned for the Legler Branch of the Chicago Public Library. Copyright©1995, Chicago Public Art Program. Photograph courtesy of the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs.

The bad guy is wearing black, but then I see these people going to a high class social affair and they tell me that that's a black tie affair—that I can't go in unless I'm dressed in black. That must mean that it's more complex. I thought, 'How can black be elegant and no good at the same time?'

Simba, the white lion of the jungle, Tarzan king of the jungle—one white man beats up a whole tribe of black people—well that all seemed so absurd. If I see how ridiculous all of that is to start with maybe I'm less inclined to be particularly angry about those representations when I see them. I saw it from when I was a kid. There's something more to this than what I'm hearing about. (personal communication, March 1996)

Marshall's words point to the importance of drawing our students into conversations that enable them to critically examine the full complexity of their observations and insights about how symbol systems create meaning in our lives. Teachers who ignore the obvious racial implications of the language of color in our race-conscious society, risk inadvertently teaching students that the language of art and symbolism taught in the artroom is not relevant to their lived experiences.

As art teachers, we educate students to be attentive to nuance. We enable students to understand artworks

through careful observation and by contextualizing the works within a range of appropriate associations. To do this work effectively, we as teachers must be alive to the many currents of cultural meaning which flow through our classrooms and our discourses. Teachers are sometimes concerned that students may become angry or upset when directly confronting negative color symbolism in class discussion. I believe students lose faith in a system of education which ignores or suppresses the resonance and echoes of complex cultural issues in subject matter.

In my experience, students are reassured when the school environment gives them the tools to understand and analyze how familiarity and "otherness" are created in culture. Ultimately, students, parents, and fellow faculty from the school's diverse communities, feel respect for art programs which express their commitment to multiculturalism, not as merely studying diversity from the point of view of "mainstream" white America, but also as teaching students to see art and culture from a range of subjective positions.

W.E. B. Dubois's dictum that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (Dubois, 1989, 1903) is still alarmingly relevant as we enter the 21st century. We cannot erase color lines by trying not to see them. We can color our students' visions of the future.

Students can understand, analyze, and resist divisive messages from the media and "high culture." We all see so much negative color symbolism, it sometimes seems to be hardwired into our brains. By showing that this is culturally constructed meaning, art teachers model that such meaning can also be culturally deconstructed. We can construct a colorful and color blind culture, what the great African American poet Langston Hughes, called the "America, that never was, but yet could be."

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