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Navigating the Self:
A Path to Social Justice

A Conversation With
Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
by Ami Kantawala

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz opens the biography on her website, yolandasealeyruiz.com, with a simple phrase—"This is me." As a professor of English education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the architect behind the Archeology of Self™, Sealey-Ruiz has made self-exploration and discovery the cornerstone of her work. As a strong advocate for racial literacy in education as a practice and skill, her research with teachers and English education students offers a new perspective on the development of racial literacy by affording a deeper look—or archeological dig—within ourselves to determine where issues of race and racism live. In this issue of *Art Education*, Senior Editor Ami Kantawala sits down with Sealey-Ruiz to discuss her groundbreaking work, as well as how art educators can use this concept as a lens for bringing lived experiences and racial representation into the classroom.[1]

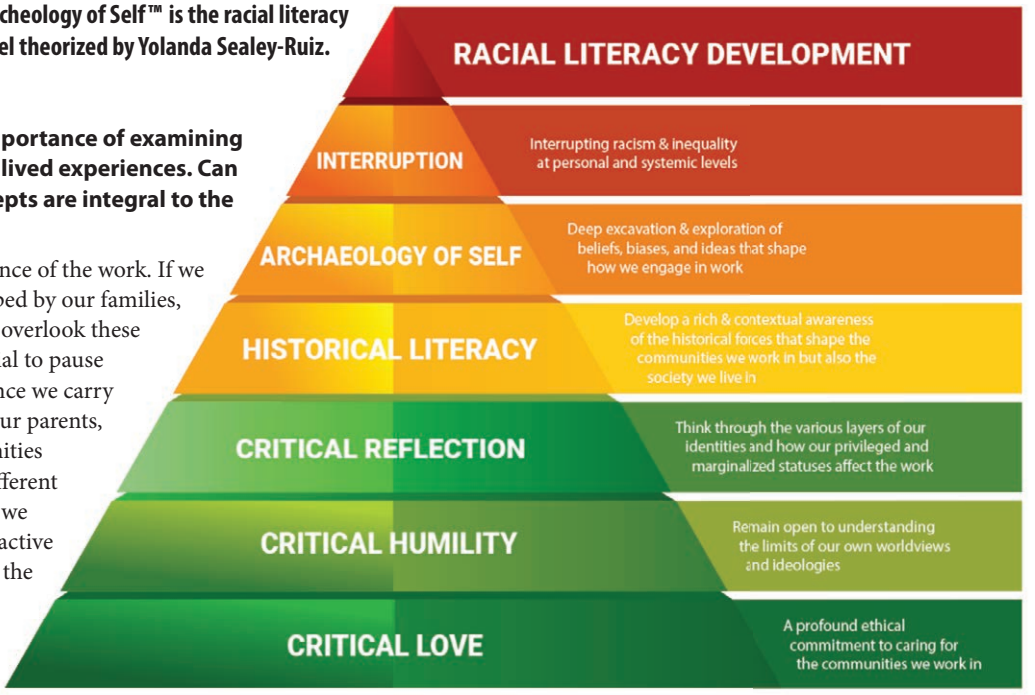
AK: Can you talk about the work you've done on the Archaeology of Self, and how it relates to who you are as a person?

YSR: What a beautiful question. The Archaeology of Self is an ongoing process that allows me to continually discover who I am becoming. I recently participated in a session where I discussed how presenting and reflecting on this concept has deepened my understanding of myself, and this theory and practice. I am in an evolutionary phase. As a visual learner, I appreciate the pyramid's original design, which Angel Acosta indeed helped me create. He also assisted in developing the second version, the 2.0, which is represented by a shovel to symbolize the archaeologist at the center engaging in the work. This theory and practice, while not entirely new, is innovative in education due to the way I apply it by incorporating elements such as love and humility. What this reveals about me is that I am curious and solution-driven, and I have always been this way, even as a child. If we consider astrological signs, my Libra nature constantly seeks justice, and so ultimately, the racial literacy development framework—by way of doing the self-work—is trying to get people to examine their biases, their racism, and stereotypes they hold, which interrupt the way they, particularly as teachers, teach, and treat children in schools, as well as the way they treat families, and specifically families of color. So, I think the theory leans into who I am as someone who is curious, looking for solutions, and always pushing for justice.

AK: How did you come up with the concept of Archaeology of Self?

