

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Arts & Architecture

School of Visual Arts

**“WOW! I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW BLACK ARTISTS EXISTED!”**

**ADVOCATING FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN THE VISUAL ARTS THROUGH  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

A Thesis in

Art Education

by

Danielle M. Leveston

© 2011 Danielle M. Leveston

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

August 2011

The thesis of Danielle M. Leveston was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Karen T. Keifer-Boyd  
Professor of Art Education & Women's Studies  
Thesis Adviser  
Head of the Graduate Program in Art Education

Wanda B. Knight  
Associate Professor of Art Education & Women's Studies

Graeme L. Sullivan  
Director of the School of Visual Arts

\*Signatures are on file at the Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

In this autoethnography, I critically examine my own educational and non-educational experiences as a Black woman in pursuit of degrees and a career in the visual arts field. Intersectionality theory, specifically the lens of a working-class Black woman, is used as the theoretical perspective. The purpose of this thesis research is to provide educators with an understanding of how they can make their classroom environments more welcoming for Black students, and thus, motivate Black students to become more involved in the visual arts. Furthermore, art educators need to understand the reasons why some Black students are reluctant to participate in the visual arts as educational and professional pursuits. Within this examination, it is my hope that educators, including myself, become reflexive about their own experiences as students and teachers in order to explore several ways they can make their art classrooms and philosophical stances as teachers more inclusive to the needs of all students.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd and Dr. Wanda Knight, for all of their wonderful advice and support throughout the duration of my research study. Their knowledge was invaluable not only to this study, but also in helping me think more critically as a researcher and feminist in my everyday life.

I am grateful to have the support of the faculty members, staff, and students among the Penn State Art Education graduate program. I appreciate everyone who has encouraged me along my journey.

Without the encouragement of my close family members and friends, I may not be where I am today. I am especially thankful for my mother; whose love and support has helped me stay grounded and focused on my goals.

I must pay respects to my spiritual beliefs and other personal influences that have kept me motivated along the way.

Finally, I thank all the people that I have depicted in my stories. I appreciate all the mentors who I have mentioned; as well as those that I have not mentioned, but have served as positive examples for me to follow. I also thank those people who were not exactly my mentors or positive examples. Despite the nature of my relationships with all of these people, without them, the stories that I share would not be possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction: Using My Stories to Advocate for Black Visual Art Students.....	1
The Purpose: Helping Art Educators “Welcome” Black Students in the Classroom.....	1
Problematizing the Situation: Underrepresentation of Black Visual Arts Students.....	2
Background: Inequalities and Imbalances of Black People in the Visual Arts.....	5
Context of the Study: A Glimpse into My Experiences.....	8
Significance of the Study: Why Does Race Even Matter and Who Cares About Danielle Anyway?.....	11
How the Autoethnographic Method Benefits My Research Goals.....	15
 Chapter Two: Intersectionality Theory: Examining Oppression through the Eyes of a Black, Working- Class Woman.....	 18
 Chapter Three: The Process of Writing My Autoethnography.....	 27
 Chapter Four: My Autoethnography: Stories as a Black Woman in the Visual Arts.....	 32
It Starts at Home: Early Influences and Experiences.....	32
School Days: Early Experiences Outside of the Home.....	35
Just ‘Getting By’ in Undergraduate School.....	40
Receiving Support from People in ‘Other’ Places.....	47
Life in Graduate School and Beyond.....	49
 Chapter Five: Findings: What I Have Discovered Through My Stories.....	 56
Discoveries through My Sketchbook Drawings.....	59
 Chapter Six: Implications for Art Educators: How Can Teachers Advocate for Black Students?.....	 64
 Reference List.....	 68
 Appendix A: Drawings from My Sketchbook.....	 72
 Appendix B: Excerpts from My Journal.....	 77
 Appendix C: Institutional Review Board - Letter of Approval.....	 80

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction: Using My Stories to Advocate for Black Visual Art Students**

#### *The Purpose: Helping Art Educators “Welcome” Black Students in the Classroom*

“Wow! I didn’t even know Black artists existed,” said one of my classmates in our studio art freshman seminar in undergraduate school. It was the fall semester of 2003. We were in our classroom, divided into groups of four to five students discussing an article, which I believe featured artists from different ethnicities and racial backgrounds. I happened to be in the group with the girl who made this statement to her group members. After she made this perplexing remark, I remember saying something to her like, “Of course Black artists exist. No one talks about them though.” This ignorance was not all her fault. I sensed her statement to be genuine and, unfortunately, there are more people who would express the same sentiments. The idea that no Black (or non-White) artists exist largely stems from the little-to-no information that students receive about Black artists during their early educational experiences. Furthermore, there is the simple fact that Black artists are not as visible as the more represented White race in the visual arts.

As a Black woman who has earned a degree in visual art and is in pursuit of an advanced degree in art education, throughout my educational experiences, I have always been concerned about the low numbers of Black students enrolled in visual arts programs. When I hear news that a new Black student has enrolled in one of my academic courses, or, if I see other Black people at art education conventions, I get really excited. From personal experience, I know that the sense of excitement a Black person feels when he or she sees another Black person in their academic or professional environment is nothing new, especially when people of that race are underrepresented in their fields. I am aware that not everyone will choose to pursue the visual arts academically, but as a future art teacher, I often wonder how I can encourage more underrepresented students, specifically Black students in the United States, to become

more involved in art-making experiences, and realize that “visual art” is not as limited or inaccessible as it may appear.

In this research study, I use the method of autoethnography to critically examine my own educational and non-educational experiences as a Black woman in pursuit of degrees and a career in the visual arts field. The purpose is to provide educators with an understanding of how they can make their classroom environments more welcoming for Black students, and thus, motivate Black students to become more involved in the visual arts. Furthermore, art educators need to understand the reasons why some Black students are reluctant to participate in the visual arts as educational and professional pursuits. Within this examination, it is my hope that educators, including myself, become reflexive about how their own intersections of race, gender, and class impact their experiences as students and teachers. My hope is that this critical reflection of power relationships, by which ideas and objects are legitimated, obscured, or devalued, will lead to positive changes for art learning environments; in which these environments become more inclusive to the needs of all students. This chapter serves as an overview of my research study.

### ***Problematizing the Situation: Underrepresentation of Black Visual Arts Students***

I often ask myself why my race is rarely represented in the visual arts. This underrepresentation is interesting to me since I am well-aware of the creative contributions that Black people have made historically in the United States and in other countries as well. The ingenuity of many people who identify with being Black has played a large role in constructing what we know as the U.S.A. Over the years, I have informally researched why this underrepresentation exists and have come up with some of my own answers. I believe that for many Black people, particularly those who have been educated in underserved or working-class communities, have not had as many opportunities to engage in quality experiences in the visual arts as have people from other racial groups. Some people could state that these missed opportunities are a result of class disadvantages; while others might argue that race is the more

important factor. I would say that both of these factors, among others, directly contribute to the inequality of racial groups represented in the visual arts.

One question that remains most important to me is, “How can art teachers help Black students feel comfortable in the classroom and empower them to engage in visual art activities?” Furthermore, how can teachers encourage Black students interested in the visual arts to pursue academics and careers within the field? There is no remedy or one single answer that will *solve* these *problems* that may contribute to the underrepresentation of Black people in the many fields within the visual arts. I do not expect that all students (primary, secondary, traditional college-aged) from a specific subgroup will respond in the same way to certain forms of motivating factors simply because they identify with the same race and/or culture. However, reading and hearing stories from students may help educators understand the types of journeys that some students go through in their quest to pursue their career aspirations.

I realize that my own educational journey of pursuing visual arts degrees may hold many implications for what art educators might do to reflect on their teaching practices and teaching philosophies, in order to create an environment that supports underrepresented students. Exploring my artistic experiences prior to formal instruction, along with any other informal experiences I might have had throughout my life, are just as important as the encounters in school. As a young, Black woman from a working-class background, I find that my experiences have been different from those of my non-Black peers. Many times I have felt *othered* and have been singled out as the only Black student. I have even felt discouraged by some of my professors and have not always been given support from my peers. On top of the *othering*, as an artist-educator, I usually have to explain to people outside of the visual arts what I *want to do* with my degree. I often feel the need to clarify *what I do* or justify why I want to do it. When some of my family members and friends are unsure about what I do in my profession, this can sometimes hurt, even though I know they do not intend to hurt me; as people unfamiliar with the arts profession, they have limited knowledge and/or exposure to the visual arts themselves. Sometimes I find



myself in situations when I cannot construct a clear definition that people outside of my field would understand. This can be embarrassing, so I simply tell them I am an art teacher, hoping to cease any further confusion. However, I may be causing even more confusion, especially if hand-turkeys and Popsicle stick people are the only art projects that surface as their thoughts of what I would teach in the classroom.

The situations I face are typical of many college students, especially when they are in the fine arts, liberal arts, humanities, and other *artistic* fields. I have noticed that being Black complicates these situations. I feel as if some Black people outside of the field do not understand the importance of my profession. Sometimes, I feel like people think I am not intelligent, and that to draw pictures is simply a *manual* skill, or, that art is easy; not an engagement in higher order thinking of synthesis, comparison, and critical reflection. When it comes to White people, I often think they assume that I do not truly possess artistic abilities, and that they are skeptical of my intentions to become an art educator. When I confess these feelings now, I would like to think that I am just being paranoid and that everything is not how it seems. But I have come to the conclusion that I take on these feelings because of the way I have been treated over the years due to my race, class, and gender (Pyke, 2010). Some of the experiences I have had throughout my schooling, along with more informal interactions with people, have all contributed to my thoughts and feelings in regards to how I have been accepted or disregarded as an artist.

One could say that I have become more sensitive to criticism and also more aware of when I am being discriminated against because I have *internalized* some of the negative experiences that I, and others, have faced as a Black person in the United States. More recently, scholars have studied how White racism has manifested itself into the perspective of the oppressed (Pyke, 2010). There are “psychic costs” that the oppressed have to pay due to the inculcation of racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies about one’s racial group that have been historically perpetuated by the White dominant society (p. 553). When an individual internalizes these racist views, it can lead to self-doubt, self-hate, or disrespect for one’s race and/or oneself (Pyke, 2010). Although self-hate and disrespect for my race are

issues I cannot identify with, I can say that I have had brushes with self-doubt due to internalizing instances of discrimination and oppression.

In my quest to understand how educators can provide more moral and academic support for Black students studying the visual arts, I have decided to design my study as an autoethnography. Being a Black woman and first-generation college student from a working class background, I believe that critically examining my own experiences will help me, as well as other art educators, understand the personal struggles that underrepresented students studying the visual arts may face during their education. Learning from my stories will help me explore how educators can play a role in advocating for Black students who are interested in pursuing the visual arts in college and as a career. Through this study, I also hope I can encourage teachers to actively work on cultivating an environment in their classrooms that will make their underrepresented students feel comfortable and empower them to take part in arts-related activities. Understanding the complex issues that some Black students may face will assist teachers in better educating these students by making their classrooms, as well as themselves, more accessible and welcoming. This is just one step in becoming better educators and in providing supportive resources for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, skin color, gender, class, religion, (dis)ability, or sexual orientation.

### ***Background: Inequalities and Imbalance of Blacks in the Visual Arts***

When I use the term “visual art(s)” in this thesis, I am referring to forms of art that are visual in nature, created by the artist to produce a primarily visible product or experience. Overall, the essence of the artwork is primarily rooted in serving as a visual stimulus for the viewer. These forms of art include painting, ceramics, sculpture, printmaking, collage, mixed media, fibers, but can also take on the forms of more contemporary artwork, such as installation art, art as public pedagogy, interdisciplinary art, performative art, environmental art, cyber art, and visual art of textual language. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of what art can be. Most of the art forms that I have listed could easily fall under a

category of what is most popularly considered art in the mainstream of formal and informal education in the United States. These categories are evident at colleges and universities as academic disciplines or “majors” and “emphases” within the schools’ visual arts or fine arts departments. Many high schools have implemented visual arts “tracks” or programs for their students as well. Due to a socially constructed hierarchy within the institution of art, many of the art forms I have mentioned are placed on a higher value scale when compared with other, more non-traditional, works of art. However, it is my belief that art is made through various media, taking on many different forms. Unfortunately, many of these forms of artistic expression are not fully accepted as mainstream art.

Furthermore, when I use the term “Black people,” I am referring to people who acknowledge that they have dominant ancestral roots from the continent of Africa. To focus my study, I am primarily concerned with Black people who were born in the United States, or, have lived in the United States for the majority of their lives. These people identify with being “Black,” “Black American,” or “African American.” While African American is usually the more popular term in the U.S., I choose not to use that term particularly because some people who identify with being Black may not consider themselves *African American*. For instance, this may include people who consider themselves Haitian, Haitian American, Jamaican, Jamaican American, among others whose ancestors derive from the continent of Africa. They may also be biracial, but acknowledge their African ancestry and identify with being “Black.” The reality is that race is very complex, regardless of the labels we give ourselves or those we place upon others. Skin color is also a dominant factor in determining racial categories in the United States. People often make assumptions about a person’s racial background based solely on the color of that person’s skin. For instance, a Black Haitian may be living in the United States, and at first glance, people who do not know this person may automatically label him or her an African American, simply because he or she may have dark brown skin. However, that person may not identify with this label. Thus, I choose to use the term Black for those who I believe would consider themselves, or, are considered by other people, to be a part of the “Black race” or among “Black communities.”

Generally, Black people participate in visual arts activities at a relatively lower rate compared to other racial groups in the United States (Kamegai-Cocita, Gomez, White, & Ragland-Dilworth, 1998; Nichols, 2003). This imbalance is attributed to a number of factors, ranging from lack of parental support, misconceived perceptions about artists' characteristics, to the underrepresentation of Black artists within art history (Charland, 2010; Marshall, 2010; Young, 1995). For instance, most artists that we see and hear about are usually White men of European descent and the subject matter of the artwork we often see rarely depicts Black people or an African-centered viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> Of course this does not apply to all artwork, especially those created by Black artists. Contributing factors to the imbalance in visual art participation is partially due to the United States of America's long history of inequality and institutionalized racial oppression towards people of African descent (Knight, 2006; Lareau, 2002; Pyke, 2010).

According to the general perception of what is considered relevant art, otherwise known as "the canon," we can see that an indirect sense of racism can permeate itself into the general ideas about why we make art, what it can be, how we view it, and why we appreciate it (Marshall, 2010). Many artists of African descent are not considered a part of this "canon," which again, mainly consists of White male artists of European descent. Over time, a select number of Black artists have become accepted into the mainstream art culture, such as John Biggers, Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, etc. There has also been a gradual shift away from "the canon" with the appearance of post-modern and contemporary art, as well as certain movements intended to promote Black art and culture. But concerning many Black artists and their work, inequality within the visual arts is even more problematic due to the past and still existing inequalities that people of African descent have had to face in all areas of their lives. It is not often that students in the art classroom hear about many Black artists on a regular basis (Charland, 2010). In the same respect, most major art museums deal with Black artists

---

<sup>1</sup> Afro-centrism would be the dominant viewpoint instead of Euro-centrism. For instance, Black people, Black culture, and Black ideals would be represented in the artwork. This contrasts what is seen in the mainstream, mostly-White, art world today.

with a “Black History Month” mentality: there are a few here and there throughout the museum regularly; but, it takes a special exhibit (or month) to see works created by several Black artists.

