

# Analyzing Blick Multicultural Lessons through Critical Race Theory

Liza Torrence

Contemporary Art and Critical Pedagogy: Issues in Identity, Race, and  
Multiculturalism

Professor Desai and Professor Hamlin

**Abstract**

In this essay, I will evaluate the lesson plans provided by Blick Art Materials found on their online lesson plan database. Using this database, I will specifically analyze the four lessons dedicated to learning about Native American Indian cultures through artmaking. These lessons are entitled *Buffalo Hides*, *Native American Coil Pots*, *Native American Burlap Weaving*, and *Indian Jewelry*. I will also analyze one lesson about the Kuna Indians of Panama, *Making a Paper Mola*. I will evaluate these lessons through the lens of Critical Race Theory, to assess whether these lessons are using anti-racist education or critical multiculturalism as avenues for addressing race and racism in an art classroom.

Blick's multicultural lesson plans are accessible to anyone on Blick's website, and they are specifically listed "for educators," under "multicultural" lesson plans (Blick). On this webpage, Blick refers to these lessons as "colorful" and "insightful" (Blick). This page states that these lessons were designed, written, practiced and submitted by art educators. The four lessons I will evaluate, using Critical Race Theory, about Native American Indian art were created by Anne Pietropola, a white elementary art teacher from Dillsburg, Pennsylvania. She completed her undergraduate studies at Edinboro State University and master's degree at Pennsylvania State University (Evans, 2004). The fifth lesson I will evaluate through CRT is about Kuna Indian culture and was created by Dianne Turner, D.Ed, a white art education professor at California State University and director of the Children's Art Institute at California State University, Bakersfield. She completed her doctoral degree at Pennsylvania State University. She has also taught art in elementary, middle and high school levels (Turner, Homepage).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework based on the idea that whites inherently hold racial power in society due to a history of racism and power structures. It is assumed that these power structures, which have been upheld throughout history, oppress people of color. Using CRT, one can analyze these power structures and dissect biased perspectives of cultures. When combined with education, teachers can encourage a critical understanding of cultures, seek to challenge meritocracy, expose racial color-blind ideology and contextualize curriculum. Ultimately, “The CRT movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado, 2012, pp. 3). In art education classrooms, it is important to practice values of CRT for students to become active learners and critical thinkers regarding race and culture. CRT is needed to assist in overcoming race as a social construct.

Overall, Blick’s multicultural lessons regarding Native American Indian art fail to address two important tenets of Critical Race Theory. The first tenet of CRT is “racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pp. 21). None of these lessons name or discuss racism and its inherence in American life, an important feature of critical multiculturalism. In relation to the fourth tenet of CRT, only one of the five lessons includes a voice from Native American culture that is able to represent their people. Experiential knowledge from a Native American perspective is necessary for authenticity. These “stories, or narratives, are deemed important among CRT scholars because they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming ‘objectivity’ of positivist perspectives” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, pp. 21-22). In addition to these tenets, I will argue that three out of the five lessons attempt to provide context of cultural history behind these Native American art projects, which relates to the third tenet of CRT. However, all five lessons homogenize Indian cultures by generalizing craftwork

and iconography. These lessons primarily focus on the artmaking, and the context is provided in a brief paragraph outside of the procedure. Overall, none of these lessons have motives from critical multiculturalism in addressing race or racism in their art classrooms.

