

# Using art to challenge racial stereotypes and racial injustices



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## INTRODUCTION

Race represents a unique but tricky thing. Something that is commonly recognized but and rarely looked over. It is something that divides us and something that never seems to change. Many think that the identification of race is something easy to point out, that you can just say because he is dark brown that he is African but in fact he may not be. The face of race varies as time goes on. Many think that race is only defined by the color of the skin and their physical uniqueness. However, there is more to race than skin color and other physical features. Race is defined in sociology as a social construction.

In fact, race is not defined by some scientific facts but by the social meanings people ascribe to. Art represents one of the ways in which artists from various races represent themselves as well as their racial domination. In a hasty fashion, artists can have an ability to challenge racial stereotypes and strive for racial justice. Although there are artists worldwide who are much focused on using art to challenge the common stereotypes we still face today. For example, an American artist, Ayana Jackson has been using her artworks to challenge stereotypes of white women permeated by the white gaze.

As previously stated by Jackson Ayana in one of her latest photographs she still tends to use still imaging. As one of the tools when dealing with the broken relationship between African American women and art. The history of art lies within the heart of in racial differences. Despite being one the largest scale stereotyping that art has engaged in, artists can use the same art to

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challenge stereotypical art. The paper presented to you is dedicated to investigating how different racial groups represent themselves and how they portray others through art. Second, the paper is going to discuss how artists can use their work and uniquely gifted talent to challenge racial differences and reach for racial justice.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Race is a topic which elicits a lot of different emotional opinions from different people. From a racial formation perspective. Race can be both socially and culturally defined depending on how you look at it. Those who make attempts to understand race primarily seek to do so in terms of these analytical dimensions. Race is understood by other people as a set of complex and overlapping ideas. United States racial history represents one of the most painful pasts. Different people have been attempting to use different means to try and negotiate this painful past.

While race is socially constructed, it is partially seen in qualities that easily manifest on the body as physical features. The invisibility of race has in the past been translated into systemic racial injustice. The invisibility of race give others powers beyond measures. The present section is dedicated towards investigating the theories that best describe the origin of these racial stereotypes in art and others whose approach can be used to promote racial justice.

The Marxist Theory of Cultural Hegemony conceptualizes that the ruling class can manipulate the mores of society and value system, so that their

views become the world view. In art, this theory may be applied to <https://assignbuster.com/using-art-to-challenge-racial-stereotypes-and-racial-injustices/>

demonstrate how the artists and artworks from mainstream races win consent to their rule from those they subjugate. Counter-hegemonic orders and practices attempt to challenge the existing hegemonic order and introduce another one. In art, the hegemonic order that has existed for the longest, is the one that elevates artworks that racially stereotype other races. Which is then used to diminish those that attempt to bring harmony between different races. Like in politics, art is subject to the hegemonic struggle of universalization. In the art field, the fight is settled in favor of this or that version of art. With a division of culture the struggle continues.

The Critical Race Theory was coined in the 1960s during the era of Civil Rights movements and 1970s during the era of Critical Legal Studies movements. The Critical Race Theory conceptualizes that law reproduces and promotes racism. There are certain characteristics that define the Critical Race Theory, including the centrality of race and commitment to social justice. The CRT provides people with a model to challenge historical and institutional racism and inequality that persist today (Sleeter 2017).

Racial inequalities have triggered disparities in outcomes for certain racial groups, including Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans among other racial groups. In the U. S. Central to different fields, including art, is the use of deficit based rhetoric and ideologies that continue to propagate stereotypes of inferiority of certain races (McCloud 2016). Such ideologies are continually being used to create a hegemonic system that continues to perpetuate the stereotypes of certain racial groups.

The CRT can help one to examine racism, racial stereotypes, racial domination, and deficit ideology. This theory recognizes racism as something that the society uses to allocate itself status and privileges. In history, some artists have always used racist art to diminish other races by stereotyping them. In addition, they elevate their own races as superior to others they attempt to diminish. According to McCloud (2016), there are three central beliefs that are held by the mainstream culture that CRT strives to challenge, including the beliefs that blindness to race can help end racism, racism is practiced by individuals, but not systems, and that racism can be challenged without paying attention to different forms of injustice, such as exploitation, homophobia, and sexism.

Racial identity of an artist has been central in promoting racial stereotypes and racial injustice. Today, artists from minority races do not just sit back and watch; rather, they resist the ways artists from mainstream races often satirize and mythologize their races. In like fashion, they create counter images. “ Most of artworks” by black artists are a depiction of how black people visualize themselves, their culture, and their people.