Scholars have found that one of the reasons why some Black people are discouraged from pursuing art is because they view art as something for White people who belong to the middle-to-upper class population of society (Charland, 2010; Marshall, 2010; Young, 1995). Because of the racism that some artists of color have faced, Black people who show artistic talent and interest may be turned off from these professions and may be reluctant to visit museums and other art institutions, such as art galleries and community centers. Researchers have also found that the perception of an artist not being a financially stable career is resonant within Black communities (Charland, 2010; Young, 1995). Some also argue that many Black people, mainly those who come from working-class backgrounds, are simply not exposed to art centers, museums, and other arts educational activities due to lack of resources and/or lack of opportunities to become involved (Charland, 2010). These are just a few conclusions gathered from the small number of studies regarding Black people’s general perceptions about careers in the visual arts.

### *Context of the Study: A Glimpse into My Experiences*

Although Black people get the “short end of the stick” in regards to the racial imbalance within visual arts participation, there are a number of Black children and adolescents who are an exception and have made the choice to engage in visual arts-related opportunities as adults. I am one of these people. Since I was a little girl, I always knew that I wanted to be an artist. During those years, an *artist* was all that I believed I could be since I was not aware of all the professions available in the visual arts. Therefore, as a young girl, I made the decision to attend undergraduate school as a studio art major. I write this thesis in 2011 as part of my master’s degree in art education at The Pennsylvania State University. Prior to completing my thesis research, I received teacher certification in K-12 art. Throughout my education, I have had challenges along the way, and can most likely write a list of the

people and situations that have served as sources of discouragement. I had an extremely difficult time feeling understood or supported by some of my studio art professors, who were all White, in undergraduate school. For instance, during the development of my B.F.A. thesis work, I hardly received any one-on-one direction from them on how to write, what I should be writing about, or how to develop a focus in my studio work. I was 21 years old at the time and never had to write about my artwork before or design a studio exhibition. However, I was expected to produce a paper to accompany my artwork with only the guidance of my committee's less than helpful feedback, every other week or so. During my B.F.A. thesis defense, I even remember seeing one of my professors almost smirk and look away from me after I told her I wanted to go into art education. I guess I was supposed to feel better after my committee members told me that my exhibition was not among the worst they had seen.

I am not claiming that my White professors were racist or that they should solely take the blame for my poor performance. However, based on some of the relationships I witnessed between them and my White peers, or, other students who were more acclimated into the *culture* of the studio art program, I saw that there was a disconnect between how the art professors viewed me as a Black student and how I viewed them as people who I thought were supposed to help me, and with whom I thought I should have a mutually respectful relationship. As a result, I believe that my professors (and some students) felt as though I was not as serious about my schoolwork and artwork as the other, mostly White, students were. Within my autoethnography, I explain more about my perceptions regarding the culture of my undergraduate studio art program; but for now, I can say that I did not feel accepted in it. It can be quite discouraging when, in your academic program, you do not see someone who looks like you or who may be able to relate to your own experiences. I think that my professors could have spent more time trying to understand me; a young, Black woman from a predominantly Black neighborhood, trying to make sense of my ideas and values within a predominantly White institution and academic program. We might have been able to cultivate stronger and more positive relationships.

While negative experiences cannot be avoided in life, I believe that many people also have the chance to experience an abundance of positivity. Therefore, there were many factors that kept me afloat during those challenging times. Starting in the fall of my sophomore year of undergraduate school, I was selected for membership into the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, which is a program designed to provide economically disadvantaged, underrepresented, and/or first-generation undergraduate students with effective preparation for continuing on to graduate studies. The McNair Program is nationally recognized, with chapters at several colleges and universities across the country. Students interested in joining the program undergo a selection process which includes submitting an application, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement. After being reviewed, applicants are interviewed by faculty and staff members of the university who are affiliated with the program. If admitted, the students then belong to the new cohort that year.

The professors and staff members of the McNair Program showed me that they truly cared by giving me encouragement. The program coordinator even set up meetings to discuss academics, if my grades were not as good as they could have been. We also took trips to other schools and got the chance to speak one-on-one with professors from our prospective graduate school fields. Having the privilege to be within this supportive environment was very important for me as an undergraduate student because I always felt the support necessary to pursue my academic goals from staff members and peers, regardless of the type of grades I received.

Along with the people of the McNair Program, I am blessed to have supportive people in my life. My family, especially my mother, has always been very supportive of my academic goals. Nowadays, I continue to receive strength from several sources of encouragement, as I continue to work on completing my master's degree. All of my professors at Penn State have been extremely encouraging and supportive regarding my ideas and career aspirations. Family, friends, and other close positive relationships with people continue to keep me motivated. I can say that over the years, I have not only gained confidence in myself, I have had to undergo an attitude adjustment as well. The support I receive from other educators

and mentors contributes to my confidence building and helps me believe in myself as a student, artist, and teacher.

Overall, I want to serve as a positive role model for not only underrepresented students who want to pursue areas of the visual arts, but also for all students and educators who are concerned with advocating for underrepresented students. This desire to serve as a role model keeps me on the path to pursuing my career aspirations. Honestly, I have never really taken the time to truly reflect on my own process of preparation in my field. I question whether or not my experiences relate to the experiences of some artists and art educators who come from a background similar to my own. Some Black people who are involved in the arts often take on marginalized experiences, which are quite unique from the experiences of their peers (Fleming, 2005; Knight, 2007). Through the autoethnographic method, I explore the factors that encouraged me to pursue degrees in the visual arts, despite some of the challenges I faced as a working-class Black girl, now woman, and first-generation college student. All of my experiences, whether positive or negative, come as a result of how others treat me and most importantly, how I treat myself. These viewpoints are based on the personal characteristics that make me who I am, which include race, gender, and class. The intersectionality of these characteristics and how they affect my life chances as a student, teacher, and artist need to be studied, as they may give educators insight into how a young Black student may have internalized oppressive views through experiences due to her race, class, and gender (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Shields, 2008).

***Significance of the Study: Why Does Race Even Matter and Who Cares about Danielle Anyway?***

Involvement in the arts, including enrollment in visual art classes, can provide youth opportunities to develop relationships with caring adults who express high expectations for them. Participating in arts-related activities has been known to encourage discussion and dialog between teachers and students, set the stage for regular self-expression, increase a child's positive self-image, encourage effective problem-solving skills, and influence positive behavior (Fiske, 1999). Art-making



also provides opportunities for hands-on engagement that allows students to experiment and explore different outcomes without risk of failure (Clawson & Coolbaugh, 2001). The traditional idea of what it means to *fail* can be reconceptualized through art making, allowing youth to learn through process rather than product, discovering the possibilities of their creativity, and further experiment by learning from the failure, without feeling as if they have not been successful. However, some students are not exposed to these experiences because they are not being provided the necessary opportunities due to racial and socio-economic factors. Loss of opportunities often happens to Black students who are not being exposed to the visual arts due to lack of information, which leads to lack of interest, and places an even further educational disadvantage on these students in relation to students of other racial and socio-economic backgrounds who may be widely exposed to the visual arts.

The art classroom is a place where there is ample opportunity for all students to have quality experiences in the visual arts. One problem with this idea is that some primary and secondary level schools do not have art programs available due to major budget cuts among schools nation-wide. There are also school administrations that do not value the visual arts, and within this culture, art classes are often left out of the curriculum or are the first classes to get cut when facing financial challenges. Art teachers who are so fortunate to have their own classrooms (or positions) within a school should make every effort to reach out to and encourage their students who may not be granted the opportunities to engage in art activities outside of school. All art educators, whether in the K-12 teaching and learning environment or university-level environment, should uphold their responsibility. To elaborate, while undergoing my pre-service teaching experiences, some of my peers, who are White, would admit that they are worried about teaching in “urban” environments. When I hear the term “urban” in these cases, I know that it is code for “poor or working-class Black people or other people of color live here ... and that scares me!” Most of my White peers have lived in predominantly White, middle-class neighborhoods and have attended predominantly White schools all of their lives. The perception that White, middle-class teachers are unable to relate to students of a different race is a genuine concern and something that more

educators should consider. Their feelings are real and should not be dismissed, especially if a person intends to become a successful teacher who is an advocate to all students, regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic background.

One way for a teacher to challenge their personal views and address these fears of not being able to relate to students is to reflect on her or his own individual experiences. As human beings, many of our experiences (and lack of experiences) may lead to personal assumptions and biases of which we are not even aware (Knight, 2006). If art teachers want students, regardless of race or socio-economic background, to feel accepted in classrooms, teachers need to become aware of their biases in order to make a genuine effort to change their attitudes and better connect with students. Along with reflecting on biases, teachers should use their own stories and personal experiences as evidence that embodies the essence of problems that we are most passionate about resolving. I encourage all academics and educators to critically reflect on their experiences. Those with lived experiences outside the predominant cultural narratives should take advantage of any platform to share their testimonies.

For the Black artist or art educator, I believe that sharing stories is the first step necessary to enlighten colleagues and to encourage Black students. I take on this challenge myself. Through the process of learning about myself, I can use my analyses about my experiences as ways to help me understand how I can better educate youth who come from similar backgrounds as mine. This information is important for all art educators who teach groups of students whose race and ethnicities are underrepresented in the visual arts. Educators who do not teach in this type of environment should also find my study important. Foremost, White middle- or upper-class students need to learn about the contributions and humanity of people different from them. Also, teachers who state that they do not want to teach in these “urban” environments may find that teaching in homogenous White schools is not as easy as they think; as few, if any, of these schools exist. Moreover, in reality, if a new teacher is in need of a job, they may not have the luxury of being selective about where they will teach. Every teacher should have the desire to learn ways they can support students from all walks of life.

Being that my life as a Black woman in a visual arts field is a marginalized experience, it is fitting that I chose to include my voice as a major part of the findings in my study. The voice of the researcher is usually left out, just as I feel like my voice and others like mine are generally left out of the prominent dialog within visual art communities. What I also notice is that when those in the “Black community” are the subjects of research, they are often *compared* to their White counterparts in both narrative and statistical accounts. Unfortunately, these studies typically place Black people in an undesirable position, or, the purpose of the research attempts to explain a perceived problem within an aspect of Black communities. The situations in which the researched are involved are in opposition to the situations in which they *should* be seeking, according to the studies. These desirable positions are those that are most likely held by White people.

For instance, recently there has been an obsession with studies claiming that high numbers of college-educated Black women in the United States are single in their relationship status (Davis & Karar, 2009). These studies suggest steps Black women should take in order to have a better chance at getting married, including dating outside of their race and seeking older men (Brown, 2010). Studies like these can be problematic because they perpetuate the assumptions that: (a) being single is an undesirable status for all women and they need a man to feel fulfilled and/or so they can procreate, (b) Black women should strive to be more like women of other races and try harder to find a man, (c) Black women must be inferior because as a whole, they are least likely to get married compared to women of other races, (d) Black women ought to compromise their standards in men and even sometimes compromise their academic and professional success, (e) Black women, typically, do not date outside of their race or date older men, and (f) women, Black women in particular, are all heterosexual. There are probably many more assumptions, but based on the aforementioned assumptions, the “single Black woman” persona is a generalization that results in the stereotyping of Black women.

It is important for researchers to take extensive precautions in order to show the utmost respect for the participants of their research, and to avoid demeaning them. By writing an autoethnography, I

focus on myself as both the researcher and the researched with the intention of providing a “safe zone” for other Black people by not attributing gross generalizations to a whole group. I deem the autoethnographic method as a way to use myself to critically explore issues among the broader scope of society. I am not *pointing my finger at others*, but making my research a reflexive process by using the evaluation of myself as a bridge between the subject and the researcher.

I doubt that some of my experiences are unlike the experiences of others who are underrepresented in the visual arts. Although my story is unique in its own right, I feel certain that I share some of the same concerns as others who may have struggled with their own identities as artists, students, and educators. I hope that sharing my stories and the analysis of my experiences will encourage other underrepresented artists and art educators to look at their own experiences with a more critical eye, and as part of larger, systemic practices by which inequities are maintained. This information may be valuable to other art educators, a population which is largely comprised of White middle-class women, who may not fully understand some of the challenges that people of African descent, specifically in the United States, face at the expense of preparing to become a visual artist.

### ***How the Autoethnographic Method Benefits My Research Goals***

There are many benefits of writing this thesis project as an autoethnography. Autoethnographic writing involves highly personalized accounts in which authors draw on their own experiences to further their understanding of a specific discipline or culture. It connects the personal to the cultural within a social and political context (Holt, 2003; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Holt (2003) quotes Tierney (1998) as saying, “autoethnography confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders” (p. 66). Through this process, the author can examine his or her own story and reflexively look at self-other interactions (Holt, 2003). This contrasts other forms of research in which the author’s voice is typically silent in the presentation of findings (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997; Denzin, 2010).

In this autoethnography, I examine my educational experiences in art throughout my life. Having been born in 1985, I chronicle my experiences starting in the early 1990s, until the current year, 2011. To guide my study, I formulated lead-in questions, addressing issues such as the extent to which I was involved in formal art activities outside of school, the type of relationships I formed with my instructors and classmates, as well as how I coped with racism, classism, and gender bias throughout my education. These questions are further explained in Chapter Three. I examine both my formal and informal education, which have shaped my thoughts and opinions about myself as an artist-educator. Formal experiences include instances in the classroom such as discussions and activities with teachers, professors, and student peers. Informal experiences that I have had include discussions with teachers, professionals, and peers outside of the classroom, as well as personal engagements with art, and encounters with family, friends, and other people. More specifically, these encounters may be those in which I have felt accepted among visual art communities, or, times when I have felt *othered* by people in those communities. This sense of *othering* would be due to my race, along with other possible factors, such as class and gender. Despite all the challenges that I may have faced due to my background, I question which experiences were the main factors that helped me persevere in my pursuit of education in art over the years.