The first of the five lessons, *Buffalo Hides*, is a multicultural lesson plan about Native American Indians, and was created by Anne Pietropola. This lesson is about the Petroglyph drawings left by the Anasazi Indians in the cliffs of the Southwest. In this lesson, students draw and paint pictures of Indian symbols on dark brown roll paper to look like markings on an aged animal hide. The lesson begins with the phrase, “Review of Native American Indian Culture” (Pietropola, *Buffalo Hides*). I am not sure if this means that the following paragraph is the review of Native American Indian Culture, or if they are first prompting the teacher to review Native American Indian culture. Either way, this statement enforces the racist perspective that all Native American Indian cultures have the same history, and it can easily be summarized at the start of the lesson. This phrase homogenizes Native American Indian cultures. Cultural homogenization is a term that describes referring to a multitude of cultures as uniform or the same. Joni Boyd Acuff, in her article “(Mis)information highways: A critique of online resources for multicultural art education”, states that “Homogenization is damaging in that it does not allow the individual cultures to be transient, diverse and ever changing; they are designated to one simplified idea that has been established by a western conceptualization and US mainstream culture” (Acuff, 2014, pp. 308). This lesson goes on to talk about the Anasazi Indians who inhabited the Southwest 2000 years ago. The lesson connects the Anasazi Indians to the Pueblo Indians, who live there today. I believe these statements are an attempt to contextualize the history of Pueblo Indian culture, which is the third tenet of CRT. By providing a quick sample of Pueblo history, the writer is assuming it is enough to give context to the lesson. However, this lesson goes on to say

that the Anasazi Indians left Petroglyph drawings that are pictures of “Indian symbols” (Pietropola, Buffalo Hides). What do these symbols represent? What were they for? Pietropola does not inform the reader or students. They go on to say that “The Indians were very spiritual people. They respected the earth, never wasted resources, and were ingenious at using the things in nature around them” (Pietropola, Buffalo Hides). This wording continues to homogenize Native American Indian cultures because it generalizes the practices and beliefs of all Native Americans. It also lacks concrete information about Petroglyphs. Joni Boyd Acuff believes that “online multicultural art lessons silence cultural voices (Acuff, 2014, pp. 309),” which rejects the fourth tenet of Critical Race Theory, integrating experiential knowledge into discourse. Dipti Desai, in her article “Imaging Difference: The Politics of Representation in Multicultural Art Education,” believes that a first-person narrative is essential when discussing a specific culture. She states that “one of the primary concerns of multicultural art education is to provide accurate and authentic representations of the art of racially and ethnically marginalized groups in the United States and of subordinate cultures around the world” (Desai, 2000, pp. 114). This lesson ultimately fails in providing any experiential knowledge from the Pueblo population because it lacks references. There are no quotes, images of Pueblo art, or videos that show Anasazi or Pueblo Indian culture. Furthermore, this lesson does not name racism or its inherence in American life that disadvantages people of color. It does not say why “There are 20 pueblo villages left; at one time there were 200!” (Pietropola, Buffalo Hides). This is an example of overt curriculum, whereas the null curriculum expresses why and how America violently depopulated Native Americans. It is important to bring light to the fact that “racism is ordinary... the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (Delgado, 2012, pp.

7). This is the first tenet of Critical Race Theory. Without identifying racism, the class will not undergo a critical eye to multiculturalism and analyze the content as it stands in history.

The second of the five lessons, *Native American Coil Pots*, is a multicultural lesson plan about Native American Indians, and was created by Anne Pietropola. This lesson is about Southwest Pueblo villages and their pottery. In this lesson, students are prompted to create a Native American Coil Pot with clay. This lesson specifically refers to an article about Maria Martinez in *Scholastic Art Magazine*, a Native American who lived in the Pueblo of San Ildefonso and was famous for creating black pottery. Here is an attempt from the writer to provide a narrative from a Pueblo Indian, which refers to the fourth tenet of CRT. This relates back to Dipti Desai's argument towards providing a cultural voice for authenticity in a lesson. She believes "It is irresponsible of art educators to present artworks to students without preparing them to also understand the context from which they come and the rationale for their selection" (Desai, 2000, pp. 121). This lesson does not present the rationale, nor does it even give access to the School Art Magazine, but it does attempt to provide some context by providing an article about Maria. Even still, it goes on to prompt the teacher to "Mention that, like all Native Americans, Maria respected the earth and its resources" (Pietropola, *Native American Coil Pots*). Here, we are back to the homogenization of Native American Indian cultures because the lesson is reducing Native American culture to an "imposed, stagnant representation" (Acuff, 2014, pp. 309). It is not accurately contextualizing history, as the third tenet of CRT suggests. Furthermore, it is not acknowledging racism in American life, nor is it opening opportunity to discuss the pervasive reality of racism, the first tenet of CRT. It is perpetuating a "color-blind, or 'formal,' conception of equality" (Delgado, 2012, pp. 8), where Native Americans are seen just as another culture. It does not identify racism, therefore it will not contribute to the end of racism.

