



# RE-FRAMING BLACK ART: A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

BY MICHON BENSON, TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Thomas Jefferson had good intentions when he published his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781).<sup>1</sup> Keenly aware of Europe's disdain for his fledgling country, the former governor of Virginia and chief architect of the "Declaration of Independence" (1776) determined to set British and French detractors straight. He regarded his own state an exemplar of American progress and crowed that although his homeland was yet a "child of yesterday" and its citizenry comprised only one-tenth the combined populace of England and France, America rivaled those monarchies, namely in philosophy, in government, in war, and in science (p. 70). Offering additional "hopeful proofs of genius" and of moral progress, Jefferson not only lauded American commercial industry as well as its painting and sculpture,<sup>2</sup> but he also proposed a "perpetual prohibition on the importation of slaves" (p. 96) and called to emancipate any generations of Africana children born after December 31, 1800 (p. 233). To be sure, Jefferson's advocacy of gradual manumission meant forfeiting considerable personal wealth, and his high-minded self-sacrifice has distinguished him as an early pioneer of social justice.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, pride in his country's burgeoning greatness could not solve what Jefferson perceived as a prevalent 18th-century American race problem: his ostensible race magnanimity aside, the diplomat did not actually value the enslaved Africana people he proposed to emancipate. In fact, rather than echoing the language of equality and justice he had deftly employed in the "Declaration," his tone and tenor in *Notes* unrelentingly denigrated them. Jefferson argued that if the aesthetically, morally, emotionally, and artistically inferior "negroes" were not emancipated and summarily "removed beyond the reach of mixture" with white Americans (p. 154), a race war was imminent.<sup>4</sup> Ever more tragic, American children would also be "nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny" (p. 172), and their overexposure to the "unremitting despotism" of slave masters and to the perpetual and "degrading submissions" of the enslaved would deprave their "manners and morals" and destroy their love for their country (p. 173).

Jefferson's socio-political perspectives conspicuously informed his philosophy about children's education. For example, just as he had emphasized America's artistic accomplishments as indicative of the country's vitality, he also drew a positive correlation between the visual arts and children's right development.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in much the same way that Jefferson explicitly disparaged the capacity of any "black" to create literary art or to exhibit even an "elementary trait of painting or sculpture" (p. 150), so too did he perceive a negative correlation between the presence of Black bodies in America and white children's proper education. So contemptuous of an entire race, Jefferson scathingly dismissed the existence of Black artists altogether:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (p. 150)

Inasmuch as his remedy for racial injustice and disparity entailed the disallowance of Black people and their art forms, Jefferson surely never conceived that white American children could have benefited from being exposed to and imitating the diverse humanity Black (literary) artists evinced. The well-intentioned statesman and U.S. founding father could not have predicted how his brand of patriotism would significantly inform public pedagogy about Black Americans well into the 21st century.

Not unlike Jefferson, countless Americans today have the best intentions. Despite the well-documented history of racial violence in this country – chattel slavery, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, voter intimidation and suppression, defunding public education, the prison industrial complex, food deserts, neighborhood school closures and consolidations, rabid gentrification and displacement, predatory lending and redlining, disparities in healthcare, deadly police force, and on and on – Americans, in general, remain optimistic about the country's ability to transcend race animus and to fully realize its potential greatness. Their collective hopefulness has manifested in, among other ways, murals and other public art projects all over this country. Many of these displays have been erected in memoriam to George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other slain Black men and women who have been denied visibility and justice. Organizations and community residents in at least 69 cities, for example, have collaborated with municipal and state officials to emblazon streets with huge “Black Lives Matter” banners that stretch for blocks. Not unexpectedly, for the better part of four months, waves of self-identified patriots, heralding a Jefferson-esque slogan “All (American) Lives Matter!” have vandalized some of these displays. Not all the defaced pieces were created solely by Black artists; nevertheless, destroying the art is no less violent against actual Black people than were Jefferson's own socio-political curatives. And what about the children? How are they processing the public visual representations of American citizens whose bodies and artistic expressions have been historically erased?

This interview series and panel discussion, “Re-framing Black Art: A Matter of Social Justice” features seven visual artists and arts educators/administrators whose diverse perspectives significantly contribute to the contemporary discursive landscape. Neither refuting the reality that “all lives do matter,” nor glomming on to the idea that “all Black lives matter (more than others),” this particular set of discussions purposefully refocuses Americans' larger conversation about race to determine how public education might facilitate children's ability to process and to respond to the incessant barrage of images that rigidly define Black life in only the most narrow terms, i.e., rage, victimhood, disallowance, and criminality. These ideas frame the most pervasive images of Black Americans to which an increasing number of children have become a captive audience. To paraphrase Jefferson, overexposing American children only to artwork about the “unremitting despotism” of the police and/or to the perpetual and “degrading submissions” of unarmed (yet sinister) Black Americans denies them opportunities to witness and to engage with diverse representations of Black humanity.

Each contributing artist exemplifies the power with which Black creatives, even before Jefferson's time, have expressed *that* Black lives matter as well as *how* and *why* they do. Attesting to and affirming Black human experiences, these discussions rectify the historical censure of Black corporeal, psychical, and spiritual expression and enable viewers to perceive contemporary Black creative capacity beyond neighborhood signage, murder-scene memorials, and airbrushed t-shirts, bearing the acronym “R.I.P.” As concerned school district administrators, educators, and parents all over the country grapple with how to transition students safely back into school, their failure to prioritize re-introducing art and, specifically the work of Black artists into the formal curriculum threatens to upend continuing efforts to effect social justice.

Learn more about author, Michon Benson, [here](#).  
Join the event on October 15, 2020 by registering at <https://proctor.gse.rutgers.edu/re-framing-black-art>

## ENDNOTES

1 Jefferson, T. (1785). *Notes on the state of Virginia; written in the year 1781, somewhat corrected and enlarged in the winter of 1782, for the use of a foreigner of distinction, in answer to certain queries proposed by him*. Philadelphia, PA: Prichard and Hall. doi:[https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/jefferson.html](https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/jefferson/jefferson.html)

2 Jefferson refers to “painting and the plastic arts” (70). I have not found another reference to “plastic” in the 1780s; however, I believe that he was referring to “plaster” busts made of clay or other similarly malleable materials.

3 Jefferson’s abolitionist bent pre-dated the end of slavery in both France and Britain. After some fits and starts, the former country finally re-abolished slavey in 1848. The latter outlawed the trans-Atlantic shipping of slaves in 1807 and in 1833, passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which abolished slavery in most of its colonies.

4 Jefferson was convinced that “Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances [would] . . . produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race” (147).

5 Jefferson characterizes “[d]rawing ... [as] a qualification not to be neglected in one who is to become a mother and an instructor.” “1 September 1817 to 21 April 1818.” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Retirement Series*, by Thomas Jefferson, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 533.