Part of my analysis involved exploring the degree to which relationships with mentors, teachers, and professors have helped shape my decision to pursue the visual arts as an academic and career interest. While I examine positive relationships, I also look at negative relationships with teachers and professors that I have had over the years. Although these negative relationships are not ideal, my encounters with these people have contributed to informing my decisions and opinions about the visual arts field and my capabilities to become an active participant. To recollect my experiences and guide my writing process, I combine various methods, which include journaling, engaging in dialog with others, narrative writing, and creating artwork. Throughout my examination, I refer to arguments made by scholars that provide support for my theories based on the experiences I have had, as well as ideas that may challenge my

beliefs. Overall, seeing how my experiences all come together has helped me acquire more insight about myself as well as the people who have helped shape my experiences. I hope that my story will help other art educators understand the impact that they can have on their students' lives and potential interests in art.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Intersectionality Theory: Examining Oppression through the Eyes of a Black, Working-Class Woman**

My life and experiences as a Black woman in the visual arts is somewhat of a marginalized experience inside of another marginalized experience. Inside those invisible corners where my race, class, and gender all intersect reside spaces that leave me susceptible to possible inequalities, stereotypes, and misconceptions. This idea alludes to the theoretical perspective known as intersectionality. Intersectionality is used to explore the relationships between identifying factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, religion, nationality, etc., and analyzes how these social and cultural categories intertwine to contribute to a system of oppression (Knudsen, 2006). Within intersectionality, cultural patterns of oppression are not just interrelated, but bound together and influenced by intersectional systems in society (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality has been conceptualized by Black feminism, feminist theory, and post-colonial theory (Knudsen, 2006). It was popularized by law professor and critical race theorist Kimberle W. Crenshaw in the late 1980s, but has roots in the multicultural feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984).

The framework was initiated as a response to how gender-based research and White middle-class feminist theory in the 1960s and 1970s disregarded race as a contributing factor to women's oppression. As a result, Black women scholars argued that the feminist movement, mostly headed by middle-class White women, did not serve as an inclusive movement, representing women from differing racial and class backgrounds. Black feminist theorists challenged the idea about gender being the main factor of determining a woman's standing (hooks, 1984). Espiritu (2000) argues that because *Black* women experience oppression in a qualitatively different way, it is important to pay attention to see "how race, gender, and class, as categories of difference, do not parallel but instead intersect and confirm each other" within their experiences (as cited in Choo & Ferree, 2010, p. 132). The intersectional experiences of

Black women in society are more impactful than experiences attributed to their race or gender as separate entities. If these interconnected experiences are not taken into consideration, the extent of the subordination of Black women in society is not accurately addressed (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007).

Sociologists Choo and Ferree (2010) first examine how different scholars have employed intersectional analysis in order to see how it could be used more universally to “inform understanding of core sociological issues, such as institutions, power relationships, culture, and interpersonal interaction” (p. 130). These scholars argue that intersectionality is broken down into three main categories. First is the *inclusion-centered interpretation* category, which focuses on “giving voice” to individuals who are in positions of oppression, and considers the intersections where identifying factors meet to be like “street corners” and have multiplicative effects (p. 133). The *process-centered* category acknowledges the intersection and resulting effects, but also takes into account that the meeting holds a transformative process that is important for comparing the effects of different dominating structures within the intersections. This model of intersectionality focuses on comparison analysis and reveals the structural processes that organize power (Choo & Ferree, 2010). The last category is *systemic intersectionality*. It not only acknowledges the effects and structures of intersectionality, but it also reveals how this is a complex system in which race, class, and gender are embedded into (i.e., effects), worked through (i.e., transforms), and *normalized* (i.e., systemic) as natural and appropriate power structures (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

In my opinion, it is important to consider all three categories of intersectionality theory. Using all three perspectives can effectively highlight the discrimination that results from a culmination of race, class, and gender. The root of these discriminatory issues lies within racism, classism, and genderism as systemic intersections that permeate the United States and the world. Understanding and studying the levels of inequalities help people come to terms with the fact that different factors lead to differing forms of discrimination (i.e., process-centered interpretations). Furthermore, for every group that is discriminated against, there is an individual who is affected and has her or his own unique set of



challenges within the systems (i.e., inclusion-centered interpretations). Thus, it is important to use all of these lenses when assessing how inequalities form, impact, and become entrenched within society.

Since intersectionality theory has not been a main concern for sociologists who are not working on gender-related issues, more recently, scholars have attempted to explore the potential that intersectionality has in general sociological research (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Not surprisingly, scholars within the field of art and art education have used the framework of intersectionality in their studies. Art educator Wanda Knight (2007) calls the intersecting factors of race, class, and gender a “triple threat” for many working-class Black women in academia. Race and poverty simultaneously work with gender, making it difficult to live in a society that has devalued and oppressed the poor, people of color, women, and other non-dominant groups throughout history (Knight, 2007). “The idea of triple threat implies that Black females inherit three major entangled social realities that are assessed negatively by the larger society – being Black, being female, and being poor” (Knight, 2007, p. 24). Knight also notes that these systems of “oppression” and “inequality” contribute to the outcomes of educational experiences within the school system, which is an institution that already represents inequalities due to socially and culturally constructed factors (p. 24).

For museum curator Tuliza Fleming, being a Black woman, notwithstanding the class factor, was enough for people to *other* her and treat her with an obvious bias. Fleming (2005) tells about her experience working as a curator of “American art” at The Dayton Art Institute in Ohio: “When people asked me about African art, they were responding to the color of my skin, which even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has yet to be fully accepted as visually representative of a true ‘American’” (pp. 33-34). In this article, Fleming further illustrates the overt discrimination she has faced by discussing an experience while interning at a major art museum. While conversing with a museum contractor (i.e., project consultant), a woman of Asian descent, Fleming expressed her desire to become a curator and eventually a director of a major museum in the United States. The contractor replied by saying, “Blacks are not emotionally equipped to handle the rigorous research, long hours, and important decisions that are required from art

curators and directors. ... Blacks should restrict their careers to less-demanding positions in museums so that they can express their natural inclinations to have fun and be emotionally and intellectually carefree” (Fleming, 2005, p. 35).

When Fleming’s case is considered, simply being perceived as Black, let alone being female and working-class, is enough to spark misconceptions and stereotypes from other people. The museum contractor knew nothing of Tuliza’s class background, made assumptions based on her race and possibly her gender, and felt it was fine to verbalize her opinions to Tuliza directly. Perhaps one of the “emotionally and intellectually carefree” positions in a museum that the woman had in mind is that of a security guard. While on visits to several major museums, I have noticed that many of the museum guards are Black. I have also seen that visitors often ignore them. Artist Fred Wilson uses his own experiences as a museum guard and his own artwork to allude to the presence of museum hierarchy and the sense of invisibility within that profession (Garfield, 1993). Wilson has stated, “When I was a museum guard I felt on display, but also invisible” (p. 49). In 1991, Wilson created ‘Guarded View,’ an installation piece in which he displayed four Black, featureless mannequins that were dressed in the different uniforms of four New York City museums. The goal is to make people aware of museum hierarchy, as well as biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions that both museum employers and visitors may possess regarding the security guard profession. The presence of these Black museum guards reflect, as Wilson states, “a certain world view, being interested in security and militaristic matters. That creates a gap. The guards who have worked in a museum for a long time know a lot about the art – they look at the same things every day, so in order to make the job bearable, they become aware of everything. When I go into a museum to create a work like ‘Mining the Museum,’ they [security guards] are part of the process of getting to know everyone who works there” (Garfield, 1993, p. 49).

Unfortunately, common stereotypes and forms of discrimination are not solely stated by the oppressor. Sometimes the oppressed engage in thoughts of discrimination against themselves, or rather, take on forms of *internalized racial oppression*. Stuart Hall (1986) defines internalized racism as, “the

‘subjection’ of the victims of racism to the mystifications of the very racist ideology which imprison and define them” (as cited in Pyke, 2010, p. 552). It is important to note that internalized racism does not necessarily mean that the person is practicing in forms of self-hatred. The “oppressed” may base their own capabilities and interests on perceptions of what other people believe their capabilities are, due to their race, class, or gender.

In a study by William Charland (2010) that explores how Black youth conceptualize *art* and the identity of an *artist*, Charland noted that some of the students disassociated themselves with the possibility of being an artist because the perceived identity traits of an artist were unlike those associated with being a Black person. For others, the perceived characteristics of an artist were undesirable because they paralleled negative stereotypes attributed to Black people. Many of the students described the Bohemian stereotypes of an artist or pictured a White male, usually French, with an egotistical attitude, dressed in a messy smock (Charland, 2010). The following are statements from a student respondent: “When [young African Americans] see what people are doing out there, when they see artists, they think ‘White.’ And then they see a basketball player, Shaquille O’Neal [they think] ‘Black’[and so] they want to do that” (Charland, 2010, p. 127). Another respondent claimed that, “White people know that doing art is White, [so] for some reason they give it more credit” (Charland, 2010, p. 127).

Other disturbing findings are that stereotypes associated with artists are often associated with negative stereotypical characteristics of Black people. These stereotypes include being guarded, moody, unkempt, unemployable, and lazy (Charland, 2010). This perception of an artist’s identity is one factor that may discourage Black people from seriously pursuing the arts. Some of the young people involved in the study did possess artistic talent and an interest in the visual arts. Because their perceptions of whom and what an artist can be were skewed, some of these students decided early on not to follow through with their interests, thus, internally oppressing themselves by conforming to stereotypes.

These stereotypes are not simply created out of thin air. As artist Kerry James Marshall (2010) explains during a lecture at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, “The [institution of art] is

something [in which] Blacks were not allowed to contribute any critical or formal input from the get-go.” Racism has always been a factor within the institution of art. For instance, prior to and during the Black civil rights era, Black artists were silenced in the larger art world by being banned from exhibiting at museums and being discriminated against when in pursuit of selling artwork. As a result of the inability to become a part of the larger institution of art, the only professional opportunities that many Black practicing artists had were to become instructors at predominantly Black colleges and universities (Bey, 2011). Adding gender to the equation can cause a more negative impact on equality. Generally, many Black women feel the need to “shift” in order to simply live within this society (Knight, 2007). In the text *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004), based on the African American Women’s Voice Project, it is stated that many Black women lead “double lives” in order to deal with the everyday pressures of racial and gender discrimination in the United States (as cited in Knight, 2007). This idea is similar to the dual role or double consciousness that civil rights activist and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) describes in his literary work *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois argues that there is a “twoness” that Black people feel: “an American, a negro: two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (as cited in Knight, 2007, p. 24). This double consciousness, or twoness, teaches Black women to “shift” between their White and Black worlds by altering their appearance, behavior, or speech; shifting to *White* while at school or the workplace, and then to *Black* while at home or with close friends (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, cited in Knight, 2007).

I believe that a Black woman’s class and background contribute a great deal to the degree in which she shifts or alters her mannerisms or speech patterns. In order to directly counteract the negative stereotypes that our society has associated with what it means to be a Black woman, many Black women in academia (including myself), have learned to actively shift themselves between two worlds. I would also argue that there are other “worlds” in which Black women shift to and from. For instance, some Black women may shift in different ways when interacting and speaking with a White man as opposed to

how they would shift in their interactions with a White woman. I question whether the concept of *shifting* also applies to when Black women interact with people from other non-White racial backgrounds. Based on personal experiences, I think shifting amongst people of races other than White does occur; however, it depends on how and where the interactions take place. For instance, in academia, it is more common to shift to the White world because it is the perceivably dominant perspective.

Within this act of shifting between worlds, young Black women may lose the essence of their real voices as well as their unique identities. Just as Black identities are often silenced in the realm of art, Black female identities are often given up in exchange for academic success in typical school settings. Aside from the concept of shifting, Signithia Fordham (1993) examines how Black women in the academy are compelled to practice *gender passing* in order to achieve a certain level of success in school and in their interactions with teachers and professors. They are often encouraged to leave their sense of Black femaleness behind and in turn pick up a “phantom-like” persona in which they either “become and remain voiceless or silent, or, alternatively, impersonate a male image – symbolically – in self-presentation, including voice, thinking, speech pattern, and writing style, in the formal school setting ... assemblies, club meetings, and so forth” (Fordham, 1993, p. 10). To deal with the patriarchal structure, even in their predominantly Black schools, in which the male student population is oftentimes more favored, these female students must imitate the behaviors of their male counterparts or even silence themselves in order for their intelligence to be taken seriously.

Furthermore, the act of silencing themselves or passing allows them to avoid the “loud Black girl” stereotype (Fordham, 1993). Many Black women have tried to avoid this stereotype for decades. The “loud Black girl” label stems mainly from the socially constructed idea that Black women are loud, defiant, and aggressive. Fordham (1993) argues that Black women have a very culturally specific persona, based on the fact that they have, in a sense, had to construct their own identities over time. These identities, taking on the attributes of self-reliance, perseverance, and assertiveness, have starkly contrasted the idea of what is considered traditional womanhood from a Euro-centric point of view. Thus,

in the school setting, a Black girl's refusal to conform to the standards of *good behavior* for a female student is often seen as an act of defiance by their White teachers (Fordham, 1993). In this type of environment, it is almost impossible to succeed academically without consciously choosing an alternative to the "loud Black girl" stereotype.

The two acts of shifting and gender passing may seem like passive ways to counteract stereotypes of Black people and Black women specifically. However, these actions are very conscious and often become second nature for some Black women after years of constructing these shifted identities. In my experience over the years, I have learned how to shift between Black neighborhoods to White neighborhoods, to predominantly White school environments to being at home with family and friends, and to speaking with professors to conversing with the clerk at my grocery store back home. I, along with many of my Black female friends from the working-class, understand the *need* to shift between environments. Many of us have been leaders of school organizations, and have been leaders in other realms. So, instead of silencing ourselves by gender passing, we often focus on altering our speech and mannerisms, which we call "code switching." This is similar to the concept of shifting. When speaking in front of White audiences, it is common for some Black women to lighten their tone of voice in a way that sounds similar to the normative "White American" tone of voice. When going back to their own comfortable space with close family and friends, Black women are more prone to speak in their natural tone of voice. Furthermore, going back to their "home" voice deters them from being labeled a "goody-two-shoes" or "White girl" by the Black people in their communities. So a balance must be acquired (when code switching) because an academic Black woman from a working-class background is at risk of being perceived as "the Other" in both of her worlds, personal and professional.

All of these examples have shown the ways in which a Black woman may deal with the complexities that the intersections of race, class, and gender may bring into her life. Some of the ways in which a Black woman views herself is essentially based on socially constructed concepts. Unlike White women, Black women experience gender inequality within a different socio-cultural space, which

includes being Black and being a woman. Class inequalities contribute to another layer within this space. The inequalities that a Black woman faces can vary depending on her level of educational attainment, financial status, and sense of cultural capital (Lareau, 2002).<sup>2</sup> Through the method of autoethnography, I examine how experiences resulting from these multiple layers intersect and interact within my own life.

---

<sup>2</sup> Cultural capital is largely defined as non-monetary social assets, such as education or intellect, which lead to social/upward mobility. In this case, a Black woman's college degree could be considered cultural capital.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Process of Writing My Autoethnography

Autoethnography is largely defined as an ethnographic study in which the author-researcher uses his or her own experiences within a specific culture to look more deeply into self-other interactions. These texts are usually written in first person narrative and consist of dialog, emotion, and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By writing themselves into their work as major characters, autoethnographers challenge common views, particularly those prior to research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regarding silent authorship, in which the researcher's voice is typically silent in the presentation of findings (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997; Denzin, 2010).