## RACE AND ART

Art is one of the most powerful tools of representation and communication. It has been used to communicate messages that people would fear communicating using speeches. Art is appreciated by large audiences around the world. According to Lewis and Lewis (2017), more than eight million people visit Louvre Museum in Paris each year, making this museum

the most visited museum in the world. The museum is estimated to generate approximately \$1 billion in annual revenue for France.

It is estimated that many of these visitors visit the museum to see Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Outside the room where Mona Lisa is placed, many stand awaiting their chance at the work of art. This represents the power of art. Art gives visual expression to inner belief and has the ability to communicate important messages to people.

Racial identity of an artist has been central in promoting racial stereotypes because it affects how most artists produce their artworks and how it is viewed in the eyes of other people. Artists have been known to include an aspect of racial discrimination in their work.

Art History often faces a challenge as it tries to define and highlight 'good art' to the audiences. However, categorization often ignores 'good art' - art that can be used to challenge racial stereotypes and strive to ensure racial justice. Those who categorize artists and artworks have been found to do it in a way that only serves to encourage racial stereotypes and racial injustice.

In history, artworks by people from racial groups which are considered superior have always been elevated while those made by people from racial groups which are considered inferior have always been diminished. For example, before and after the American Civil War, African Americans were referred in mainstream visual culture as caricatures (Ayorinde 2014). This was an attempt by the mainstream racial group to define what it did not understand, and to avoid elevating the status of African Americans. Artworks from the mainstream race usually relegated African Americans to <https://assignbuster.com/using-art-to-challenge-racial-stereotypes-and-racial-injustices/>

subservient roles, including the roles of servants, caretaker, cook, and entertainer.

From the mid- to late nineteenth century, artworks stereotypes and caricatured African Americans - these artworks connected black African American culture and other black cultures to slavery. For example, an artwork by Frederick Burr Oppers showed caricatures of black people in various costumes being given melons. Such a high degree of cultural stereotypes prevented African Americans and other black people from acknowledging their heritage and racial identity in their artwork.

Even today, black artists have been experiencing great opposition and resistance in their attempts to promote their work. In his study, Wainwrights (2013) observes that many black artists have previously made attempts to amass a history of art for the black people using art-historical studies and art exhibitions.

Their intentions are seen to conflict with what the author describes as the “Americocentrism” that ensues from the representations that have been previously given to black art and artists. The author further observes that political and social priorities which are focused on the U. S. have become normative in the treatment of minority races’ culture.

According to Dumas and Dunbar (2016), an industry has been emerging - an industry that is attempting to identify and develop the next generation of creative people. Art is one of the industries that require those practicing it to be highly creative.. The authors show that the way in which people promote stereotypes of creativity has the ability to decrease peoples’ creative

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performance. They refer to this phenomenon as the Creative Stereotype Effect.

The power of art is so strong that it has been used in the past to communicate what words have failed to communicate. The art world has been undergoing a slow reckoning with racism. There have been protests against artworks that seemed to embrace racism. Artworks have the power to wound people because it is still alive and dangerous. Racism is perpetrated by many people, including the media personnel, politicians, lawyers, judges, economists, and artists. As long as people will continue embracing these ideas, artworks will continue feeding into hateful or ignorant stereotypes about them. Artists should take note and seek to change the way artworks are made and conceptualized. As Mouffe (2014) conceptualized, every order is subject to challenge by another counter-hegemonic order. The Critical Race Theory is one of the most effective theories and can be used as a framework to challenge these stereotypes.

### Social Movement Art

Art plays a very critical role of transformation when practiced in social movements. When art is practiced it functions as a cultural form and transforms society in numerous ways. Some functions include encouraging social change, empowering and deepening commitment, informing larger society about current social issues, harmonizing social activists within the movement it is practiced, setting a new emotional tone, and critiquing ideologies. Social mobilization represents one of the means by which social change is achieved. In his study, Cossu (2018) investigates how artists



contribute in reshaping and reinforcing the roles and organization of social movements. Social movements in the U. S. were partially started to protest against criminalization and racial discrimination of black people in the country. The African American male represents one of the most criminalized people in the country. Not just for the color of his skin but for the physical features he portrays. Whether it is his roundness of his nose, the fullness of his lips, the way he carries himself down the street, or the hair that grows on his head.