The third lesson, *Native American Burlap Weaving*, is a multicultural lesson plan about Native American Indians, and was created by Anne Pietropola. This lesson showcases Native American craft art. The students learn Native American weaving design and techniques, and create their own textile. This lesson rejects all three principles of Critical Race Theory in that it does not contextualize the history of Native American Indian culture, it does not provide a voice from this culture, and it does not refer to racism in the discourse of the lesson. There is a short paragraph at the beginning of the lesson:

Discuss and show examples of Native American craft art, basketry, rugs, clothes. Emphasize that these crafts were decorative as well as utilitarian, made for everyday use and also for ceremonial use. Discuss the use of symmetrical designs in Native American art (Pietropola, Native American Burlap Weaving).

Automatically we see the homogenization of Native American Indian culture because this lesson refers to all Native American Indian culture. It assumes that all Native American craft art is the same, and used for the same reasons. The third tenet of CRT is rejected because the curriculum is not accurately contextualized or historicized. Joni Boyd Acuff discards this approach when saying “If staying in line with critical multiculturalism art education, these lessons should support the articulation of diverse narratives and the schizophrenic nature of culture” (Acuff, 2014, pp. 309). This lesson rejects the first and fourth tenets of CRT for the same reasons of the lessons listed above. It does not speak to the reality of racism in society, which serves to disadvantage people of color. It also does not share any narrative or perspective from a Native American Indian, which would work as a source to understand and critique dominant social order.

The fourth lesson, *Indian Jewelry*, is a multicultural lesson plan about Native American Indians, and was created by Anne Pietropola. This lesson is about the famous turquoise and

silver jewelry and belts created by Native American Indians. The students in this lesson are exposed to Native American Indian jewelry and create their own beaded arrangement using white clay and texturing tools. This lesson is very similar to *Native American Burlap Weaving* in its approach to educate children about Native American Indian culture. It also rejects all three principles of CRT because it homogenizes Native American Indian culture, lacks a voice from this culture, and ignores racist realities in the description:

Native American Indians are famous for their beautiful turquoise and silver jewelry and belt. The Indians, who were very close to the earth and spiritual people, believed that certain animals, birds, etc. possessed special powers. They would carve these spirit totems into their jewelry and then wear them for good luck (Pietropola, Indian Jewelry).

This is clearly homogenizing all Native American Indian culture and lacking any contextual or historical analysis. This lesson primarily focuses on a specific craft, and provokes the reader to assume all Native American Indians created this jewelry.

The fifth and last lesson, *Making a Paper Mola*, was created by Dianne Turner, D.Ed, of California State University. This lesson is about Molas, or brightly colored applique panels, created and worn by the Kuna Indians in the San Blas region of Panama. In this lesson, students learn about Kuna inspired Mola designs and create their own Mola inspired artwork using construction paper. This lesson is not about Native North American Indian culture, but it still lacks a voice from the specific Kuna culture, therefore this culture is not represented authentically (Desai, 2000, pp. 119). However, it provides much more context than the other lessons. The introductory paragraph tells the reader about the Kunas' residence in the Panama/Colombia area for centuries. These statements are to provide context for making Molas, which they created as they migrated eastward (Turner, Making a Paper Mola). It goes into further detail about Molas, and the meaning and design behind them including inspirations from

“natural-world native animals, local vegetation, and the shapes of the coral reefs around the San Blas islands” (Turner, Making a Paper Mola). However, it refers to Molas as “The Kuna Indian women’s traditional costume,” in which she expresses pride (Turner, Making a Paper Mola). This reference to costume implies that these Molas are not an ordinary type of dress. This is a dominant narrative from a Eurocentric perspective, which could have been avoided with a perspective from a Kuna Indian. In this lesson, it would be best to know what the Mola designs mean to their culture. By encouraging students to use iconography of the Kunas, they are subject to appropriation. This could be fixed by prompting personal imagery from the students in their projects after knowing the significance of Mola design.