Autoethnography as a research method has sparked much criticism by scholars who deem it too difficult to analyze self, even within the scope of subjectivity that is acknowledged as important to qualitative research. There are doubts about its rigor and validity, as well as skepticism regarding its scientific merit (Holt, 2003). Autoethnographies have also been criticized for being self-indulgent and narcissistic (Coffey, 1999; Holt, 2003). Several scholars who advocate for autoethnographic research argue that it cannot be judged by the same traditional criteria used to evaluate other forms of qualitative research (Denzin, 2010; Garratt & Hodkinson, 1999; Sparkes, 2000). Sparkes (2000) suggests that scholars continue to develop new criteria for evaluating the autoethnography and resist the desire to "seek universal foundational criteria lest one form of dogma simply replaces another" (as cited in Holt, 2003, p. 19).

While some people advocate for pushing the boundaries of what methods can be perceived as valid research, others advise that autoethnographers use reflexive practices that can connect their own experiences with the larger world. Many autoethnographers choose to focus on writing in a more evocative style, which uses subjective and compelling descriptions of the author-researcher's emotional



experiences to create an “emotional resonance” with the reader (Anderson, 2006, p. 377). Leon Anderson (2006) highlights *analytic autoethnography*, an alternative to evocative autoethnography, which can be used by researchers who may want to follow a more traditional style of social inquiry. He proposes that analytic autoethnography is based around five key features, in which the researcher: (a) is a full and complete member in the research setting, (b) practices analytic reflexivity, (c) provides narrative visibility of the self, (d) engages in dialog with informants beyond the self, and (e) commits to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006).

There are considerable differences between evocative and analytic autoethnography. The intent behind evocative autoethnography is to reach readers through intense emotion. Researchers who practice this method often reject traditional analytic assumptions and believe that the integrity of evocative autoethnography is “violated by framing it in terms of conventional sociological analysis” (Anderson, 2006, p. 377). On the other hand, analytic autoethnography seeks to support experiences within the narrative by connecting them to a theoretical perspective. I focus on practicing the analytic method in this autoethnography. Therefore, within my narratives, I present detailed descriptions of my experiences and connect them with supporting statements from the literature I have reviewed. Comparing my experiences with the experiences of others in scholarly research will provide a framework in which to situate my own experiences within a social context. Although some people may become emotionally moved by my stories, I want to make sure that I validate my research in order for readers to make connections in a broader sense.

To guide myself through the writing process, I created a set of lead-in questions that I address in my study. Although my narratives are not written in a question-and-answer format, I use these questions to provide a springboard for my writing. Therefore, I was more prone to discuss the experiences in which I feel are most significant to providing suggestions on how educators can be more responsive to underrepresented students in the classroom. However, the stories I chose to highlight are not subjected to my responses from this set of questions alone. These questions include: *What was the nature of my art*

*programs in school while in grades K-12? To what extent did the lack of involvement in formal out-of-school art activities as a child affect my desire to pursue the visual arts as an adult? How did I cope with racism, classism, or gender-biases while pursuing my visual art degrees in undergraduate and graduate school? What types of relationships did I establish with my instructors and student peers? When I faced specific challenges or setbacks, who or what did I have as a source of moral/academic support? How did these support systems encourage me to continue with my studies in the visual arts? Overall, do I still feel discriminated against because of certain intersectional factors within my identity?* I also address other situations that may not be directly associated with visual art, but are important in illustrating how intersectionality theory relates to my life.

I combine two main styles of writing and explore different ways to generate the recollection of my experiences in order to write my autoethnography. I have written in a personal journal, which served as a place for me to immediately write about and reflect on thoughts and events that came to mind, lessening the possibility of forgetting to include them in my autoethnography. Journaling allowed me to use a very informal tone when writing. Grammatical errors were allowed and even jargon that I would not typically use in an academic paper. I then edited these stories as I included them in the autoethnographic section of this thesis. The other style of writing started right here in this electronic document before I had even started developing my thesis into a full paper. This style served as a way to write about my experiences in a more formal tone. I wrote in-depth descriptions of my experiences, detailing what actually occurred, along with how I internalized the situations. Writing in this way helped me figure out how I wanted to organize my stories.

Other forms of data collection were sharing my thoughts with others and creating artwork. Although I do not include the conversations I have had with people about my study in this research paper, sharing my thoughts and ideas with people has played an important role in helping me articulate the purpose and significance of my thesis research. Engaging in this dialog has also assisted me with recalling and defining the significant experiences I have had, which fit the criteria of being included in my

data. The creation of artwork, which consists of drawings, has allowed me to creatively respond to the questions that I posed. Some of these drawings were quick sketches, while others were given more detail. The act of creating was also very helpful in triggering experiences I may have forgotten about, as well as raising new issues that were not brought up in my original set of questions.

Writing this autoethnography did not come naturally for me. It is unfortunate that some critics of autoethnography do not consider this research method as rigorous. However, writing about oneself can be a difficult task. It is not easy to discuss situations that I, up until now, kept private, had only discussed with people who are extremely close to me, or, had not even consciously thought about in a critical way. I also had to put myself in a frame of mind to think about my experiences as “findings” or “data.” Interpreting my findings has been the most difficult part of my study. It is difficult to be introspective and reflexive about certain personal situations, and then, have to make connections between your situations and what occurs to the general population. Furthermore, the Institutional Review Board required that I apply for approval to conduct my study.<sup>3</sup> This is the same procedure I would take if I were conducting a more traditional ethnographic study dealing with other human subjects.

As a researcher, I understand that I bring my own biases into the conception of my study, to the theoretical lens in which I chose to view my research, as well as to the overall findings and implications. It was important for me to be aware of these biases and to address them while I wrote my paper. Confronting researcher bias in an autoethnography is not much different than addressing them in more traditional qualitative research methods. The main difference is that most of my biases are exposed more within the autoethnographic section. Again, within these narratives, I work through the events that have happened to me and conceptualize them in a larger context. I understand that some of my experiences may not apply to some Black people who are involved in the visual arts. However, due to my interactions with some Black peers, it can be said that I share similar experiences with others. My intentions to provide these stories are not to simply evoke a sympathetic or empathetic response or to show people *how*

---

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix C for IRB letter of approval

*hard I've had it* in life. I hope that readers critically think about how these experiences have affected me. Furthermore, there are other Black people who have come before me and have experienced a more direct and overt form of racism, as well as discrimination based on class and gender, than I. To dismiss this fact and try to evoke only sympathy from my stories would negate the struggles that prior generations went through in order to lay down a less discriminatory path for myself and others to follow.

Along with understanding the biases I bring to my research study, I also want to make sure I avoided making generalizations. The worst thing I could do at this point is provide a platform that generalizes the experiences of working-class Black women serving in the field of visual art. Nor do I want to stereotype Black students by suggesting to art educators that my proposed implications should be generally applied to any and all situations involving Black students. The sharing of my stories is intended to help educators gain insight from another person's experiences, which are different from theirs, especially since the majority of educators in the U.S. are White middle-class women. I also believe that some of my Black peers may be able to relate to several of my stories. I attempt to highlight the importance of not assuming that my situations are parallel to every person of my race on a similar academic journey.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **My Autoethnography: Stories as a Black Woman in the Visual Arts**

#### *It Starts at Home: Early Influences and Informal Experiences*

I am an “80’s baby” who was born in Chicago, and then grew up in the south suburbs of the city in a two-parent household with three younger brothers. We have lived in the same working-class neighborhood since I was in the first grade. Our sole source of income came from my father, who is a delivery person for a baking company located in the city. We were not poor, but we were definitely not rich either. Financial situations could get bad sometimes, but fortunately, I can say that my family and I never had to go hungry a day in our lives. The common term for this type of living situation might be called “living paycheck-to-paycheck.” However, because my parents always made sure to provide for their children, both necessities and affordable luxuries, I never felt deprived or like I *missed out* on anything. My family and I never attended any art museums together when I was younger. In spite of not visiting any art museums or taking part in recreational art programs as a child, visual art, particularly drawing, was always my area of interest. I may not have known the exact term “visual art,” but I knew that I enjoyed creating artwork. Drawing was all that I focused on at one point in time. Paper and pencils were easily accessible. Plus, drawing seemed to come naturally as a way to express myself through the artwork I chose to create.

I always had drawings pads, drawing pencils, and colored pencil kits that my mother would buy for me. My favorite subjects to draw were people. Sometimes, I drew people from an image that appeared in my mind, but most times, I would look at magazines with my favorite celebrities in them and draw their portraits. Memories of drawing the boy band N’SYNC during my “teeny bopper” days cross my mind, and I recently came across a colored pencil drawing of Janet Jackson that I did around the same time frame. I also had a “thing” for designing clothes. My inspiration for designing clothes must have come from my obsession with clothing catalogs. For some reason, I would look at them for hours;

sometimes making a list of all the clothes I wanted, knowing that I was not going to bother my parents about buying these clothes for me. I guess I would also study how the clothes looked and the type of poses that the models held. Overall, everyone in my family knew about my interest in art. Early on as a child, my classmates found out that I could draw after I brought my artwork to school. Occasionally, I drew portraits of some of my classmates, at their requests. I always gave the portraits to each student, without charge.

I cannot pinpoint an exact moment when I decided that I wanted to become an ‘artist.’ I was not greatly influenced by the things we were doing in my elementary art classroom. However, my mother was an artist and I think she had a lot to do with me becoming interested in visual art. Like I stated earlier, my family was never the kind to go visit art museums, art galleries, and artists’ talks. But, ever since I was little, my mother was always working on some kind of art and craft. She used to sew clothes for my younger brother and I on her Singer® sewing machine. I still have photos of myself from my kindergarten years dressed up in my mom’s “custom” clothes. She also did macramé, made doll clothes, jewelry, and she even designed plates, all of which I consider art. Moreover, my mom would paint on canvas when she was younger. I got the chance to see some of her paintings; but, before I was born, many of her paintings were destroyed in a mild flood that took place in the basement of my grandparents’ house. Then, she moved some of her paintings to my paternal grandparents’ home after my parents got married and while she was living with them temporarily. When my parents were ready to collect her things to move to their own apartment, they found out that my paternal grandfather had thrown the paintings out because he somehow was not aware that they belonged to her. My mother says that she no longer paints because the chemicals from the paint cause an allergic reaction to her skin. Unfortunately, there is a possibility that the idea of painting left a bad taste in her mouth after someone devalued her artwork by throwing it away.

Although my mother was always engaging in some form of art, when she started having children, she became even more interested in using her hands to produce craftwork. One reason for this is because,

shortly after I was born, she became a stay-at-home mom and wanted to do things to keep her hands moving. When my mom worked outside of the home, I would stay with my maternal grandmother during the day. When I was a baby, my mother decided to quit her job and take care of me at home. While my grandma loved me very much, my mother realized that I was not being cared for to the degree in which she felt she could care for me herself.

The other reason for my mother getting heavily involved in her work was because she needed to find ways to make extra money for the household. Much of her motivation for doing what she has done was (and still is to this day) to supplement my dad's income and make sure that we always had food on the table and the bills paid every month. She even opened an Ebay store to sell her creations around the years 2003-2004 in order to put money towards my undergraduate education. So, it was not out of luxury that my mother decided to raise her children at home. Growing up, I realized that many of my Black friends had mothers who worked outside of the home. Thus, a Black working-class, stay-at-home mother was rare in my neighborhood. However, being a woman who was also raised by a working-class stay-at-home mom, this was the environment that my mother grew up in, thus, she was used to it. Plus, both of my parents are products of a male-dominant culture and upbringing. They were teenagers during the 1970s, which some might refer to as a movement, awakening, or raising of feminist critical consciousness. However, my parents are not college-educated like many of the people who participated in feminist consciousness-raising, so they missed opportunities to be a part of the women's rights discussions and demonstrations. Therefore, since my father made more money working his job than my mother did at hers, there was no discussion about my father quitting his job to raise children.

My mother has told me that she does not particularly consider herself an *artist*, but I beg to differ. Our motivations to create and learn about art might differ, but my mother's artistic influence on me still remains. In a study, Charland (2010) found that parental and familial acknowledgement is one of the key factors that encourage young people to identify themselves as an artist or show interest in wanting to pursue the visual arts. There was one Black student involved in the study who definitely understood his

potential as an artist, yet he was unsure about how he would seek out this career path. However, it was clear that his family supported him and his talents. He received art supplies as gifts from aunts and uncles, and his mother encouraged him to study art in college. Several members of his family had also been involved in the arts throughout the years by creating craftwork. In the same study, Charland (2010) also noted that a lack of encouragement from family members can turn Black students away from holding interest in the visual arts. Some students even felt at risk of alienating their family members. In relation to familial acceptance, students stated that, “[African Americans don’t choose to study art in college] because they’re afraid of what other people would think of them as an artist” and “[My parents would ask], ‘When you gonna get a real job?’” (Charland, 2010, p. 127). Fortunately, I have always been encouraged by members of my family to pursue art. I was never afraid of being deterred by my family because I knew my mother created artwork. Maybe a part of her support for me stems from the fact that her own artwork was in a sense devalued at some point in her life, particularly, the incident when her work was thrown away.

### *School Days: Early Experiences Outside of the Home*

The public schools that I attended as a child in my neighborhood were all predominantly Black schools. Although the student population was majority Black, I remember all of my main classroom teachers being White women and men (mainly women though). As far as formal early experiences in art, I remember taking part in art class throughout elementary school. My art teacher Mrs. G was not fond of many students, but for some reason, she liked me. In fact, most students thought she was mean and did not show her much regard. But since she liked me and liked that I did my work, I did not really notice her meanness. In class, we mostly drew pictures and painted. I think we created some kind of sculptural pieces at one point. I remember really liking art and I think that excelling in art at school encouraged me to continue to develop this interest at home. One thing that I distinctly remember is that Mrs. G taught from a cart. At the time, I did not really know what “art from a cart” meant and I did not understand the



kind of implications that came along with that title. Now that I understand what “art from a cart” means, and have even been brushed with the scare of possibly teaching from a cart while pre-service teaching, I have even more respect for my elementary art teacher.

My formal visual art experiences during middle school seem to be less significant than my memories in elementary school. I do not remember making much art in school during seventh and eighth grade. I do remember us having an art classroom and I remember being in that classroom a few times. I even recall attending an art club meeting, one time. But, for some reason, I cannot remember making or learning anything significant to technical art skills, or even discussing art history. Hopefully, I have not blocked out or repressed any memories. Looking back, this lack of opportunities for visual art engagement in middle school was very unfortunate for me. Middle school can be a point in one’s life when a person begins to better understand his or her skills and future aspirations. Fortunately, I became involved in another form of art, which was music. I joined the school choir in eighth grade, after auditioning. I was also somewhat interested in joining the band, but I never followed through because I had no prior experience playing a musical instrument.

