



Introduction: Diversity And Difference

Jordana Moore Saggese

To cite this article: Jordana Moore Saggese (2016) Introduction: Diversity And Difference, Art Journal, 75:1, 70-74, DOI: [10.1080/00043249.2016.1171541](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2016.1171541)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2016.1171541>



Published online: 06 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Greg Dalton and Jonah Olson, detail of defaced mural *Walking Stick*, 2003, defaced in January 2015, California College of the Arts, Oakland (artwork © Greg Dalton and Jonah Olson; photograph by Maxwell Leung)

Jordana Moore Saggese

**Introduction:
Diversity And Difference**

While attending a recent College Art Association conference panel on the subject of contemporary indigenous art, I was struck not only by the rich artistic practices of First Nations artists, but also by the implicit argument many scholars on the panel made for the study of these works outside mainstream discourses of American art.¹ When asked in the question-and-answer session about their use of preexisting methodological or theoretical frameworks—from black cultural studies,

specifically—the panelists remained mostly silent. However, an audience member was happy to turn around to inform me that if I wanted to know if scholars

of First Nations art and artists had read bell hooks, the answer was yes. The issue, expressed by this one audience

member and supported by the gentle nods of the panelists onstage, was that these artists needed their own theory, which recognized the complexity of their experience. In short, nothing else would do. The “us not them” mentality evidenced in such a response had the immediate effect of marking me as other for all in attendance—frankly, not an experience unknown to me at academic conferences—but more important, it also prompted me to consider the degree to which such defenses of the exclusivity and the resulting fragmentation of these groups serves to secure our positions as outsiders.

Twenty years ago, in the context of a burgeoning move toward identity politics in art scholarship, Olu Oguibe laid out the stakes. “The contest for History,” he wrote, “is central to the struggle for a redefinition and eventual decimation of centrism and its engendering discourse.”² Oguibe’s central tenet—that the concepts framing our very consideration of otherness (in his case, “Africanity”) are always already plural and unfixed—certainly rings true today. As we move further into the twenty-first century, our thinking about diversity certainly must operate holistically and navigate multiple terrains; we must consider how the ideas and experiences contained in terms like “queer,” “black,” or “disabled” might overlap.

Oguibe’s work, in conjunction with that of the scholars who followed, has had far-reaching implications in the ways we practice scholarship. His prescription for a reclamation of cultural discourses and histories by those who have lived within them (i.e., “those who have the privileged knowledge and understanding of their societies to formulate and own discourse”)³ has produced a generation of scholars with deep knowledge of and investments in identity positions previously excluded from art and art history. Nevertheless, twenty years on, the complex experience of identity in the contemporary world has yet to produce a truly intersectional scholarship—that is, one that considers the relationships among gender, race, ability, and so forth, as well as how the theoretical frameworks from one particular camp (e.g. queer studies) might be mobilized by scholars outside that field. The very terms that we seek to expand begin to constrain us and even potentially reinforce the marginality of those positions we hope to move to the center of our art making and our scholarship.

Meanwhile, the academy has become increasingly preoccupied with diversity. International study programs have raised the profile of diversity, as more and more institutions of higher education revise curricula, admissions policies, and retention efforts in the interest of institutional administrators, who continue to hire and attempt to retain diverse faculty. On campuses both domestic and

This introduction and the essays and roundtable that follow developed from “Beyond the Numbers Game: Diversity in Theory and Practice,” a panel at the College Art Association Annual Conference in Los Angeles in 2012. The panel, organized by Jacqueline Taylor and myself, was sponsored by CAA’s Committee on Diversity Practices. I would like to thank Jacqueline as well as Kevin Concannon, past chair of the committee, for their support of and encouragement with this project.

1. The panel “Indigenous Contemporary Art” took place on February 2, 2015, at the CAA Annual Conference in New York City.

2. Olu Oguibe, “In the ‘Heart of Darkness,’” *Third Text* 23 (Summer 1993), rep. *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 227.

3. *Ibid.*, 232.

