

Response to The Orders of Cultural Production by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández

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I WAS INVITED TO RESPOND to Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández's (2020) essay, "The Orders of Cultural Production" published in this issue and take this opportunity to engage in a reflective conversation with the essay, perhaps more accurately an internal monologue as I read with, through, and around this provocative essay, which proposes the concept of cultural production instead of the term "arts" as an alternative analytic framework to make sense of creative practices in education. I, for one, designed an art education program two decades ago at New York University (a corporate university that is part of the academic industrial complex) that is grounded in contemporary art, critical pedagogy, and social activism, which has also compelled me in recent years to question what it means to do social justice work through the arts (in my case visual art). Gaztambide-Fernández's (2020) essay has pried open some issues that I struggle with in relation to visual art education that I explore in this response. At the onset, I want to specify that I will focus on visual art education as this is the area I know best and cannot comment on all of the arts disciplines (music, theater, dance, etc.), as each is markedly different. As all readings are situated, I feel obligated to share my position and location in relation to my understanding of visual art education and social justice as it shapes my response to this essay.

My recent personal reckoning regarding the classificatory lens and logic of social justice art education (Desai, 2020) is undoubtedly grounded in coloniality (Quijano, 2000), perpetuating a western epistemology in relation to art, aesthetics, and social change that sets limits on how I see, know, and act in the classroom and society. My understanding of social justice is a mash-up of my lived experiences as an East Indian woman growing up in India and moving to the United States as an adult, my family history of social activism, and my understanding of the relationship between art and politics that is grounded in my colonial education in postcolonial India, and then later in the United States. The struggle of mind vs body is ever present, as I embody a different way of being in the world as an East Indian woman living in the United States. Growing up in India, a communal yet hierarchical society with a different worldview compared to western individualism, shaped my way of knowing and feeling that resides in my body and that is radically different from

the West. I struggle to articulate this bodily knowledge in my thinking, which is still deeply colonial, what Marie Battiste (2001) calls “cognitive colonialism.” Unlearning this colonial and imperial way of thinking is an ongoing process as it is fraught with tensions and contradictions. This confluence of lived and educational experiences across two democratic countries prompts me to always keep present the ways my privilege and oppression are deeply intertwined, shaping how I have come to see and know our world in particular ways, which influence the kinds of action I am willing to take to challenge, and gesture towards changing, unequal power structures through what we call “art.”

My colonial education and art education began in elementary school and continued through university where I did not learn about Indian culture or art. My undergraduate training as a textile designer at a design school in India was inspired by the Bauhaus (Germany) design philosophy, however, with an explicit mission of creating socially relevant design for India that has shaped my understanding of the instrumentalization of the arts, what Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) calls the “metonymic function of the arts” to do something good in our society. This notion of socially engaged art/design continued in the United States and was more firmly grounded in a Gramscian approach to visual art education. The idea of the transformative role of the arts in society has guided much of my work in visual art education, leading to frustrations, doubts, and questions regarding what ideologies frame notions of social change, who benefits from it, and at whose expense, especially when the practice and teaching of visual art in schools (Kindergarten through higher education) is based on western coloniality. The idea that the arts are inherently progressive in politics and power lies in changing individual subjectivity (Marcuse, 1972) that produces informed socially responsible citizens and guides how we teach social justice art education that ultimately leads to the representation of social issues as the end result. This notion of art is problematic, as it assumes that responsible citizens will take social action, which is not necessarily a given. Rather, simply representing social issues in schools and galleries can perpetuate the status quo and colonialism as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues.