However, just like in elementary school, I would bring my personal drawings to school and show them to some of my classmates. When my peers saw that I could draw, I received many requests to draw their school portraits or photos of their favorite musicians. I actually continued to do this up until high school. Many times when my peers saw my drawings, they would ask, “Did you really draw that?” Other times, they were partly skeptical and would claim, “You couldn’t have drawn that.” As far as I can recall, no one ever came out and stated it; but, I was always sure that their skepticism stemmed from the fact that I was a girl. Looking back on it now, I realize that it could have also been because of the fact that I am both female and Black. It seemed strange to believe this at first, since I attended predominantly Black schools, but generally, these students are no more exposed to Black artists than White students. The majority of Black students are not always exposed to the arts (Charland, 2010; Young, 1995), so it

makes sense for them to question how and why a young Black girl would cultivate these kinds of interests and skills.

My high school art class was somewhat of a joke. My academic adviser warned me that this class, which was the *only* art class offered, was generally occupied by incoming freshmen or graduating seniors who did not want to do any work. Because I had no real academic instruction in art, and since I had plans of majoring in an arts-related discipline in college, I was determined to enroll in the class anyway – so that I could get some kind of experience. To my dismay, I soon understood why my adviser was concerned about me taking the class. While in this class, I felt like I did not learn anything worthwhile about art and art-making. Many of our assignments were free drawings or paintings. We had some projects, but I can honestly say that I was taught very little about art techniques, information about artists, innovative ideas in art, and how to explore social and cultural concepts through art.

I do not want to blame everything on my teacher though. The students in the class were pretty much like my adviser described; taking the art class because it was “easy.” I honestly think my art teacher would have tried to motivate the students more if he felt that most students would actually be self-motivated enough to do “real projects.” Judging by the old paint bottles on the shelf, there was most likely a budget problem in the art department as well. On the positive side, I do remember asking him if he would help me with getting my portfolio together for college admissions. I even showed him some of my artwork that I had completed outside of class. Although I did not end up needing his assistance, he did agree to help me with anything I needed. I believe that the potential art-making experiences I missed during high school were much more detrimental to my education than what I may have lacked in middle school. I missed out on classroom time that could have been used to experiment in art, learn about myself as an artist, extend my artistic interests, and form ideas to connect my artwork to the world around me. After reflecting on this experience, however, I *have* learned more about the type of teacher I want to be in the classroom; a teacher who tries hard to bring her passion into the classroom, as well as one who is connected to her students and sets high expectations for them.

During high school, I applied to a summer internship for high school students at Columbia College in Chicago. My cousin had attended Columbia College as a creative writing major and persuaded me to apply. Students would have the chance to enroll in college-level art classes for free and receive instruction from college professors. I thought this would be a great opportunity for me since I planned to attend college as a visual art student. Applicants were required to submit an art portfolio as part of the application process. However, I was worried about not having a variety of styles among my body of artwork. Although I considered myself to be good at my personal artwork, I was not sure whether the work I had done thus far was up to the high caliber necessary for college admissions consideration. I ended up not getting accepted into the program at Columbia College. I think this had somewhat of a negative impact on me because I remember not wanting to apply to Columbia College's undergraduate program. I believe that I could have had a better chance of being admitted to the program if I had the opportunity to build an extensive portfolio during my high school years. But there were really no opportunities for me to enroll in quality art classes during high school. There was only that one art class offered which, unfortunately, served as a fill-in for the school curriculum.

A large part of my high school experiences was being a member of the school's speech team, which I joined during the second semester of my freshman year. Because of regular school hours and staying afterschool for practice, I think I ended up spending more time at school than at home during these years. Fortunately, the time I invested towards the team did not have a negative effect on my academics. My main competitive event was original oratory, in which I delivered a speech that I wrote concerning a topic of importance to me. I remember that one of my speeches had to do with the importance of music education. This further illustrates how strongly I feel about education in all areas of the arts. Being on the speech team was a great experience for me because it gave me a sense of leadership and helped me get over typical fears of speaking in front of an audience. Competing in speech competitions also taught me about how society favors certain speaking styles and mannerisms over others as a model for what is acceptable. Generally, the speech activity is considered a "White" activity. Most

of the teams we competed against consisted of mostly White or all White students and coaches from schools in middle-class neighborhoods.

Most of the “speech kids” (as speech coaches often called us) I competed with at speech competitions were White or Asian, and they sounded very “proper.” They were also mostly female. Some of the kids who seemed to be of Indian or Middle Eastern descent had accents different from those typically found in the United States, which seemed to be even more appealing to the judges. These were the people who placed in the top three positions and won awards for their schools. If they were Black kids, they sure sounded like all the other competitors. The few Black competitors who did not have a *lighter* tone in their voices were not always the ones seen on stage winning awards at the end of the day. I have always been a good speaker, but to eliminate the risk of not placing or winning awards in my events, I made the conscious decision to lighten my voice and sound more “White.” This idea of what the typical *White voice* sounds like mimics a very proper, professional sounding voice, similar to the voices of many news anchors heard on television and radio in the United States. It is free of any strong accents that can be used to identify a person’s geographic location or connect them to any unique ethnicities. After a while, this way of speaking, while competing at tournaments, came naturally. I was winning too. The message I received was that if I had a White sounding voice, White sounding speech patterns and inflections, then that made me an exceptional speaker.

This message was strongly reinforced until one of my judges gave me a lower score than usual and made a comment on my scoring sheet, telling me to “be yourself.” The judges have to write their names on the scoring sheets, so I knew which judge made the comment. She was a Black female judge from another high school in our school district, which was also predominantly Black. From then on, my coach and I attempted to break down my usual competing voice and bring *myself* back into the equation. I realized that trying to be myself while competing in speech activity was much harder than code-switching. I felt like I finally got to the point of being myself the next time this woman was my judge. She gave me a higher score than before and even made a note of my progress. I do not remember if my

scores from other judges became lower or higher, but, I did place extremely high in the regional competition that year and I did fairly well at sectionals.

As I reflect on that experience now, I think I finally understand what her words “be yourself” meant. She did not know me personally, and I do not ever remember speaking with her outside of my competitions. However, I think she may have picked up on the fact that I was actively code-switching and trying to sound like the White girls from some of the other teams. Whether or not this was the case, that is how I internalized her words. Regardless, I now understand why it was so important for me to be myself. Even if I did not win some of the competitions, it would not matter because I was making it known that my voice mattered, including my own speaking patterns ... my own tone ... my own inflections. Through my own experience, I have realized that even very young Black women notice the need to *shift* as a defense mechanism of the “twoness” they feel in their lives (Knight, 2007). My speech teammates and I would even joke about the need to talk in this stereotypical White voice in order to be taken seriously. So this was an issue we clearly recognized, but because we enjoyed the activity, we learned how to navigate within this narrow space.

Despite not having worthwhile academic experiences with art in high school, I never doubted my decision to pursue visual art in higher education. I was interested in a few other academic areas, such as communications and English, but mainly because I felt like I was good at these things as well. In school, I was able to take part in Radio/TV class, and I could see my strengths through the work I completed in my Advanced Placement English class. But art was something to which I was naturally drawn. I was not sure exactly what I wanted to do, but I have always believed in the saying, “Do what you love and what you’re most passionate about. Otherwise, you might regret it later.”

### ***Just ‘Getting By’ in Undergraduate School***

I entered college in the fall of 2003. The transition to undergraduate school was not easy. Academically, I was fine during my first year. But, I definitely felt a sense of culture shock after my first

semester. My college was located in a small, rural town in Missouri. Undergraduate enrollment was about 8,000 students and fewer than 400 of those students were Black. Not surprisingly, this was a predominantly White institution. I was amazed when I heard some students' stories about never meeting any Black people until coming to college. I also remember hearing something, I will never forget, at the orientation for all the new art majors. This orientation took place during the first week of school. I was conversing with some students, who were all White, as we waited outside of a classroom to go into our next session. One girl in the group started to express her frustrations with the college and all the activities we were advised to do during orientation week. I will paraphrase, but she basically said, "I am so tired of all the diversity awareness stuff we have to keep going to. I mean, I know about ... colored people." I just looked at her, amazed that in 2003, the word "colored" came from the mouth of an 18 year old. I did not say anything to correct her though. No one said anything. If I had responded, I am sure I would be at risk of being labeled the "angry Black girl" during the first week of school. Back then, I did not have the language to educate her about how her statement was uninformed and insensitive on several levels. I sometimes wish I could go back in time to that moment and get a "do over."

Within the first few weeks of school, I immediately tried to make friends with most of the girls living in my residence hall. The majority of my hall-mates were White, aside from one other student who was Black. At this time, I got to know her on a superficial level, but she did not really hang around the residence hall or converse with the other girls much. Before entering school, I was very adamant on getting to know people from different backgrounds and not just hanging out with people because they looked like me. But I soon felt like I was missing something. I had yet to make many real connections with students in the Black community at school. During the middle of my first semester, I finally started making more friends within the Black population on campus, and felt like I truly had a place to belong. This is not because I did not want to have non-Black friends. But, within the predominantly White environment at this school, it got to a point where I felt like I was not being myself and once again found

myself “code-switching” or *shifting* in order to fit in with the other students. These feelings were also present while in the classroom.

Overall, as an undergraduate student, I was not very pleased with my experiences in my B.F.A. program. Half of my discontentment had to do with the unwelcoming environment along with the lack of support I received from some of the White faculty members and some of the White students in the fine arts department. However, in the beginning, unlike the experiences of some college freshmen I knew, my first semester of college went exceptionally well. At this point, I had no concentration courses in art yet, but I was taking foundation courses in both drawing and design. Although these were basic courses, until then, I had not learned some of the core concepts. Through discussions with other students, I realized that many of my classmates had taken rigorous visual arts classes in high school, which prepared them for the work they were getting ready to do in college. I, on the other hand, had never even picked up a canvas board in high school, and cannot remember a truly significant art project I made in middle school.

So there I was in college, during my second semester, with no prior formal art instruction, sitting in my three-dimensional design class. In this class, we used different types of materials, including chicken wire, cardboard, foam core, wood, fabric, etc., to make three-dimensional structures. By now, my design instructor had become displeased with my quality of work, and did not hide it. She went from praising my two-dimensional drawing and design work during my first semester, to publicly insulting my work second semester. She was the type who would tell her students that their work “sucked,” no matter who they were and no matter who else was around. I even spoke with her about my inexperience with three-dimensional design artwork, and I remember her being empathetic to a degree. I think she let me redo a project. Although I was having a hard time with my technical skills in this class, I was really putting effort into my work. Deep down, I felt like some of her negative feelings toward me stemmed from a friendship I had with another Black student, who enrolled in the class at the beginning of the second semester. I learned from this student that my professor was her adviser and they did not have the best relationship. The student told me about a conversation she had with our professor about double

majoring in another academic area. My professor discouraged her, saying something to the likes of her not being able to handle all the coursework. My classmate felt offended and took it personally. We were the only two Black students in our art class; two out of three Black students total in the fine arts program at that time.

Although I already had periodic encounters with racism, and was expecting it because I was attending a predominantly White institution, this was the first time I started to believe that I was possibly being mistreated regarding my artistic abilities due to my race and the dark color of my skin. To make matters worse, my own adviser did not seem very supportive of me either. While in a meeting with him during my sophomore year, I had expressed my desire to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree instead of a Bachelor of Arts degree. This change of degree status would take more time because I would have to enroll in extra classes. I also talked to my adviser about my desire to attend graduate school. He basically suggested that I continue on with the B.A. because getting the more advanced degree would require more money, and I did not have to go to graduate school in order to get a job. He was not very interested in speaking to me any further about changing my degree status and did not offer to help or give me any advice in regards to my aspirations for graduate school.

This exchange with my adviser was very discouraging; as he should have been someone I could trust and speak with about academic aspirations. Instead, I felt like he was judging me based on his own perceptions about what was best for me as a Black woman. I wonder if he thought I just wanted to ‘get by’ in school in order to get a job because he assumed I was poor. Did he think “poor” Black students could not find the means to pay for graduate school? Although it is important to be realistic about finances in regards to being able to attend institutions of higher education, I thought that he would at least be a little interested in helping me reach my goals. Instead, he disregarded my inquiry as pointless. I believe he spoke to me based on his biases toward me and who he thought I was as a person; a Black girl who somehow got into the art program, who probably cannot afford graduate school, and who, most likely, will not do well in graduate school – even if she did attend.



In addition, my academic adviser was also my painting professor. Class critiques were always nerve-wracking. My professor and most of the students seemed to value work more if it were created on an extremely large canvas and showed an accurate and precise depiction of an image or representation. My work, as well as the work of a few other students, was more about personal expression. For instance, I once brought in a painting I made in memory of my grandfather who had recently passed away at that time. The painting depicted me as a little girl smiling, with an arm extended, holding my grandfather's hand. Only part of my grandfather was shown in the painting, which included his arm and right side of his body. During the critique, the comments from my professor and classmates made me feel like I should have created it more as a representational painting. My professor even made a comment about my painting being representative of what he called "naïve art." The way he used this term did not suggest that he thought it was good, quality work. At least, I did not take it that way. It makes me think of the term "primitive art" that some people use to describe the work of artists who create outside of the United States culture.

On top of not receiving support from some of my professors, I did not feel like I got much support from some of my classmates either. This was apparent in some of our class critiques, but it occurred outside of class as well. I did get along with the majority of them, however; even when some of them made ignorant comments. For instance, one day, a White, female classmate and I were catching up on work in the ceramics studio. As I rolled out slabs of clay, she asked me what I planned to do for Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (it must have been a day in mid-January). Before I could answer, she said something like, "I'll be eating chicken and drinking beer." I heard her clearly, but I second guessed myself about what she said because I could not believe it came out of her mouth, so I asked her to repeat what she said. The student seemed to sense that she said something wrong, and quickly replied, "Nothing." It was common knowledge that at my undergraduate school, a few of the predominantly White fraternities would have racist "chicken and beer" parties, as a joke, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I do not know whether my peer understood that what she said was racist and insensitive. In my opinion, I

think she started to feel comfortable around me and she let the “chicken and beer” comment accidentally slip out. I brushed this incident off, much like the comment about being around “colored” people, made by the other White, female student, during orientation week. In order to refrain from questioning her in an angry tone, I chose to *silence* myself and question her quietly, and really, ignore the fact that I heard her racist comment. This was another time in which I wished I had the proper language to effectively express how I felt.

Overall, my interactions with my White peers started to change by my second or third year in the program. I did not have much in common with most of them and I often felt ostracized because of perceived differences. Therefore, I found myself being disinterested in the culture of the students in the art program. I believe that part of my disinterest also stemmed from my resistance to want to engage in gender passing or code-switching in order to make friends, or, ensure that people understood me. I also did not want to jeopardize the connections I made with my Black friends, with whom I felt most comfortable. Spending more time with the students in the art program would mean that I would have to spend less time with my other friends. I did not want to risk being falsely labeled “lost.” “Lost” is the term students in the Black community, at my undergraduate school, used to refer to other Black students who they felt did not have a strong sense of self-identity and did not spend time interacting with other Black students in the community. Fordham (1993) explains that the egalitarian ideal within Black communities greatly influences people’s behaviors and responses. People want to feel a sense of shared experience and even be assured that their ideals and values are shared within a community. Gaining human status means receiving validation from other people and, thus, having the idea of being intimately connected with other people. The ideals of having shared views and experiences seemed to be at the core of the Black community at my college.