4. These statements were listed under job announcements in both art history and studio art for Fairmont State University and North Central College, respectively. The former refrain was repeated verbatim in announcements from Bowling Green State University and University of California at Santa Barbara for the 2014–15 job cycle. College Art Association Online Career Center, at www.careercenter.collegeart.org, as of April 18, 2015.

5. The announcement for a tenure-track position in art history at Reed College posted in October 2014, for example, asked candidates to “address how your scholarship, teaching, mentoring, and/or community service might support Reed College’s commitment to diversity and inclusion articulated in the College’s diversity statement.” H-Net Job Guide, at www.h-net.org/jobs/job_display.php?id=49940, as of April 18, 2015. Job announcements for California State University, East Bay, Rhode Island School of Design, Rochester Institute of Technology, and Skidmore College also explicitly called for some form of “diversity statement.”

6. Karen Kelsky, “The Professor Is In: Making Sense of the Diversity Statement,” *Vitae*, January 13, 2014, at <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/266-the-professor-is-in-making-sense-of-the-diversity-statement>, as of November 18, 2015.

7. *Fischer v. University of Texas* was the third case on affirmative action brought before the Supreme Court after *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003).

8. The Supreme Court also presided over *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003; *Fisher v. University of Texas* was revisited by the court later in 2014 and as of early December 2015 is before the Supreme Court again.

9. The online platform #BlackLivesMatter was founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in 2013 after the trial of George Zimmerman, exonerated after fatally shooting seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin the previous year. In Garza’s words, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, at <http://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>, as of November 18, 2015.

abroad, the work of artists and art historians increasingly requires a consideration of how diversity might be further institutionalized. Job postings frequently call out diversity as a priority with descriptions of the ideal candidate, who will “contribute to the diversity and excellence of the academic community through teaching, service and research” or “enrich the diversity of the campus community.”⁴ Applications often require candidates to submit a statement of their commitment to diversity along with their CV and research dossier.⁵ Such emphases undoubtedly result from a variety of internal and external sources, but we must first deal with the fact that the institutional uses and definitions of diversity remain unnecessarily vague. Does diversity only refer to the subject position of job seekers? To their methodological approaches? Or maybe we could consider an artist’s practice across several media as “diverse?” The academic career coach Karen Kelsky took up this topic in her *Vitae* column in 2014. “The diversity statement,” Kelsky wrote, “is quickly emerging as the fifth required document of the typical job application. . . . And because it’s of such recent origin, nobody has the foggiest idea what it’s supposed to do (including, I suspect, the requesting search committees themselves).”⁶ The perceived move toward diversity for the sake of diversity threatens to diminish its true potential—that is, the repair of historical inequalities.

Moreover, under the institutional rubric of diversity, the emphasis on demographic (e.g., race, gender) compliance and assessment does not necessarily account for the complexity of what Oguibe and others have theorized as difference. This constant entanglement in what I would call the “numbers game” remains lodged in outmoded conceptions of identity that cannot account for the complexity of lived experience. As a consequence, while these moves toward diversifying the campus (and faculty) body are undoubtedly beneficial to the academy as a whole, there is not a direct correlation between who gets hired and what gets taught. In fact, the faculty members on whom we pin our hopes of diversity may feel unnecessarily burdened by the expectation that their courses (and no one else’s) will satisfy the programmatic learning outcomes and goals associated with diversity. That is, does the expectation that some of us will teach courses that deal with issues of race, gender, and sexuality relieve all of us from the responsibility to address issues of power and privilege in the classroom?