Overall, these lessons fail to enforce a critical multiculturalist education, and ultimately provide a limited, neutral western perspective. This is because these lessons are written by western art teachers who seek to incorporate a brief understanding of Native American Indian culture through a multicultural lesson plan. However, we must keep in mind that these lessons are prominently based on materials and artmaking. These lessons are posted on a website that sells art materials, and these materials are referenced in each lesson. It is important for Blick to sell their product, and less important for Blick to counteract racism through critical multiculturalism. Furthermore, each lesson is only a page, which includes a short summary of the background and reason for the artmaking, as well as the procedure for art making. It could be possible that Blick edits these lessons once submitted by art teachers, in order to fit their template and highlight the artmaking, since they are selling their products. If I were to use any of these lessons, I would use them as a basis for an artmaking activity, in addition to further researching the culture. In this way, it is helpful for Blick to reference specific Indian cultures, unlike the lessons *Native American Burlap Weaving* and *Indian Jewelry*.

If I was a child in any of these classes, I would ask why Native American Indians produced these works. All of lessons refer to the type of artwork these cultures make, but none of them respond to why they make them. In addition, none of the lessons explain Native American Indian iconography, but they use Native American Indian symbols. They are claiming to highlight Native American Indian identity, but do not share what these symbols mean to their cultures. Symbols in Native American Indian cultures are deeply tied to the language, land, and ceremony, and may be used for ritualistic motives, which should not be appropriated into elementary art (Menard, 2006). To better these lessons, I would use traditional techniques and materials from Native American Indian cultures, and then prompt my students to incorporate their own imagery. That way, they can appreciate working with certain materials that these cultures used, but are applying a personal connection to their art. These lessons should also include references from these Native American Indian cultures for the sake of authenticity. Dipti Desai states that “One of the critiques of multiculturalism is that it often speaks for entire groups of subordinate people and thereby positions them in relation to the dominant group” (Desai, 2000, pp. 116). By including a video, reading, or quote from individuals in these cultures, the teacher would be providing experiential knowledge of people of color, which then could be analyzed through discourse in the classroom. I would encourage these teachers to even partner with museums that have artworks from American Indians, so their students are able to understand what these cultural works look like. Lastly, I would construct knowledge through discourse in my classroom based on my students’ understanding of Native American Indian cultures. I would discuss the history of Native American Indians, which would prompt notions of white-supremacy and racism. It is important to contextualize the history of Native Americans in order to provoke a critical discussion of race within American culture today.

It is disappointing that a major online art resource fails to provide critical multicultural lessons. None of the lessons provide first-hand experiential knowledge of American Indians, nor do they contextualize history or provoke a critical eye towards racism throughout history. Their neutral perspective on race perpetuates racial color-blind ideologies. Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel say that “People are more inclined to view diversity as a positive condition rather than as something to be feared and repressed” in “Themes of Contemporary Art: Art After 1980” (Robertson, 2017, pp. 112). The writers of these lessons suggest positive attitudes behind diversity. On the main page of Blick multicultural lessons they say that “art has always played a significant role in shaping and recording our cultural history and lifestyles; teaching it from this perspective has become an increasingly necessary discipline in our ever shrinking world” (Blick). Here, Blick shows neutral tendencies toward multicultural education. Lastly, I would like to reference the article “Children, Race and Racism: How Race Awareness Develops,” by Louise Derman-Sparks, Carol Tanaka Higa and Bill Sparks, in which they state that a “two-year study indicates that children are very much aware of racial difference. Many are also aware of racism” (Derman-Sparks, 1980, pp. 1). Avoiding the topic of racial oppression and refuting racism in an academic environment only amplifies these curiosities in children. It is important that children become aware of racial differences in order to critically assess them. Maintaining a neutral or racially color-blind perspective will only perpetuate racism in a classroom and beyond.

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