The interactions that I (along with a few other Black students in the fine arts program) had with some of the White professors and classmates made me feel like my assumptions about racism in the department were even more valid. Undoubtedly, there were White students who felt ignored by some of

the professors as well; but, at least for the majority of them, they seemed to have a support system within the student culture. On the other hand, not all Black students felt the way I did about some of the White professors and White students in the program. Based on interactions and knowledge about these students, I assume that they were more comfortable participating in the art department's culture, for a number of reasons. They might have lived in predominantly White or mixed-race neighborhoods, or, were of mixed-race themselves. Therefore, they might have always existed in a more Euro-centric culture, or, were used to engaging with people who might have had certain expectations for them regarding their speaking behaviors and mannerisms. Maybe, they could have cared less if they were labeled "lost" by the Black community at school and preferred establishing their own communities. Also, some Black students seemed more successful at being able to navigate between their two worlds. They did not mind code-switching in class in order to be successful, but were still able to *shift* back when hanging around people within the Black community at school.

As the years in my undergraduate career passed, I spent less time conversing and sharing ideas with the people in my art program. I started to spend more time with my Black sorority sisters, my Black friends, and overall, people in the "Black community" on campus; who only consisted of a couple of art majors (of the few Black students actually in the fine arts program), as well as a few students from other racial backgrounds, who happened to identify with the Black community. There were also several personal issues that I had to deal with during my last few years of undergraduate school, including the sickness and death of my maternal grandfather, which affected me greatly. Many of my personal issues started to affect how I dealt with balancing schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Getting the feeling that some of the faculty members did not care about whether I did well in school or not, I did not feel like I could consult with them about my personal issues. As a result, my grades started to falter. Because of this, I do not think that some of my professors and classmates took me seriously as an artist. So, I succumbed to gender passing not as a way to necessarily succeed, but as a way to get by without being too noticeable. I was not always quiet in class, since I contributed enough to show that I was actively

participating in critiques and discussions. I did not completely shut down; but, I did not want to have to prove myself to anybody. As I reflect on these experiences now, I am sure that this was not the correct way to respond to the conflicting emotions I was feeling. Maybe, I should have tried to meet with my professors more often to speak about how ostracized I felt in the academic program. Maybe, I should have confronted the students who made racist comments. However, during that time in my life, I am not exactly sure whether I even knew how to react differently in those situations.

### ***Receiving Support from People in 'Other' Places***

Despite the lack of support and confusion I felt within the B.F.A. program, I got along well with many of the students, and was always civil towards them. I became close to a few of my White classmates, and a few more Black students joined the program during my junior year. I also believe that about half of the faculty members I interacted with actually did genuinely care about my success as a student. It was a good feeling knowing that I could still feel comfortable around *some* of my professors. However, given the nature of my existence within the program, overall, it is safe to say that I received the majority of my academic support from other areas of the university. The main source of support came from the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, which I introduced in Chapter One. Their goal was to specifically help economically disadvantaged, underrepresented, first-generation students be successful in undergraduate school and eventually enroll in graduate studies. I, definitely, fit that description. Although this was the program's goal for all students, I could tell that I was not just a number, and that the McNair Program staff members at my school genuinely cared about me as a person.

In the McNair Program, I attended several workshops, including those informing students about how to write a résumé and how to apply to graduate school. We also went to seminars and conferences at other schools where we got the chance to hear from people who were already attending graduate school. Visiting big universities was always exciting for us, especially since our own school was so small. On these visits, the McNair Program staff members made sure to make appointments for each McNair scholar

to meet with a professor in the graduate program of our interest. I remember McNair scholars taking a visit to The University of Iowa, where I met with professors in the university's art education program. This was my first encounter with anyone in the art education field. I now realize that this was a very important step in my career journey. Without the McNair Program, I am not sure whether I would have even known that art education was a possibility.

Other important aspects of the program include preparation for the Graduate Record Examination, and getting the chance to conduct my own research study. For my research study, I was required to have a faculty mentor from my university who would help me develop my ideas, guide me along on my research, and help with editing my final paper, which would be published in our university's annual McNair Scholarly Review journal. Dr. L was my McNair mentor and she also taught classes in the department of Interdisciplinary Studies at my undergraduate university. I asked her to be my mentor because of her background in art history and visual arts as an undergraduate and master's student, in which she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree and Master of Arts degree. Dr. L was a Black woman, hailing from Chicago's south side area. Her interests and experiences were very similar to mine and I thought she would be a valuable resource and mentor. Although all of this was true, Dr. L, unfortunately, was also extremely socially awkward. It was oftentimes difficult to work with her because of conflicting views or just habits of her own behavior. Because she was also a staff member of the McNair Program, she worked closely with the other students in the Program as well. We all shared the same sentiments about her. For some reason, she did not understand that she engaged in awkward and sometimes rude interactions with the McNair scholars and other students, many of which did not like her. But since she was my mentor, I had to be very patient with her and eventually I got to see a different side of her that not many other students saw.

I could tell that Dr. L was very interested in my ideas and interested in me as a person. Sometimes she tried to push some of her views on me; but, I learned to be very honest and direct with her when it came to what I wanted to do regarding my research and my own educational aspirations.

However, she was truly supportive of me and my desires to attend graduate school. I told her about how my adviser tried to discourage me from getting a B.F.A. and also from applying to graduate school. Dr. L highly encouraged me to pursue my B.F.A. and a graduate degree. She would often come from the perspective of me being a young Black woman, and how important it is for me to represent myself in my field, and get an advanced degree. She was truthful with me and knew that some people, even if they were university faculty members, did not really care whether I succeeded or not. Being a Black woman, she understood the challenges I was faced with because she had already undergone many of them herself.

Having this support from Dr. L, along with other faculty and staff members of the McNair Program, as well as a select few faculty members in my department, is what kept me positive about my career goals, in addition to other aspirations related to my education. The research that I was able to conduct with the McNair Program, along with other undergraduate research opportunities, were also motivating factors. My research dealt with Black children and how they were able to use artwork in order to respond to questions about their self-esteem. I saw just how important art could be to show educators how a child thinks, and most importantly, what the child thinks about him or her own self or other people. Instead of dwelling on my current mistakes in undergraduate school, conducting these research studies kept me focused on the possibilities that might lie ahead of me.

### *Life in Graduate School and Beyond*

Transitioning to graduate school was not as difficult as it could have been. The summer before completing undergraduate school, I was very fortunate to have participated in an internship which awarded me the opportunity to conduct research within the art education department at Penn State University. This opportunity was provided to me by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) and their Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP). Just as the McNair Program, the CIC's goal is to increase the number of underrepresented students pursuing graduate degrees and careers in research by pairing students with a faculty mentor at a top-ranked research institution and granting students the

opportunity to conduct research in their fields of study. Interested students are required to submit an application, which includes a proposal for a research study. Many top-ranked research universities participate in this program, but Penn State just happened to accept my proposal.

This was a great experience for me because I got the chance to work with a faculty mentor who would eventually become one of my professors in graduate school. I was also able to meet with a professor who was, then, the Director of the School of Visual Arts. I had established not only a good working relationship with my mentor, but for the first time, I felt I had created positive personal relationships with professors in my field. One day, I had a lunch meeting scheduled with the director of the school. When I first met him, he seemed approachable, so I was not very nervous. The lunch was going really well. Then, he asked me to email him photos of some of my artwork. I dreaded this request because, by this point in time, some of my undergraduate professors and classmates had made me very self-conscious about my artwork. Being the director of a visual arts school, at a well-known university, I was just sure that he would hate my work. For a few days, I grappled with what to send and what not to send. I finally emailed him several images. His feedback regarding my work was actually very positive. I was truly relieved, especially since his message seemed sincere. This slightly boosted my confidence about my artwork and contributed to how confident I felt in regards to being able to do graduate school work.

After getting to know me and seeing how I was able to manifest my research interests into a full research study, my mentor, the Director, and the Coordinator of Multicultural Affairs in the College of Arts & Architecture at Penn State, all encouraged me to apply to the university's graduate program in art education. I understood that one of the main purposes of the SROP is for universities to recruit students for their academic programs. However, I was still realistic about my chances of being accepted into graduate school. My overall grades in undergraduate school were definitely not graduate school material. However, I had a very positive academic experience through the SROP at Penn State, so I definitely wanted to apply to their graduate program in art education. Plus, I knew other McNair students who did

their research internships at other universities or participated in SROP. Some of them received admission to the institutions where they conducted their undergraduate research; others did not, but were still admitted to reputable graduate programs. Since I was interested in attending graduate school, I decided to apply to Penn State's art education program, as well as the art education programs of four other schools.

Out of the five schools to which I applied (two of which were very close to home), I ended up getting admitted to two of them. One of the schools was a lot closer in proximity to my home state, but they had a policy of not granting scholarships to master's students. The other school was Penn State, which did offer me financial assistance aside from student loans. It did not take much time for me to make a decision about where I wanted to go. I am not saying all of this to brag about my admittance or to persuade people to attend Penn State. However, I am suggesting that without participating in the SROP, I may never have been admitted to graduate school. I knew that my grades did not define who I was and what I was capable of accomplishing; but, there is no doubt that my grades played a role in influencing the rejections I received from the other graduate schools. During my undergraduate research internship at Penn State, I was able to reach some of the faculty members on a personal level. These professors were able to actually witness my work ethic and see the quality of work that I was doing. I assume that they may have convinced other faculty members to give me a chance, in spite of the bad image that my grades may have projected.

Although the transition to graduate school was not very difficult, I was a little nervous about how I would get along with other students in my program. This was mainly because I have heard stories about students in graduate school being very competitive with each other. I was also concerned about my ability to keep up academically. I did not want to disappoint myself, my family, and my professors by performing poorly – like I did in undergraduate school. I was determined to do a complete 180 degrees turn away from the academic frame of mind I had in undergraduate school, so like most graduate students, I took my school work very seriously and was reluctant to commit to extracurricular activities or join any organizations right away. I made sure to make friends and have a social life, as well as a



spiritual one; but, it was much different from the social life I was used to having in undergraduate school. In a way, I was less stressed out and often preferred studying and doing work on a Saturday night as opposed to going out.

Being an underrepresented student, or more specifically, a Black woman in graduate school, I was aware that I had no room to *mess up*. It is great for underrepresented students to have these types of opportunities, but it can also add more pressure on them. I would not say that I felt an immense amount of pressure, but the stress to achieve in graduate school is similar to the pressures of being Black in a predominantly White institution, or, being one of the few Black teenagers to compete in a speech tournament. It is the idea that as a Black person, in order for me to achieve and dispel certain stereotypes about my race (and sometimes my class and gender), I had to be on my “p’s and q’s,” as the saying goes. In many situations, Black people feel the need to prove themselves to some of their White peers, employers, and colleagues. To be successful in society, we have to work harder and often strive for more achievements in order to show people that we do not possess the typical stereotypes that are attributed to Black people. This need to do extra work to gain success is commonly known within Black communities as the *Black tax* (Kalson, 2008). I sometimes think about past situations in which I know I could have done better in order to steer clear of any negative perceptions from others regarding my aptitude and capabilities based on my race. However, I try not to dwell on situations like those because I think I have done pretty well in the grand scheme of my graduate studies.

Attending graduate school was my first step in being exposed to the professional side of my field. It is very important for me to take part in professional development opportunities, whether it was attending the optional teacher workshops during my pre-service teaching internship, to attending the National Art Education Association (NAEA) annual conventions. Being in my graduate school program can sometimes be like living in a plastic bubble though. In my graduate classes, my peers and I critically discuss issues of social justice, the ills of racism and stereotyping, gender issues, etc. It made me feel good about my professional career choice in art education as well as my interactions with people who

already belonged to the profession. Over the years, however, I have learned that social justice issues are not always important to everyone who is an art educator. Furthermore, when I attend professional conferences, I can clearly see that my field is largely populated by White women. It is very interesting to be in this kind of environment. I often wonder what type of treatment I will receive from other conference attendees. I am also able to count on both hands and feet how many other people of color are in attendance.

I will always remember a particular incident that happened to me at my first NAEA convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2009. My classmate and I were inside of the convention center and wanted someone to take a photograph of the two of us. A group of art educators came by, so I asked one of them, an older White man, if he would take a photograph of me and my friend, using my camera. After taking the first photograph, the man showed it to us and told us that the lighting in that particular spot was bad. He went on to say something to the likes of, “You all could stay in that spot, but one of you isn’t going to show up!” He chuckled. I was taken aback by his comment and started to grow upset. I knew the remark was directed towards me because when he showed us the photograph, it was I who was “washed out” in the image. My friend is a Korean woman with a beige skin complexion, and she showed up fine. We moved to a different spot while he took a second photograph. I think the man sensed that I was upset. He asked if we wanted him to take another photograph, but I said no. My friend and I thanked him and walked away.

Some might say that what he said was just a harmless comment and that I am overreacting. I have heard comments like that before and have amicably joked around with my family and close Black friends regarding skin color and about us (mostly those of us with darker skin colors) not *showing up* in photographs. It could also be said that the man was just making a technical observation related to photography and how dark and light contrasting colors can sometimes create a blurred image. However, the tone and context in which the statement was made was troubling. I was not expecting this to come from someone who I did not know on a personal level at a national conference – someone who is

supposed to be professional – to make such a statement. I question why skin color, and as a result race, even had to become a factor in this moment. Why did he not simply ask us to stand in a different spot so that the lighting could accommodate both my friend and I? Why did he feel the need to add that comment, “*one* of you isn’t going to show up,” while looking directly at me? I assume he made the comment to be humorous, but I thought it was inappropriate to make under the circumstances. I am not naïve, so I know that this will probably not be my last encounter with someone making such a statement in a professional environment.

Sometimes, statements are not always made verbally or even directly to me. It can come in the form of glares or rudeness. During the most recent convention I attended in Seattle, I was on my way to a university’s public gathering in one of the nearby hotels, and had stopped at a hotel along the way to meet some of my professors. While I was waiting in the lobby, a conference attendee, a White woman, asked me directions to a hotel where another university’s gathering was being held. It happened to be in the same building as the gathering I planned to attend, so I knew the location. Right when I started to give her directions, another attendee, a White woman, jumped between us and started to give her a different set of directions. She claimed that it was the hotel she was staying at, but she obviously had the wrong hotel name in mind because she was giving the woman incorrect information. I could not even get a word in, so I just stood there. When the woman who interrupted me left the lobby, the other woman looking for the gathering seemed so confused. I informed her that the directions I had were given to me by hotel employees and proceeded to give her the right directions. Later on that night, while on my way to the gathering, I saw the woman to whom I had given directions, in the elevator, at the correct hotel. Thankfully, she decided to listen to me and take my set of directions instead of the other woman’s.