YSR: I must trace back to my doctoral students, particularly Brennan DuBose, who is now Dr. Brennan DuBose, and Moises Lopez, who was also a doctoral student in the English education program. One day, during an interview about the impact of my diversity class on their teaching, Lopez mentioned that engaging in the diversity course felt like conducting an archaeological dig of oneself, which deeply resonated with me. Just 1 week later, I was interviewed about culturally responsive teaching, and the concept of "archaeology of self" emerged in our conversation. The filmmaker decided to use it as the title of the video he was creating about me and my work, and that officially marked the beginning of the concept. Listening to my students, who also serve as my teachers, has been invaluable in understanding how the class impacts their lives. This insight led me to examine the core objective of my diversity course, which is to help students excavate and remove biases related to race, gender, and religion before entering the classroom or interrupting those biases if these students are already teaching. When Moises mentioned the archaeological dig of the self, it felt like the perfect descriptor. Since then, I have trademarked the term with the help of Teachers College Alum Angel Acosta, and I have also developed workshops. I am currently working on a video series, collaborating with multiple school districts, and expanding the concept abroad, all while continuing to learn about myself.

Figure 1. The Archeology of Self™ is the racial literacy development model theorized by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz.



AK: You mentioned the importance of examining personal narratives and our lived experiences. Can you discuss how these concepts are integral to the Archaeology of Self?

YSR: Oh, yes, that is the essence of the work. If we don't examine who we are, shaped by our families, cultures, and society, we might overlook these influences in our lives. It's crucial to pause and consider how much influence we carry from various sources, such as our parents, grandparents, and the communities we grew up in, as well as the different institutions we interact with. If we don't pause, we may become reactive and act without understanding the foundation of our behavior or perceptions of others. Fundamentally, knowing ourselves and telling our stories should be the basis for approaching anything we do. I happen to be in education, but I was in the corporate world for 13 years. If I were still in corporate, I'd probably be a diversity, equity, and inclusion vice president, organizing workshops to help people understand their identities in relation to their clients. In education, our students are our clients, and I say that with the utmost respect. If we don't understand our feelings about a particular client pool, we won't serve them the way we need to. It's that simple. In the corporate world, you're motivated by money, whereas in education, the motivation should be human flourishing. The purpose of education is to help individuals emerge from darkness into light, overcoming the lack of knowledge, and using that knowledge to help them thrive in their lives.

AK: Undoubtedly, there is a significant distinction between education and the corporate world. If our primary motivation in education were financial gain, our approach would be entirely different. Instead, we teach from the heart, driven by our passion for nurturing and empowering others.

YSR: Wow, that's a poem what you just said!

AK: You've mentioned racial literacy and the Archaeology of Self as a means to maintain and enhance racial literacy. How does this process function?

YSR: Thank you for that question. My goal and my dream are at the state level—if not beyond. In this case I'll start with the state level in moving toward teacher education programs having a capstone racial literacy course experience. So, you know how teachers have to take a child abuse course, they have to take a special education course? There are certain foundational courses that students have to take as well. So, my point is, I feel there needs to be a racial literacy course, and you cannot graduate from your program until you have successfully completed this course, and the capstone project is an Archaeology of Self project.

I would also say this—and not to push my book—but certainly the book I cowrote with Detra Price-Dennis, *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education*, I'm hoping will be a go-to book on racial literacy. Another book that was based on my racial literacy model, *Teaching Racial Equity: Becoming Interrupters*, was written especially for teachers. This book provides practical steps on how to engage in critical love and critical humility, in addition to what other components of racial literacy look like in the classroom.

So, to put it very simply, first, we have to acknowledge that we're racialized beings. We also have to acknowledge that race is a social construction, not a biological one. We have to recognize that because it's been constructed, and when people construct things they have a purpose in mind. "I'm going to construct this building for what? For people to live in. I'm going to construct this road for what? For people to travel on." So, race has been constructed for a purpose, and in the white supremacist hegemonic, all of those terms in a white-focused, white-created, and white-structured world, race serves a purpose. I want people to examine race for what it is, why it was created, and how it's played out. My hope is that people will be open to saying, "Well, how has it worked in my life? And when have I used race for my benefit and against someone else?" I'm talking to white folks here, right? For people of color, when have I used race to hurt another person of color or to doubt myself? Race functions in very specific ways.

Whether you're teaching math, science, or social studies, what happens outside must be brought in because you're working with and teaching human beings who are impacted by world events. The separation between the classroom and the world is an outdated concept.