I agree with Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) that we in visual art education rely on a rhetorical frame to justify our work when we use words such as *art empowers* or *art fosters awareness* and in doing so claim that the “arts or arts-based work has the capacity to transform educational experiences and social circumstances” (p. 8). Art is instrumentalized in education, especially social justice education, particularly as it remains at the level of representing a social issue that is exhibited in the classroom or white cube. Yet, the arts throughout history and across time and space have been an integral part of social life and, thereby, serve a purpose for people, either religiously, culturally, or politically—they have an instrumental function. From its first recorded appearance 40,000 years ago in a cave in Borneo, Indonesia, visual art has served a change-making function; whether it was to win over the gods, to ensure fertility, secure a successful hunt, or lead to a spiritual state of enlightenment—art was supposed to *do something*. The idea of art not having a social function nor being connected to people’s lives and ideologies—*l’art pour l’art* or “art for art’s sake”—a term coined by the French philosopher Victor Cousin in the 19th century—is only a relatively recent western notion that spans a short moment in the long, global history of art making. This apolitical view of art has become the dominant approach to visual art education in Europe and North America, which through colonialism and imperialism spread to the rest of the world. The critical issue is the way the instrumentalization of the arts has

been constructed to justify both the arts for art’s sake approach or the recent social justice approach to visual art education, as they are both grounded in individual self-actualization that ultimately reproduces colonialism and imperialism. However, if one understands that, across the globe prior to 1496, the arts had a social function, which I call “activism,” then from this position, art is understood for its cultural production and not a mode of representation. Artistic activism for me is a mode of being and questioning.

It is clearly evident as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues that the arts discourse in a Foucaudian sense has classified and labeled only specific objects and practices as “art” that gets taught in schools. What gets labeled art does change over time; however, as he argues, despite change that might make it more inclusive (crafts or non-western artifacts, social practice art), it is still based on certain forms of expertise, the right kind of disciplinary knowledge, and institutional authority. The notion of the visual arts, like education, is not neutral or apolitical, even though it is taught in schools as a neutral activity through its focus on modernist formalism. I, too, believe that the arts and education are political, and this selective notion of what gets called “art” as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues is rooted in colonialism and white supremacy and, therefore, implicated in the reproduction and production of “racist, sexist, ableist, and colonial violence” in art education (p. 5).

The very concept of the arts since 1496 in the Abya-Yala (Americas) and Europe as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) notes are part of the colonial and imperial project that deliberately destroyed cultures and peoples—the colonial and imperial violence that he argues is constitutive to not only art, but also museums reproducing and producing racial hierarchy and white supremacy. I question, however, the universal implications of the arts’ fundamental role in colonial violence that his essay suggests. The arts have a long history in many non-western countries prior to colonization of the Americas in 1496 and, therefore, his argument needs to be historically contextualized and spelt-out, rather than assumed—contextualization is important as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) suggests. For instance, in what we call India today that has a long history of invasions and conquests dating back to the Indus Valley civilization (5000 BCE), the constitutive role of white supremacy does not hold true. This is not to say that a dominant narrative regarding what gets called “arts” does not exist in India, nor that colonialism’s mark is not present in art education. In fact, the same process of selection exists that labels some works and practices as “art” and some others as not, beginning in the Vedic times (2nd century BC) when the notion of *rasa* (literally meaning juice, flavor, taste) was penned by the sage Bharata Muni describing an aesthetic sensibility that the performing arts, poetry, literature, and visual arts should suggest not express. Traditional art in India has religious intent and mystical aims, and the aesthetic theory of *rasa* based on the logic of emotions guides the artist to trigger emotions in the audience as a way of moving towards a spiritual state of being. The aesthetic theory of the *rasa* applies not only to the production side of art practices, but also its reception by the audience. The *rasa* aesthetic theory focuses on affective ways of knowing that predate western aesthetic theory. The reproduction and production of western racialized vision and colonial violence in visual art education certainly does occur after the British Raj, where the promotion of western visual art practices have firmly taken root in India. I cannot, however, say categorically that the concept of art in India, given its long artistic tradition, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues “plays an important role in signifying the presumed superiority of European cultural sensibilities and affective ways of knowing and, by extension, of whiteness as a way of being” prior to colonization by Britain (p. 8).