Of course, the White woman who interrupted me might have been just rude and it did not matter who I am or what race I am. However, situations like this are common. I hear and witness similar stories that happen to other Black people. These situations can often be comical. It is almost as if a White person *has* to come in and save the day because a young, Black woman just cannot possibly have the

correct information. Other times, it may happen in the form of a White classmate asking me information, me telling that individual what I know, and then that White classmate asking another classmate (who is usually White) the same question they asked me to ensure that my information is accurate. My information is susceptible to being second guessed, doubted, and needing second opinion. No matter how many degrees I receive, what my job title is, or how *well* I speak, I know that these are the types of racist encounters that I will continue to face in the future.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Findings: What I Have Discovered Through My Stories

My stories provide specific examples of how I have been discriminated against based on the intersections of my race, class, and gender. This discrimination happens often, since biases regarding race, class, and gender systemically and institutionally permeate our culture in the United States. No one came out and told me, “Hey, you can’t be involved in the arts because you’re a Black woman ... and you’re working-class!” However, people’s words and actions toward me were enough to show that they possessed particular biases; some of which they probably were not aware that they had. In my opinion, this form of discrimination is just as problematic as more overt forms of racism, classism, and genderism. It is not always conscious to the person who is discriminating; however, due to prior experiences living as someone considered “underrepresented,” the person being discriminated against is always aware of the discrimination.

For instance, when speaking with my undergraduate academic adviser/painting professor about proceeding to graduate school, he automatically brought up the issue of me not being able to afford graduate school. He did not take the time to ask me about the status of my financial situation or even inquire if I had looked into scholarships. In addition, the fact that he dissuaded me from taking extra classes to pursue the B.F.A. degree further implied that he did not take me seriously as a student. One could argue that he may have simply considered me an underperforming student. However, at the time of this discussion with him, I remember myself being a pretty “average” student. I often wonder if his responses would have been different if I were one of the average performing, White, middle-class male students. Unfortunately, this discussion with my professor reminds me of the meeting between Tuliza Fleming and the Asian woman who worked at the museum, which I mention in Chapter Two (Fleming, 2005). Like Fleming, I had already established certain expectations for myself regarding my career.

However, someone, who we considered a professional in our fields, clearly held biases against us due to factors of our identities.

The same point can be made in reference to my other undergraduate professors who served on my B.F.A. thesis committee. As stated earlier, one of my professors tried to smirk inconspicuously when I told the committee about my plans to pursue art education in graduate school. It is one thing to provide a student with a certain level of criticism regarding their artwork or performance, but to smirk in response to a student telling you his or her career goals is unprofessional. I was already insecure about my status as a student within the studio art program's culture. I felt like I did not fit in because of my race and the cultural values I possessed. Then, I started to feel as if my artwork was not good enough for the program because it was considered "naïve" by one of my professors. Now, my professor laughs at my professional pursuits, further letting me know that I am not considered a *serious student*. My professors should have considered the fact that maybe I was having a hard time because I was an underrepresented student, and, aside from a few professors who supported me, I had no internal support within my academic program. I am not implying that my professors should have treated my status as a Black, working-class woman as an ailment, or, a hindrance to my performance. Their expectations of me should have been similar to their expectations of all the other White students. However, through their actions and language, it was apparent that they failed to acknowledge that some of my struggles occurred because I felt unaccepted within the program. By not taking me seriously (Fordham, 1993), they further added to my frustrations with the program, instead of giving me the academic support that educators should provide.

Some non-Black art educators may be concerned with appearing patronizing when interacting with Black students. It is possible for educators to advocate for Black students without doing so in a patronizing manner. For instance, the staff member of the McNair Program who assisted me with applying to graduate school, a White woman, was very encouraging during this process. At the same time, she was not hesitant to organize a meeting with me to discuss the need for me to take action regarding my less than average grades. My painting professor's response to my academic pursuits was

quite different from my McNair mentor's advice. Dr. L, my McNair mentor, was adamant that I not only continue to graduate school, but also change my B.A. degree to a B.F.A. I did not enroll in any of Dr. L's classes, so she never witnessed my performance in class. I do not even think she had seen any of my artwork before our graduate school discussion; but as a Black woman herself, she already understood the importance of my role as a student in the visual arts and in higher education in general. This mentoring relationship with Dr. L, a McNair Program staff member, along with other mentors in my life, was a very important factor in keeping me motivated and positive about my future in the visual arts.

The encounters I had with the art educators at the National Art Education Conventions are also representative of the type of discrimination I face in relation to intersectionality. It further shows that some educators are not always conscious of the language they use and the actions they make on a daily basis. For example, earlier, I pointed out how the White man who took the photograph of my friend and I could have changed his phrasing so that he did not imply that my dark complexion was a *problem*, but rather, something that required all of us to make an adjustment so that the picture could come out successfully. I wonder whether or not he would have made the same comment if I were a Black man with the same complexion. I also wonder whether the woman who cut me off while I was giving directions to the other convention attendee would have been as rude to me if I were a different race and/or a man. It is possible that their actions toward me would be quite different if I were not a Black woman.

When reflecting on my experiences as a teenager in the sole art class offered in my high school, it is apparent that the school did not value the visual arts as a viable academic subject. I often compare and contrast my high school art experiences to the experiences of the students who attend high school at the predominantly White, middle-class neighborhood in which I currently reside. There is usually less comparing and more contrasting done. The students at this school have access to a full computer lab with new Macintosh computers, and at least four spacious studio classrooms. They also have at least four art teachers who teach several levels of art classes. Students can take classes offering various styles of art,

including ceramics, drawing, and book-making, as well as art history classes. This high school even has an Advanced Placement art class for students who are willing to take on the rigor that this class requires.

My high school art experiences are the exact opposite of what happens at this predominantly White, middle-class school. My high school did not have the money to afford a full lab of thirty to forty new computers, and if it did, the money was not going to be allotted for the art classes. Furthermore, my high school art teacher did not have very high expectations for us as Black students from a working-class neighborhood. Many of the students in my class already had the idea that art was easy and not a real academic subject. Additionally, it has already been proven that many young Black people associate art with negative stereotypes (Charland, 2010). In a way, my teacher reinforced these stereotypes by not teaching us challenging material. He had the opportunity to try to change some of his students' perceptions about visual art, but for whatever the case, he was not able to do this in the classroom.

These are just some of the findings apparent in the stories that I have provided. I am sure that if I were writing a novel, I could continue to add stories about certain situations that have happened to me. There will undoubtedly be relevant stories and experiences in my life that have not even taken place yet. Engaging in personal reflection (and reflexivity) regarding my experiences as a Black woman in the visual arts is something that will always occur. Using a critical eye to look at the experiences that happen in one's life should not be seen as a burden or unfortunate thing to do. Everyone should look at their lives more critically, especially since the way we treat others is a direct reflection of how we internalize our own experiences. Learning about oneself is a continual process. Furthermore, the analysis is a continual process; one that can offer several different interpretations. Fortunately, I can continue my work as a researcher-autoethnographer, and use my teaching experiences to add to my discoveries as time goes on.

### ***Discoveries through My Sketchbook Drawings***

These drawings (See Appendix A) were created as a part of my data collection method. Creating my artwork has helped me recall some experiences, but it also contributes to understanding how I



internalized these experiences. My sketchbook drawings complement my written autoethnography, and have helped to generate thoughts about my overall findings. I have been able to creatively explore certain issues within myself that have resurfaced throughout my written autoethnography. Reflecting on my experiences, while going through the creative process, has helped me pinpoint where some of the insecurities I possess about my artwork originate. I now realize that the comment my undergraduate school painting professor made about some of my paintings being “naïve art” still bothers me today. I am more confident with my drawings because I have no problem creating realistic depictions of people, but when I paint it takes a little more time and effort. For instance, I started to make a painting but felt like it was not going in the direction I wanted it to, and therefore, I stopped working on the painting and decided to focus on drawings. My former professor’s comment and the reactions I received from students in my undergraduate classes continue to contribute to the insecurities I have today.

Along with this, I even feel like some of the praise I received for my artwork from my mother, other family members, and friends was more due to the idea that I could draw *realistic* depictions of people. People told me I was a good artist because I could *draw*. I realize that at a very young age, I had already been influenced by other people’s perceptions of what “good” art was and how this more realistic style was valued over other forms of representation and art genres in general. So while familial influence and support were no doubt important for me, they did contribute to some of the narrow views I possessed about visual art, before I had the chance to become familiar with the many styles in which various artists choose to practice.

Many of my pieces for this research project examine the emotional growth that I have undergone (and am still going through) as a student-artist-educator (See to Appendix A). There is no particular order, neither chronologically or stylistically. I used a mixture of colored pencil, charcoal, and soft pastel to complete my drawings. I mainly chose to represent the feelings I have toward different aspects of my journey in the visual arts, as well as concepts and ideas that are important to me. For instance, I feel much happier at this point in my academic life than I did when I was in undergraduate school. I try to

capture this feeling in a self-portrait (Fig. 1), realizing that I am not smiling in most of the other self-portraits I have done. I am generally a high-spirited and positive person, so I am sure that the usually solemn and reflective facial expressions I gravitate towards in the other self-portraits are most likely due to personal creative style. However, I thought that making the conscious decision to draw myself smiling, along with strategically using the yellow, orange, and red colors, was an accurate choice. Whatever the case, I think the depiction of me in this new piece represents my spirit today, especially when reflecting on my academic experiences.

As I reflected on many of my experiences as an undergraduate student, I happened to recall how my ceramics professor would assign my class numerous plates, bowls, and cups to be made at once, and as a result, some students (the ones who were not great at wheel-throwing, including myself) did not feel as if they got the chance to actually develop the craft through the processes of wheel-throwing. It seemed like product was more important than process, which was extremely frustrating. While taking pottery classes at an art center offered through my current university, I recently got the chance to practice wheel-throwing over an extended period of time; this time at my own pace, and it felt really good. My next drawing (Fig. 2) represents these experiences. I have always wanted to gain more experience with wheel-throwing and creating pottery in general, so I am happy to have had these recent experiences. It is important for me to stay mindful that practicing a craft also means continually taking classes; classes in which I do not necessarily have to receive a grade, and those in which I can go along at my own pace.

Some of my drawings touch on the empowerment I feel when I create artwork (Fig. 3). When I am really enjoying myself during the creating process, I can tell that the product is going to be something that makes me proud. Being able to do work that I love makes me feel powerful because I know that some people may not expect me, a Black woman from a working-class background, to be able to possess these skills and talents. With my arm raised high, grasping a soft pastel stick, I want people to look at me and bear witness to what I am able to create with this hand using my ideas, influences, and experiences. In a way, the drawing represents the uniqueness I possess as a Black woman artist. This uniqueness also

leads to me having somewhat of an overprotective attitude regarding my artwork and feeling that I have to prove myself as an artist. I represent this attitude in the next drawing, which is the only piece that I immediately titled, “Warrior” (Fig. 4). In this drawing, I depict myself as a soldier, donned in an artist’s smock, prepared to battle with my choice of artist’s tools behind me. I must show people that I am capable and ready to take on whatever obstacles come my way.

While I am happy and am now empowered by what I can do with my artwork, there are still parts of me which remain confused about how I should represent myself as a Black, female artist. I am also learning to deal with the layers and complexities of my life as a Black woman. These ideas are represented in the following drawings (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). I have many roles to be and sometimes I feel like I can only be one role at a time. For instance, it is difficult to see my roles as an artist, a student, and a teacher as one entity; especially when our culture in the United States tells people that they must be *one thing*. To the contrary, we are all multiple things at once. I must always be aware of the ways in which my different roles all work together to inform each other. A portion of my drawings are dedicated to some of the concepts I have written about throughout this paper, including the idea of “double-consciousness” or the duality that Black women feel in many instances in their lives, particularly when engaging with others in academia (Fig. 7). I also illustrate the idea from Kerry James Marshall, regarding how artists should place actual Black figures in their artwork in order to go against the normalized images of White people that we see in art and in major museums throughout the country (Fig. 8 and Fig. 9).

Through creating my artwork, I have realized that I can empower other Black students who are interested in visual art by continuing to be a practicing artist myself. I have found it difficult to practice while in graduate school and I know my load will not get any lighter when I start teaching full-time. However, I think it is important for my students to see, that in my own artwork, I practice whatever advice or suggestions I give to them regarding their work. Furthermore, I hope to inspire my students by being a Black woman artist, since this is something they would rarely witness. I illustrate these concepts

mainly in one of my drawings (Fig. 10). I have found that creating artwork to work through some of the past issues in my education not only aided in my research process, but it was therapeutic as well.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Implications for Art Educators: How Can Teachers Advocate for Black Students?**

Art educators need to question the biases they bring into their classrooms. The average art educator is White, a woman, and from a middle-class background. Therefore, they are not going to have had the same experiences as Black students from a working-class background. Even as a Black woman who received a K-12 education in a predominantly Black, working class community, I question whether my educational preparation to become a teacher will prepare me for teaching in these areas commonly referred to as “urban.” For instance, aside from a few volunteer opportunities back home in my neighborhood, all of my extensive teaching experiences have been within a predominantly White, suburban, middle-class community. Thus, surprisingly, I find myself working through some of the same concerns as White, middle-class female teachers.

Art educators must be cognizant of the language they use when speaking with Black students. Educators must also be aware that the ways in which they speak outside of the classroom may be directly related to the language they use inside of the classroom. The nature of a teacher’s interactions with her or his students should be a reflection of how she or he interacts with people on an everyday basis. Educators must be mindful of how their language and actions may discourage Black students. Black students’ issues and insecurities are more complex than those of other students because the intersections of institutional racism, classism, and genderism affect them on a daily basis. Often times, I have heard the term “lazy” being used by teachers and other adults to describe some Black students who seem unmotivated. Being a Black woman and understanding how the word “lazy” has historically been a negative stereotype attributed to Black people, I make the conscious decision to try to leave that out of my vocabulary when speaking to children, adolescents, and even adults. I know that I do not like to be called lazy, so I would not want to label anyone else. If a student seems unmotivated in the classroom or is showing signs of sluggishness, it is appropriate to use the term “unmotivated” when speaking to the

student. It is difficult because we sometimes want to *tell it like it is* so that students understand how frustrated we can get. Yet, if we succumb to this, we have to ask ourselves how we really feel about our students. Should a teacher really consider a student lazy? If a teacher wants to see a change in a student's behavior, the teacher must first alter his or her own way of perceiving that student.