So, my goal with racial literacy is to help people, number one, and also be open to recognizing what it is. And, basically, understanding that racism is believing that one group is more deserving and more human than another, and therefore they should have more resources and all those things. And, number two, understand how it's been constructed and why, as well as how it's played out in society, and in their personal lives. That's what I hope, and it's not just for education, it's for our entire society. It's to help who you are as a person because we are going to interact with people from different so-called races, from different cultures, sexual orientations, religions, and so on. So, the fundamental principle is being open to the stories of others, understanding the stories of others, and finding out how you relate to other human beings because of—and beyond—the construction of race.

AK: In my history class, I love using resources like *Race: The Power of an Illusion* and Peggy McIntosh's "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." They definitely relate to what you're saying. I'm hoping that once I spend more time with your book, I can introduce the key components of the Archaeology of Self in my history class, as I believe students need to understand these concepts. We don't do that enough in our programs, which leaves students unprepared for teaching in diverse classrooms.

Knowing yourself is essential to maintaining your commitment, because if you're performing for someone else, it won't last. However, if your life is connected to the purpose of your work, and you know it deeply within yourself, the Archaeology of Self becomes a constant process.

So, the next question is centered on the key components of the Archaeology of Self. How would you advise students to approach each of the components you've outlined to effectively implement them in their future teaching careers?

YSR: I've given hours and hours of thought to this over the past 3 years, and I'm grateful that I address these topics in my classes and workshops. For example, among the six components of the racial literacy development model, the Archaeology of Self is the central and main component. It is the "self" that does the work of critical love, critical humility, and historical literacy. It's not just a theory, it's a practice, and I have developed activities, workshops, and thought processes around this practice.

In my class, every project students engage in is meant to excavate their own story. At one point, there is an activity where they look for the practice of each component of the model in their personal and professional lives. I want them to understand that this isn't just about their role as a teacher, but as a human being. The readings, videos, audios, texts, and guest speakers are all carefully selected to craft an excavation experience for the students. My goal is for them to become fluent in discussing race—both their own and others'. To achieve this, I carefully plan activities, use videos, and expose them to diverse perspectives. I also look for external experiences to bring into the classroom, such as plays or movies that address race. I believe a racially literate teacher must be willing to learn from what's happening in the world and not be afraid to bring it into the classroom. Many of us are stuck in old ways of teaching, but our students need to know how to function in the world. Whether you're teaching math, science, or social studies, what happens outside must be brought in because you're working with and teaching human beings who are impacted by world events. The separation between the classroom and the world is an outdated concept.

AK: Indeed, allowing our teaching to be shaped by current events keeps it relevant and responsive. Embracing flexibility in our curriculum and adapting to the ever-changing world enables students to stay current and engaged. As you rightly pointed out, strictly adhering to a syllabus without acknowledging significant events—like the George Floyd incident—would result in missed opportunities for fostering critical discussions and learning.

YSR: It is a missed opportunity. Honestly, not all of my white colleagues in teacher education or in higher education address these issues. Many of them, if they're not directly affected by it, don't discuss it. For example, if they don't have people of color in their family or a biracial child, they may be less likely to bring up such topics in their classrooms. That's the reality. Especially in the sciences, where teaching methods often remain the same as they were taught in their doctoral programs, change can be slow. This resistance to change is why the Archaeology of Self is so important. If you don't do the self-work and find your connection to what's happening, you won't see the urgency in changing your syllabus, citing people of color, or incorporating relevant audio and video materials into your lessons.

Ultimately, it all goes back to self-reflection. Our beliefs drive our practices, and our practices drive our policies, which in turn drive the outcomes. Schools need to recognize that they can't just blame families and communities without acknowledging the impact of societal structures or the educational system's role, and how schools create the conditions that lead to specific outcomes. Children don't act in a vacuum, they constantly respond to their environment, curriculum, comments from others, funding limitations, and available opportunities. They are reacting to their conditions, which is why we see certain outcomes. By promoting racial literacy, we can start by addressing the system itself, rather than placing blame on the child.

AK: How can the Archaeology of Self serve as a tool for advancing social justice?

YSR: Yes, well, I believe my entire purpose revolves around social justice. Perhaps it's due to being named after Martin Luther King's daughter, Yolanda, that my parents instilled this passion in me. I had to leave corporate America to help make the world more just—I want my legacy to contribute something positive to the world.

The Archaeology of Self allows you to quickly understand your values, beliefs, and what you're willing to put on the line. As James Baldwin said, "Go for broke." This self-awareness will help you determine your relationship to issues of justice and injustice. Knowing yourself is essential to maintaining your commitment, because if you're performing for someone else, it won't last. However, if your life is connected to the purpose of your work, and you know it deeply within yourself, the Archaeology of Self becomes a constant process.