This increasing emphasis on diversity as a demographic model is certainly not without problems. Take for example the 2012 Supreme Court docket, which included the case of a white female student who filed suit against the University of Texas, claiming that her rejection from its undergraduate program revealed an admissions process that favored race over academic qualifications.⁷ This case, the third of its kind brought before the court in less than ten years, once again forces a very public reconsideration of the constitutionality of affirmative action and how diversity may (or may not) be achieved in higher education.⁸ With such high-profile cases, the concept of diversity in higher education has become much more closely aligned with juridical and administrative constructs. At the same time, social justice movements—such as #BlackLivesMatter, founded by the Oakland organizer Alicia Garza in 2013—have moved onto our campuses and into the lives of our students, faculty, and staff, subsequently bringing the tensions between diversity and difference into real time and space.⁹ Many of my students at California College of the Arts involved in protests in fall 2014 were harassed and even arrested by police, who at one point blocked the street bordering our

Oakland campus in full riot gear. In January of 2015 a campus mural was covered with black paint and the spray-painted words: “Where’s the Diversity?” And in April a group of students began posting a series of illustrations across campus that questioned the institution’s public support of those killed in the attack on the French headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo*.¹⁰

Inspired by a deeper sense of social justice, students and faculty nationwide are bringing the issues of difference into the spaces of academia. It is our job to structure these conversations and to bring them into the center of our own practices as artists, curators, and scholars. Many of today’s students receive early exposure to issues of race, sex, gender, and class, but the expansion of subject matter does not always reflect a parallel expansion of methodology. In my own survey courses, for example, it is a consistent challenge not only to include the work of artists of color, women artists, disabled artists, and queer artists, but also to address the broader context and implications of this work. In upper-division courses, students are more likely to learn of the methodologies and theories that underpin studies of art, but all too often the increasing specialization of each subfield—queer theory, postcolonial studies, disability aesthetics—reinscribes the isolation of marginalized practices and identities.

We have a disconnect between the goals and the practices of diversity; even as the numbers and measures of diversity may be satisfied on the administrative level, there is still work to be done in determining how we might practice it. As academics and as artists, we must continue to think ethically about our positions around diversity—structurally, as in the case of hiring and curriculum, as well as intellectually. We must acknowledge our role in shaping the consciousness of a greater public. We ask in this forum how scholars might enter into a shared conversation based on the intersections of their own individual political, social, and ideological critiques. The following essays hold in common an interest in cultivating modes of difference. As Petra Kuppers phrases it in her essay on disability studies, these five perspectives center on “honoring artists’ discourses about their work, in whatever form artists offer this” and on acknowledging “different ways of knowing, being, and communicating.” We see in these examples how acts of naming, of representation, and of interpretation become social acts inside and outside the academy. In the case of the Garifuna community in New York, discussed in Tobias Wofford’s essay, the instability of racial categories signals the difficulties of framing identities within the confines of language. T’ai Smith also discusses the instability of categories like “craft,” which has unexpectedly become more opaque as scholarship in this area has increased. However, these essays also consider the critical potential of these types of failures—on both etymological and conceptual levels. Tina Takemoto’s essay, for example, explores the utopian and political potential of failure as a response to heteronormativity. Camara Dia Holloway similarly explains the origins of the discipline of critical race art history as produced by the failures of a traditional art history to include the perspectives of race. In moving forward with the *practice* of diversity, we must consider how to mobilize the lessons of each of these fields to connect across issues of otherness more broadly.

In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote: “The putative center welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin.”¹¹ This forum takes up Spivak’s call to further examine the impact of increasing curricu-

10. The following statement was released by the group known as Decolonize CCA via Facebook: “On January 7, 2015, the headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo*, a French weekly satirical newspaper known for its racist caricatures of Muslim and black people, were attacked by a Muslim extremist group, resulting in 12 predominantly white casualties. Less than 24 hours following the incident, CCA was quick to express solidarity with the white cartoonist victims and defend the right to freedom of artistic expression, holding an event on the SF campus to produce an ‘I AM CHARLIE’ banner. While it was important to acknowledge the tragedy itself, CCA, like mainstream media, glossed over the violence of racism and Western imperialism being reproduced in *Hebdo*’s satiric representations. We believe that CCA’s rally to support *Charlie Hebdo* and the freedom of artistic expression was essentially a defense of white people’s right to produce racist images and not hold themselves accountable for the violence they perpetrate. In this work, we are illustrating the interconnectedness of different modes of racial oppression—how French Islamophobia, anti-black racism, and U.S. imperialism operate upon the same racial hierarchy that informs CCA’s mistreatment and discrimination against different populations of marginalized students. It is our aim to disrupt CCA’s white supremacist logic of inclusion and labor exploitation, to imagine alternatives to institutionalized promises of community, and to generate critical dialogue as we make art that matters.” See www.facebook.com/CCASchoolsofColorCoalition/posts/875712302467125/, as of January 5, 2016.