Since the arts are always-already framed by hierarchical categorization that produces racial and colonial violence and perpetuates whiteness as a way of being that is superior, Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) proposes the notion of cultural production as a framework for research and practices of symbolic creativity that does not begin with the instrumentalization of the “arts,” but instead allows the arts to organize social orders. The framework of cultural production in the article is understood as a “descriptive/analytic concept—takes the position that all work of symbolic creativity is embedded in, and is, therefore, the outcome of, unequal power relations and that as such it is always implicated in the production, reproduction and, sometimes, transformation of social orders” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 11). He reframes the arts as cultural production and outlines how this approach can be understood and engaged through five intersecting dimensions of practice that he calls “orders”: the spatiotemporal order, the material order, the symbolic order, the relational order, and the affective order. His discussion on this reframing is important, as it is a pedagogical and research framework as well, and so I quote him at length:

To reframe “the arts” as cultural production is to understand them as practices, processes, and products of symbolic creativity that are situated in particular local contexts, shaped by specific material circumstances and power relations, and driven by relational encounters that are themselves shaped by both conscious and unconscious drives and desires. Yet the framework of cultural production does not grant particular status to any given practice, process, or product. Rather, as a framework, cultural production raises critical questions about the granting of such status and what this process reveals about the material conditions and power relations that shape any given work of symbolic creativity. (p. 12)

This move to use cultural production as a descriptive and analytic frame is critical, as it keeps ever present the politics of art practices, processes, and products that produce the unequal power relations since colonialism and imperialism. I am reminded of a recent interview that Brad Evans conducted with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019) regarding her book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, that shows how that the construction of museums and art are intertwined as part of an imperial project, where plundered and looted objects of people from various cultures, globally created for their own purposes, got placed in museums as objects of “art” that were viewed in a distanced manner, even if the labels contextualize the objects. In Azoulay words, when these looted objects,

cleansed of the imprint of their use in their communities and posed on pedestals or behind glass vitrines, these objects that formed life-worlds now become “art.” It is this particular spatiality and temporality of the museum that invites the visitor to believe that by going to the museum she can study art in different places and times, as if art is art. The designation of “art” is one type of imperial violence. (n.p.)

Although I appreciate Gaztambide-Fernández’s need to change the terms we use to speak about cultural and symbolic activities, such as the arts, to cultural production given its hierarchical, racist, and white supremacist force, I am not yet ready to abandon the term “art,” precisely because the constitutive role of the arts in relation to power will continue to perpetuate imperial and colonial violence, given that this history is deliberately rendered invisible in cultural and educational institutions and discourses. I worry that using another term instead of the arts will allow the arts to continue to reproduce and produce the imperial, racist, gendered, classed, sexualized, and ableist

violence that needs to be made visible and challenged if we hope to work towards the possibility of creating some change in these racialized neoliberal times. As Audrey Lorde (1984) in her insightful essay “Poetry is not a Luxury” says; “[p]oetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (p. 37). The namelessness or invisibility is deliberately shaped in particular ways in our society through various disciplines, including art and education, which are grounded in specific acts of imperial and colonial violence. Art and its politics frame our ways of seeing, sensing, and thinking that are taken for granted. What this means is thinking through how vision as a social optic simultaneously creates visibility and invisibility and how it is mobilized in our classrooms. Visibility and invisibility are socially constructed practices that are mutually constitutive. They both work across several different and often competing registers of how knowledge, common sense, and culture are shaped, which in turn frames our understanding of the world. The relationship between visibility and invisibility in our society as Jacques Rancier (2013) indicates is based on the “distribution of the sensible” (p. 7), which through various academic disciplines and cultural institutions (art, art education, and politics) at different moments in our history create arbitrary borders between what can be seen, felt, and thought and what cannot be felt, thought, or seen and in the process determines what is politically possible or not. Art for historically marginalized people, as Audre Lorde (1985) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) remind us, is a form of social action because of the epistemic violence perpetrated by the culture of invisibility in our society (Van Veeren, 2018) that not only challenges, but changes the hegemonic frame of visibility, and therein lies its power to create social change. It is precisely this act of making the invisible visible that allows us to envision alternatives. If we consider invisibility to be an active form of erasure, then we need to change the power relations of the field of visibility in order to take action. Since invisibility is political in that it is an active form of erasure, to make visible that which the dominant institutions render invisible is for me a political act—a strategy used in artistic activism. Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) rightly states that “every time we invoke ‘the arts,’ we also invoke its association with European civilization and a sense of superiority” (p. 12). I contend that, in visual art education in the United States, we need to constantly make visible and unlearn the ways European civilization and how its sense of superiority fundamentally shapes our field by managing and disciplining our social optics.