As long as you're living, you're discovering who you are, what you're afraid of, and what risks you're willing to take for others. Being engaged in social justice involves a consistent and constant archaeology of self, as you'll always face new challenges that reveal more about who you are, and what you are willing to risk.

You have to allow the change in your thinking to change your behavior. That is how we do the work.

AK: Indeed, your audience consists of teachers who are creative beings. They may not have the same background as the students you're accustomed to working with, as some of them come straight from MFA or BFA programs. The question then arises: **How can we support these individuals in incorporating the Archaeology of Self into their teaching methods and properly engage with the work of racial literacy? It's important to recognize that this is not just about taking a class; this journey becomes a part of their lives, where they will make mistakes and learn along the way.**

YSR: How perfect is this question? For the past few to maybe 5 years, I've been working with teaching artists. Although I've been writing all of my life, I only claimed to be an artist, and a poet a few years ago, really with the inauguration poem I wrote for Tom Bailey, who is the current president of Teachers College, and after publishing two books of poetry. The artists in our world are the exact people who can bring about the change that's needed, if they're willing to do the self-work. What I suggest is that they actually turn to their art and tell the story about coming to that art. What does that art do for them? Because for me, when I write, it's to free myself, it's to liberate myself, it's to encourage myself to do the things I feel I don't have the courage to do. How do you use your art as a human being? And how do you see your art furthering humanity? Artists are the ones who do the work to help us understand what is *really* happening in the world. James Baldwin talked about this as the responsibility of artists, because our artists, in many ways, are our freest thinkers. They think in music, they think abstractly, they think in colors, they think in images, they think in poetic stanzas. Their art is a laboratory-like approach to life. So, it is the artist that we need to actually figure out the mess we're in. Because for me, I see them as the freest thinkers, and they are also the ones who tend to say the things that most people cannot say. This is why I use stand-up comedians to talk about race in my classrooms, comedians like Chris Rock, for example.

Again, the artists will say the things that most people won't. Artists can see things in ways others can't. This is why Robin Kelly, in his book, *Freedom Dreams*, talks about the power of the Black aesthetic. How Black artists are able to envision a world that we've not yet seen. Most of us are so into the everyday and maintaining the status quo, not that artists don't care about keeping their jobs, but honestly, artists operate on another level of humanity when they tap into the power of what that art does, and what it can do. Art is courageous and bold, and artists are the ones who can free us.

AK: It's interesting that you mention Robin Kelly's work, because I just finished the March issue of the journal, where I discussed the omission of Black artists from the AP African American Studies curriculum. Kelly talks about the importance of understanding Black lives for students and teachers to truly understand. We put images of the Black artists who were omitted from the curriculum on the cover, and the main tagline was, "How can we remain alert and not eliminate Black artists from what we teach?"

YSR: Ah, thank you for that work. It was Black art that actually saved Black people, right? It was the music we have so freely given, or *rather* that was taken by the wider society. It was the songs, the drumming, the dancing, the artistic creations—never having gone to most art schools because we weren't allowed in—the pottery we created out of necessity, and so on. We had to create our own pots, pans, forks, and spoons because we couldn't purchase them in stores the way other people were allowed to. So, the artmaking—the creations—were a necessary function for Black people to survive, and also to pass down our stories, and I am sure it is that way in other cultures as well.

AK: Indian culture is also deeply shaped by its artistic traditions. The cultural expressions in art, music, dance, and literature have been integral to the way the culture has evolved. However, the class system in India, similar to the racism in this country, has created a divide and disparity that is deeply ingrained. It's a complex issue, and we haven't been able to fully shake off that legacy in our culture.

YSR: There's been some really insightful work done on looking at the caste system in India and comparing it, in some ways, to the caste system here in America. Not to oversimplify it, but there are parallels between the two.

AK: So, I think what you're saying is really powerful, that artists have the freedom to do the work because they have the privilege of expressing themselves in different ways to reach diverse audiences. **Now, when our audience reads this interview and looks at your Archaeology of Self, they'll see the various elements in it, but the question that keeps coming to mind is, how do we do this work? And there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for doing this work, right?**

YSR: It's really about encouraging educators to reflect personally on who they are, what they do, their racial dispositions and beliefs, and what they bring to the classroom, as well as how can they develop racial literacy.

AK: I'm not an expert on race, but the more I learn and understand, the more I realize that you have to keep doing this work.