One of the ways in which social movements were used was to challenge racial stereotypes assigned to Black males. According to Smiley and Fakunle (2016), The criminalization of unarmed Black men is not a new phenomenon in the U. S. Research studies and historical descriptions have accounted how racial ideologies and stereotypes have led to the creation of discriminatory policies that only serve to fuel racial violence. But did we need researchers to tell us that racism still exist today when little black and brown kids cannot even attempt to sell lemonade from a stand without a permit. Racial art represents one of the things that serve to fuel racial stereotypes and racial violence. Non-black artists use blackface as a form of theatrical make-up.

This practice has origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and significantly contributed to the spread of racial stereotypes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blackface became so popularized that it branched from other forms of art and became an art form in its own right. The stereotypical presentations portray black men as naturally savage, destructive, animalistic, and criminal who are deserving of being punished. He is portrayed as a antisocial menace and a sociopath.

Black men are portrayed in certain art as hideous, terrifying predators who target helpless victims, particularly white women. These racial stereotypes are highly communicated by and through artworks. We see it in plays, skits, and much more. Although social movement have made great strides in using art to challenge these stereotypes, the practices still persist requiring greater efforts.

Such criminalization of black males represents one of the factors that led to the rise of social movements. These social movements were developed to speak against this racial criminalization and many other forms of discrimination against black people. These stereotypes sometimes led to the death of black people through lynching by their white townsmen. Art can eventually change the minds of like people around just by portraying images with positive outlooks. Art, being one of the disciplines that promoted these racial stereotypes, is one that can help reverse this situation.

Numerous research have demonstrated, that art has an ability to reverse this situation. It is important for art to challenge the common perception that people from minority races can only be communicated to if certain aspects are distorted in a stereotypic way so as to make them more understandable to minorities. Not only is this distortion done in art but also in other forms of media. In his study, Bloom Quist's (2015) investigated how the tendency to distort African American English as a historical artifact has taken root in the entertainment industry. Such distortion is only meant to reinforce the stereotypes assigned to Black people. Today we see how many music videos praise such stereotypes that our ancestors fought hard against.

For example, Madea places the new generation “ Mammie” and women in videos have to be half naked to even be considered beautiful. Such ethnic stereotypes only serve as a reflection of mainstream races’ attitudes regarding Black people. Stereotypes and depictions only serve to provide non-Black people with a perception of Blackness that is founded in inaccuracies. These stereotypes are always portrayed as authentic. Since these stereotypes have come to be widely accepted, Black peoples’ lives continually remain open to continual mimicry (Bloom Quist 2015).

Art plays a very critical role of transformation when practiced in social movements. When art is practiced it functions as a cultural form and transforms society in numerous ways. Some functions include encouraging social change, empowering and deepening commitment. These stereotypes are rampant in art products, with some hidden deeply within these artworks. In most cases these stereotypes are only meant to present black people as inferior to other mainstream races.

These stereotypes only serve to diminish people to which these stereotypes are directed to. In their study, Dumas & Dunbar (2016) used 96 undergraduate students from one mid-Atlantic university as participants. Participants were drawn from various disciplines, including biology, art, physics, and theatre.

The researchers determined that stereotypes which are related to creativity have the ability to diminish individual performance on various tasks. Therefore, it is important to challenge the use of stereotypes in any discipline.

## Conclusion

Racial identity of an artist has been central in promoting racial stereotypes and racial injustice. White have continued to perceive and depict black people and people from other minority races as 'different,' 'picturesque,' and 'threatening' and this is they in which they depict them in artworks. Art is one of the most powerful tools of representation and communication. It is used as a mental relief , stress relief, and simply an art of passion. In the past, it has been used to communicate messages that people would fear communicating using speeches.

Art can speak volumes that sometime get lost when speaking. Art is appreciated by a large audience spread around the world as has been demonstrated by Lewis and Lewis (2017) in the description of large masses that visit the Louvre Museum in Paris each year to see Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* . Art has the ability to draw hundreds of thousands. the history behind art is self-explanatory and shows why art means so much today. A simple picture could tell the tells of many with needing only a paint brush.

Based on what art has been used to accomplish in the past, it is clear that it can be used challenge racial domination, racial stereotypes, and racial inequalities. The reviewed research studies and theories demonstrate that it is possible for art to challenge racial domination, racial stereotypes, and racial inequalities. Art is an expression. It is a feeling of imagination and an eye for creativity. Social movement art has demonstrated that it can play a critical role in challenging stereotypes.

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