How do factors like our gender, ethnicity, and cultural heritage shape who we are, how we teach, and how we make art? These are some of the main topics addressed by Whitehead (2008) in her article *Theorizing Experience: Four Women Artists of Color*. As a Black American herself, Whitehead conducted interviews with four women of color digging into their views of feminism and ethnicity and the connection those concepts have with “identity, education, professional activity, and artmaking” (p. 22). The four women she chose came from various ethnic backgrounds (two Black Americans, and two American Indians) and professions (artists, art educators, activists, authors, and professors) but their connections to the art world make them prime candidates for this study. In addition to analyzing the concepts of feminism and ethnicity, Whitehead also takes an in depth look at Hicks’s (1990) goals of art education.

In the world we live in today, it’s an undeniable fact that the opinions and experiences of women and minorities do not hold as much weight as that of white males. Partially do to habit, and in part due to the skewed perception of history taught in our schools, “scientific and social knowledge has been limited to the social situation of white, middle-class men” (p. 24). Whitehead uses the feminist argument that the voices of women and minorities need to be heard in order to have a more accurate viewpoint that both challenges societal understandings and empowers young students.

In regards to feminism, each artist had a slightly different take. Martha Jackson-Jarvis (Black American) connected feminism to a way you think about yourself, which Whitehead points out, closely links to the third wave of feminism from the 1970s and 1980s. Annie Nash (Native American) closely identified with the 2nd wave of feminism (1960s) in which women and men should be equal and individual viewpoints should be valued. Charlene Teters’s (Native American) idea of feminism linked closely with Nash’s in that she believes men and women should be able to contribute equally to society. Whitehead’s comparison of these three definitions of feminism makes the point that there isn’t really one solidified definition and the way we look at feminism constantly evolves.
over time. Interestingly enough, none of the women in this study identified closely with the first wave of feminism, which centered on women’s legal rights such as voting (p.26). Perhaps enough time has passed and these women have never known a time when women couldn’t vote or hold office or own property in this country. Will our female students in school today ever see a time where the feminist ideals of equal rights between men and women is no longer an issue?

While gender is a contributing factor in how we live our lives, ethnicity is arguably the more dominant driving force behind the work of these four women. When asked what culture and ethnicity mean to them, each artist—once again—had different ideas. Jackson-Jarvis thought of her ethnicity as connected to her history and her family’s history. She thought that each individual’s family history dictated the cultural traditions and sense of heritage. Howardena Pindell (Black American) felt that everyone is ethnic and our individual attitudes and mannerisms determine our ethnicity. Teters agreed that ethnicity is dictated by culture but pointed out the fact that there can be several subcultures within one larger culture, in her case different groups of Native American people, which broadens the scope of ethnicity. Through examining the different answers received, Whitehead came to the conclusion that ethnicity, like the concept of feminism, can evolve over time and is shaped by historical events that help determine an individual’s identity (p. 28).

When looking at the individual work of the four women mentioned in this article, they each chose to represent the topics of feminism and identity in different ways. Feminism most commonly appeared in their work in response to the suppression of women’s voices and the exploitation of gender roles. In contrast, these four women were more directly affected by their ethnicity then they were by their gender, and the content of their artwork makes that clear. Their work reflects the distortion of history, what it means to be a certain ethnicity, and the oppression of minority voices.

To put this all into context, Whitehead quotes the goals of art education written by the feminist L.E. Hicks (1990). Her goals; education to diversity and difference, education to context, and education to a community of difference, are aimed at creating, “a learning process that recognizes the realities of cultural diversity of society” (p. 23). Hick’s argues that we need to educate our students on the process of artmaking of minority and women artists and we need to expose our students to work other than the work of traditional
white male artists. We also need to expose our students to different viewpoints, from women and artists of various ethnic backgrounds, in order for them to “understand, criticize, and oppose oppressive mainstream traditions” (p. 33). Whitehead concludes her article by examining the oppressive power the world can have and sends home the idea that as art educators, we have the power to empower our students to change world viewpoints on minorities and women by exposing them to new experiences and voices.
Resources