YSR: Yes, my dear, and let me just say this thing about the model, and I just realized this the other day because I saw it in Gholdy Muhammad's work as well—the model is like a two-way mirror. It is both a theoretical frame and a practice as it's happening. So, for example, how do you develop racial literacy? When we talk about critical humility, you have to practice humility. So, what does that look like? If you have

Start with your art and see what story it tells.

the answer for something, and let's say you're white and you're male, keep your mouth quiet and turn to a person of color who you know also has the answer, or perhaps a more nuanced way of seeing things. Be humble in the moment, in not showing your expertise, but make space for someone else's. So, as we're asking for reflection, you have to practice reflection in order to really understand what that means. And then, what I talked about in the book, is taking it to another level of what's called reflexivity. Once you reflect on something and you see the error of your ways, or you see a way to make a change, then practice differently. Actually, the next time around or in a similar case, practice the change. It is in the practicing that there is the developing. If you don't practice it, you won't develop it. If you don't practice being humble, you have no idea how to exert critical humility. There's no magic pill, there's no book, no article that you can read, although I do have resources for critical humility. What's the point I'm making? You have to be willing to change your thinking. You have to allow the change in your thinking to change your behavior. That is how we do the work. And to keep saying, "How do I do it? How do I do it?" We have to see that that is also a status quo mechanism. Because if you're constantly saying, "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know," that's preventing you from the business of doing and learning and making mistakes and doing it again. So, we also have to be very aware of what Paul Gorski calls "equity detours." I should probably develop something on racial literacy detours, because there are certain behaviors that continue to block us from diving in and doing this work. There's no way through it other than to do it.

AK: I couldn't agree more. You've articulated it so beautifully, and it reminds me of the last interview I had with Stephanie Rowley before she left. She said the same thing—you have to do the work. You're going to make mistakes, and that's okay. Because if you don't make mistakes, you can't be a reflexive practitioner. You have to learn from those mistakes and turn them into opportunities to do the right thing.

YSR: Beautifully said, and that's the challenge in a sense, because we live in a world where, in academia or certain professions, you're told that you must be the expert. You're the professor, the teacher, the lead curator—whatever it is, everyone's looking to you to have the answers, and you can get caught up in it. This is where the ego comes in. That's why humility is part of the model, because we know the ego is often what blocks people from engaging in the way they need to around the topics of race, class, and gender. Statements like, "That's not my experience," or "I know this," can be barriers. But when we humble ourselves we can be open to the experiences of others, and that can change the course of the conversation.

AK: Absolutely, which brings me to my final question. For our readers, who may be struggling to understand their own personal narrative and history, as well as those who may be experiencing discomfort in doing this work, what messages or advice would you like to share with them? Do you have any final words for us?

YSR: That's a beautiful final question, and I want to invite all people to find the way that works for them in order to process and come to know themselves. For some it's journaling, for others it's talk therapy, or music therapy. But particularly for artists, I would invite them to use their art to do a self-discovery project, specifically around race. Eventually, you can explore issues of class, gender, or sexual orientation. But specifically—if you're a musician—compose something that articulates your understanding of being a racialized being in the body that you're in and in the society that you're in. Start with your art and see what story it tells. Now, that is an act of vulnerability, particularly if you're not used to talking about this, but you do know your art. How can you use your art as a way to get to know yourself better as a human being and not just to have an identity as an artist, but to understand what that identity really means for you as a human being in the world? How can you use your art to access *that* story? That's the first thing I would say.

The second thing I would say is to find a community. As much as the Archaeology of Self is about individual work, you also need community. You can be doing this work in isolation, but if you're not willing to take risks and say or do something, you'll never be called in or out. You might think you're "woke," but if you go into a public space and say something that makes everyone give you a side eye, it's because you haven't been in the practice of sharing and thinking aloud. Find a safe and brave community to do that work. For artists, it could be a community of artists who take on the issue of race and use their art to explore it, and then talk about it. Book clubs are a start, but that also can become a status quo, or easy way out. Education is important, but simply reading a book and talking about it can be safe and comfortable. Let's get out of the comfort zone—that's the third thing, moving out of your comfort zone. These are the top three things I would suggest on how to begin, particularly for artists. And for those who are not artists, the same ideas apply—find a community, move out of your comfort zone, and find a way to open up to your own story.

AK: I think that's a wonderful note to end on, because by creating a community of practice, you can make those uncomfortable conversations more comfortable. ■

Endnotes

[1] https://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com.

[2] https://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com.

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz is a professor of English education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is coeditor of four books and coauthor (with Detra Price-Dennis) of *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education: Activism for Equity in Digital Spaces*. Sealey-Ruiz is the author of *Love From the Vortex and Other Poems and The Peace Chronicles*.[2]