The approach to the concept of cultural production as Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) argues does not begin from the creative impulse or art, but from critical questions on colonialism and marginalization and opens ways of using symbolic and creative works to speak to these issues that gesture towards social transformation. The cultural production approach that weaves the five intersecting orders (symbolic, material, relational, affective, spatio-temporal) in his participatory action research work with indigenous and Latinx students should be part of any classroom experience, including the arts, where students begin by ask critical questions that they explore, beginning with the history of colonial period of 1496 and how ideologies of colonialism, marginalization, and racial capitalism shape how some symbolic works are considered art and others not and, in doing so, frame how we are trained to see the world in particular racialized, gendered, classed ways. This method has to acknowledge our complicity in the ongoing process of racial capitalism as it shifts and changes over time, moving beyond the problematics of representation and appropriation towards an activist articulation, where the purpose of the arts is organizing and creating networks of practice with other community and activist organizations

outside schools. Artistic activism is not about individual self-expression, nor does it need to be recognized as art, as it is about creating a culture shift that moves people to embody and internalize new ideas, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. This culture shift requires organizing networks of solidarity to imagine and create alternative ways of being, a task that is inherently pedagogical—involving learning to work across social differences and to engage contradictory ideas, beliefs, and values that rub against each other as they are experienced through unequal power relationships. As the Center for Artistic Activism (n.d.) states: “[c]ulture lays the foundation for politics. It outlines the contours of our very notions of what is desirable and undesirable, possible and impossible. Culture makes us, as we make it, and culture is the base material of artistic activism” (para. 25). Art in education and social justice education has not changed to encompass activism, which contains the orders (symbolic, material, affective, relational, spatio-temporal). To borrow the words of the artist Miriam Ghani (2017),

for art to be an important form of protest, artists have to consider what it might mean to be artists working within movements—to make and circulate work not from positions of autonomy, but from a network of positions in solidarity. (p. 199).

Artistic activism is a political project that uses artistic strategies such as making the invisible visible, organizing, and collective pedagogy, among other modes.

If our intention is to disrupt the ways in social justice art education maintains the status quo that reproduces coloniality and imperialism, then, decolonizing normative frames of vision have to be encouraged and supported through what Gaztambide-Fernández (2020) calls cultural production and I call artistic activism. We know that the arts, as Chantal Mouffe (2016) explains “can’t change the world on its own,” “but art can contribute to changing the world” (my emphasis, pp. 36, 39). Artistic organizing is grounded in collective art making, which is a process of learning to work across differences in order to be effective in shifting the balance of power in our society. As a constitutive activity in political activism and social movements, collectivity is a form of cultural production that is not about individual self-expression, even political expression, but rather is about democratizing social change that requires building networks of solidarity. I believe both Gaztambide-Fernández and myself share many of the same concerns in relation to art and its politics—in its perpetuation of colonial violence. However, I am beginning to wonder whether writing another essay for an academic conference or journal or a response as I am doing will necessarily shift what the poet Douglas Kearney (2020) calls the “changing same” power of how social optics are managed and disciplined in arts education. I end with the question that Douglas Kearney poses that continues to reverberate in my head: “at what point does another piece triggered in response to the changing same become a part of the control-comfort ecosystem?” of arts education (para. 5).

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