11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Explanation and Culture: Marginalia,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 107.

12. See Claudia Mattos, "Whither Art History: Geography, Art Theory, and New Perspectives for an Inclusive Art History," *Art Bulletin* 96, no. 3 (September 2014): 259–64.

lar engagement with diversity. How might artists and art historians use theory to productively examine the work of artists with intersectional identities (or work of diverse media) without continuing to relegate those artists and objects to the margins?¹² Is there a productive way to move beyond the classification of objects, institutions, or people? As a woman of color in the academy, the issue of diversity is always on my mind—both personally and professionally. Our hope with this forum is to reposition the issue of diversity from one of "privileged knowledge" to one of shared responsibility.

Jordana Moore Saggese is associate professor of contemporary art and theory at California College of the Arts, where she is also chair of the visual studies program. Her first book, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, was published by University of California Press in 2014.

Diaspora has gained expanding currency in cultural studies as a critical category for describing the effects of globalization on individuals and communities as they move around the world. Today we can read about queer diasporas, Asian diasporas, Indian diasporas, and Iranian diasporas, to name only a few.¹ The range of subjects explored through the lens of diaspora suggests the potential for the term to bring diversity into art-historical discourses while also challenging normalized

Tobias Wofford

Whose Diaspora?

categories of difference to which we have become accustomed. Yet, as an addendum to so many different identities and groups, the invocation of diaspora can often waver between an expansiveness that is almost meaningless and a particularity that offers a

compelling strategy for critiquing and analyzing difference in the face of globalism. Therein lies the rub; one cannot adequately discuss diaspora as a unified or universal phenomenon. As Steven Nelson has put it, diaspora is characterized by multiplicity—"multiple practices, multiple world views."² An account of diaspora in any measure must be accompanied by the particularity of the diasporic subjects in question. In short, in examining diaspora we must always ask, "Whose diaspora?" With attention to the particular experiences of dispersal and the varying strategies of diaspora identity mobilized by each diasporic subject, a diaspora art history can indeed offer both insights and challenges to the historical analysis and narration of diversity in art and culture.

Diaspora is by no means a new term—originally used in the third-century BCE to reference the dispersal of the Jewish diaspora.³ It was only in the latter part of the twentieth century that diaspora was expanded as a theoretical frame to describe not only communities dispersed through violence, as with the Jewish and African diasporas, but also communities, cultures, individuals, and even art objects spread globally under the conditions of late capitalism.⁴ In fact, it may be precisely the flows of global capitalism and its new forms of mass media that make diaspora particularly prevalent today, as it provides individuals new means through which to organize themselves into what Arjun Appadurai referred to as "diasporic public spheres."⁵ As a result of this recent opening up of the term, one encounters diaspora theories deployed in a dizzying array of disciplines and applied in studies that variously define identity and community. Still, diaspora theories do often follow a set of shared assumptions about the usefulness of studying the impact of migration. For, while the causes of the dispersal of diasporic communities and individuals might be different, the term is appropriate

1. A quick search of the keyword "diaspora" on WorldCat—a global database of library collections—yielded 39,950 books and 3,684 articles among the hits (search conducted July 24, 2015). While a search of "diaspora and art" yields mostly studies exploring the African and Jewish diasporas, one will also find texts on queer Puerto Rican artists, Iranian artists, Chinese artists, and more. Significant studies include: Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, Lan P. Duong, Mariam B. Lam, and Kathy L. Nguyen, eds., *Troubling Borders: An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Saloni Mathur, ed., *The Migrant's Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown: Clark Art Institute, 2011); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Culture and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Jonathan Harris, *Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); and Sheldon Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

2. Steven Nelson, "Diaspora and Contemporary Art: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," in *Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 296–316.