Sometimes, I hear soon-to-be art educators *speak* about promoting social justice and cultural responsiveness inside of my university classes; but when they leave the classroom, they actively use demeaning language in reference to certain groups of people. I think some people do not even realize that the way in which they use certain terms can be considered demeaning. For instance, I have heard several of my White middle-class peers use the term "ghetto" to describe something that is low-class to them, such as a grocery store, an article of clothing, someone's bad attitude, etc. This offends me because I know that many of these teachers have never stepped in a neighborhood that is considered a ghetto. They have never interacted with someone from an "urban ghetto," so how would they know how someone from the ghetto acts? I wonder whether assumptions are made based on what is seen about the ghetto on television. In addition, even educators who are from working-class communities or communities that may be considered the "ghetto" should not use this term to describe something as low-class. Furthermore, although I come from a working-class Black community, some people might consider the neighborhoods in which I originally reside as the "ghettos." I wonder whether these people would use this term around me if they were familiar with the places in which I grew up and attended school. Despite our perceived common goals to be socially just, this word is just one of the offensive terms that I have heard from a few of my peers.

Despite what statistics reveal about Black youth in relation to art, art educators must be open-minded about engaging in quality teaching and learning experiences with working-class Black students. Furthermore, they must challenge and support Black students to go beyond their own expectations. In general, some students are not always going to be motivated in the classroom. This case is even more prevalent when students already believe that their teachers have low expectations for them as students;

and furthermore, the students have low expectations for the visual arts as an academic subject, and perhaps, low expectations for themselves. By providing quality instruction, art teachers have the ability to change these students' minds by showing them that visual art is valuable, multi-dimensional, and applicable to what happens in their own lives.

In order to be successful in the classroom, I encourage art educators to reflect on their own stories and think about how they got to where they are at the moment. *To what degree were mentors available for them? Were they involved in art programs outside of school and were the programs easily accessible?* I believe that if educators take time to reflect on their own experiences, they may find that there are indeed differences between their lives and the lives of their underrepresented students. However, if allowed, these differences can lead to mutual understandings. Widely-influential educator and critical pedagogy theorist, Paulo Freire, so eloquently states in his *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*:

To safeguard myself against the pitfalls of ideology, I cannot and must not close myself off from others or shut myself into a blind alley where only my truth is valid. On the contrary, the best way to keep awake and alert my capacity for right thinking, to sharpen my perception, and to hear with respect (and therefore in a disciplined manner) is to allow myself to be open to differences and to refuse the entrenched dogmatism that makes me incapable of learning anything new. ... It is thus that I travel the road, knowing that I am learning to be who I am by relating to what is my opposite (Freire, 1998, p. 119).

On the journey to “be open to differences and to refuse the entrenched dogmatism” that hinders us from learning new things (Freire, 1998, p.119), art educators should challenge their own education and question the categories in which we clump certain artists based solely on their race and/or ethnicity, or, their level of popularity in the mainstream United States visual arts culture. We also need to challenge the categories in which we separate art styles, simply based on their place of origin. For instance, why is most of the work created by Black people in America often automatically put into the ‘African American

art' group instead of 'American art'? Arguably, work that is considered 'American art' can hold different meanings for different people. However, we must ask ourselves, "Is work created by Black people who live in the United States of America any less American than the work created by all the White people who automatically fit into the category of 'American art'? Could hand-made baskets, bowls, and tapestries also fit into what we consider 'American art'? Furthermore, why does art have to be separated into categories based on factors such as place of origin or style? The biases that we have about art can directly translate into our classroom teaching experiences. We must be aware of these biases, challenge what we think we know, and remain open to other interpretations.

As an art educator, I hope that I can empower my students from all racial backgrounds, and motivate them to become more involved with art-making, and possibly pursue a career in the visual arts if that is their goal. Writing this autoethnography has given me a better understanding about myself as a Black woman pursuing degrees in the visual arts, along with what I can do as an educator to advocate for underrepresented students. Advocating for Black students in the visual arts, and in turn, Black artists, will hopefully enlighten more people about the fact that yes, Black artists *do* exist. Through taking a glimpse at my personal accounts and understanding how these experiences have affected me, I also hope that educators can gain understanding as to how they can provide better moral and academic support for Black students who are studying visual art, thus, creating stronger and more positive connections with their students. These connections are vital when making Black students feel comfortable in the art classroom; and as a result, positivity becomes a built-in component of the classroom, making each and every student, regardless of race, class, gender, etc., feel as if they are an important part of the class culture.



## REFERENCE LIST

- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(4), 373-395.
- Bey, S. (2011). Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: African American art education, gallery work, and expanded pedagogy. *Studies in Art Education*, 52(2), 112-126.
- Brown, D. L. (2010, February 25). Single black women being urged to date outside race. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/24/AR2010022405727.html>
- Charland, W. (2010). African American youth and the artist's identity: Cultural models and aspirational foreclosure. *Studies in Art Education*, 51(2), 105-133.
- Charmaz, K., & Mitchell, R. (1997). The myth of silent authorship: Self, substance, and style in ethnographic writing. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 193-215). London: Sage.
- Choo, H. Y., & Ferree, M. M. (2010). Practicing intersectionality in sociological research: A critical analysis of inclusions, interactions, and institutions in the study of inequalities. *Sociological Theory*, 28(2), 129-149.
- Clawson, H. J., & Coolbaugh, K. (2001). The youthARTS development project. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. Retrieved from [http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/2001\\_5\\_2/contents.html](http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojjdp/2001_5_2/contents.html)
- Coffey, P. (1999). *The ethnographic self*. London: Sage.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). Gender, Black feminism, and Black political economy. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 568, 41-53.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *1989 University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139-167.

- Davis, L., & Karar, H. (2009, December 22). Single, Black, female – and plenty of company. *ABC News/Nightline*. Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/single-black-females/story?id=9395275>
- DeFrancisco, V. P., & Palczewski, C. H. (2007). *Communicating gender diversity: A critical approach*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (2010). *The qualitative manifesto: A call to arms*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.; Cambridge: University Press John Wilson and Son.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Ed.), *Hand of Qualitative Research, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (2000). *Asian American women and men*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Fiske, E. (1999). *Champions of change: The impact of arts on learning*. Washington, DC: President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.
- Fleming, T. (2005, Aug/July). The “museum baby” grows up: Being a curator of color in a monochromatic art museum world. *Museum News*, 32-37.
- Fordham, S. (1993). Those loud Black girls: (Black) women, silence, and gender “passing” in the academy. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 24(1), 3-22.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civil courage*. Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Garfield, D. (1993). Making the museum mine: An interview with Fred Wilson. *Museum News*, 47-49, 90.
- Garratt, D., & Hodkinson, P. (1999). Can there be criteria for selecting research criteria? A hermeneutical analysis of an inescapable dilemma. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4, 515-539.

- Hall, S. (1986). Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity. *The Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10(2), 5-27.
- Holt, N. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1), 1-22.
- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Jones, C., & Shorter-Gooden, K. (2004). *Shifting: The double lives of Black women in America*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Kalson, S. (2008, June 22). The Black tax comes due: The 'post-racial' Obamas come face to face with America's resentments. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08174/891457-149.stm>
- Kamegai-Cocita, S., Gomez, G., White, C., & Ragland-Dilworth, M. (1998, May/June). From theory to practice: Developing diversity-three case studies. Audience development and community outreach in San Diego. *Museum News*, 52-57.
- Knight, W. B. (2006). Using contemporary art to challenge cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions. *Art Education*, 59(4), 39-45.
- Knight, W. B. (2007). Entangled social realities: Race, class, and gender, a triple threat to the academic achievement of Black females. *Visual Culture & Gender*, 2, 24-38.
- Knudsen, S. V. (2006). Intersectionality – a theoretical inspiration in the analysis of minority cultures and identities in textbooks. *Caught in the Web or Lost in the Textbook? Eight International Conference on Learning and Educational Media*, 61-76.
- Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in Black families and White families. *American Sociological Review*, 67(5), 747-776.
- Marshall, K. J. (2010, 22 May). *Kerry James Marshall: The artist in the studio*. Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

- Nichols, B. (2003). Demographic characteristics of arts attendance. *2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts*. Research Division Note #81, National Endowment for the Arts. Washington, DC.
- Pyke, K. D. (2010). What is internalized racial oppression and why don't we study it? Acknowledging racism's hidden injuries. *Sociological Perspectives*, 53(4), 551-571.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (1997). *Auto/Ethnography*. New York: Berg.
- Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles*, 59, 301-311.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2000). Autoethnography and narratives of self: Reflection on criteria in action. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17, 21-41.
- Tierney, W. G. (1998). Life history's history: Subjects foretold. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4, 49-70.
- Young, B. (1995). Two young interviewees get a sense of heritage from African/American artist and educator Dr. J. Eugene Grigsby, Jr. *Art Education*, 48(2), 37-43.

**APPENDIX A****Artwork from my Sketchbook**

Figure 1: *Self-Portrait*. This piece illustrates the confidence I now feel at this point in my academic career.

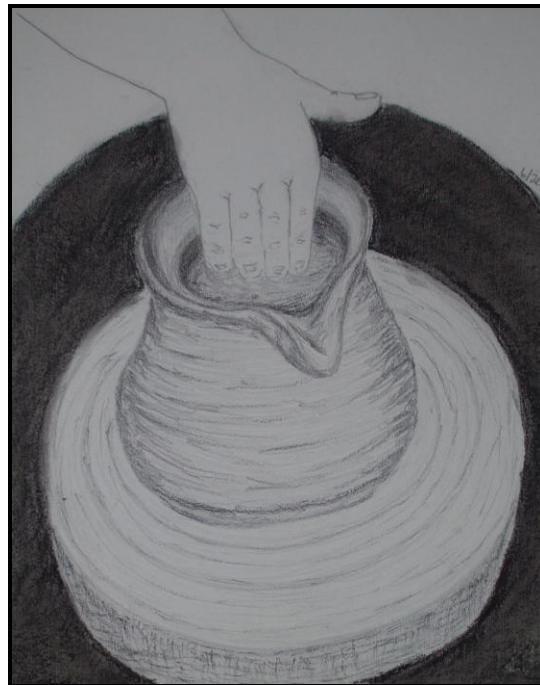


Figure 2: *Untitled*. In this drawing, I explore my newfound appreciation for wheel-throwing.



Figure 2: *Artistic Empowerment*. I remind myself that I can use my artwork as a source of empowerment.



Figure 4: *Warrior*. Sometimes I feel as if I have to prove myself capable of being an artist.



Figure 5: *Confusion*. In this piece, I represent a sense of confusion and complexity, which I often feel as a Black woman and artist.

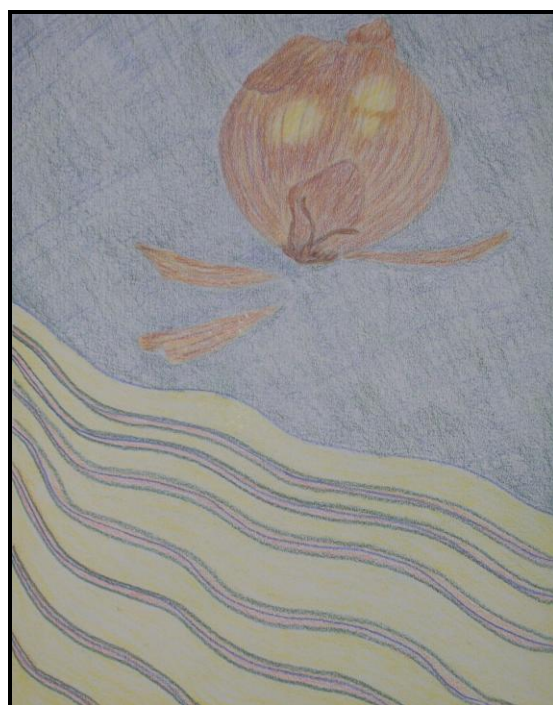


Figure 6: *Layers*. My life is full of different layers, or, roles, that I must play.





Figure 7: *Double-consciousness*. Within my “worlds,” shifting comes naturally.

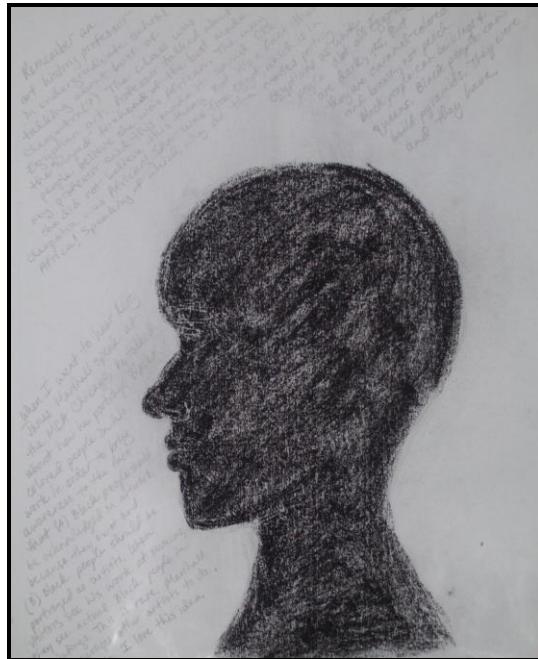


Figure 8: *Beauty In Black*. I wonder how society would respond if the world was “in Black.”



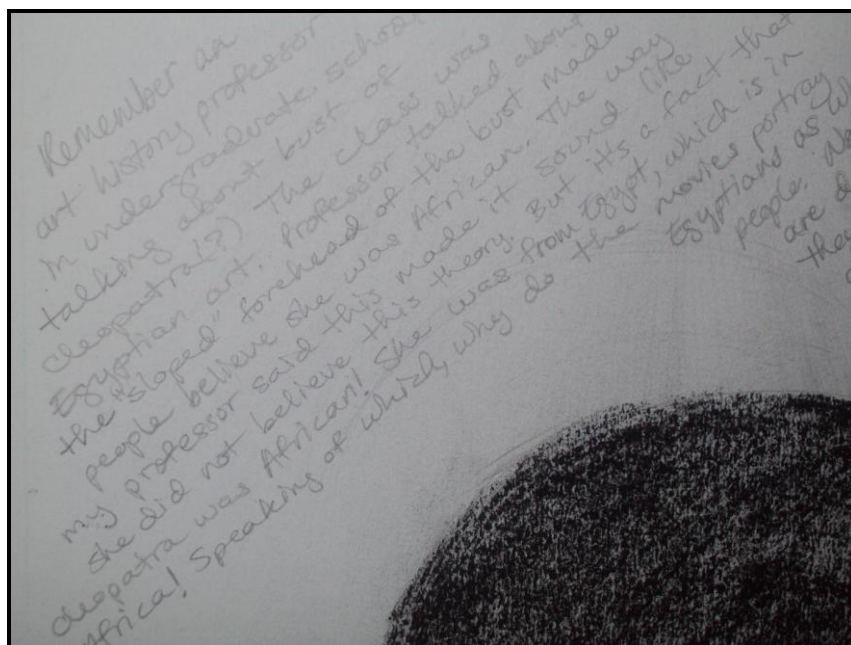


Figure 9: *Beauty In Black*. Close-up.

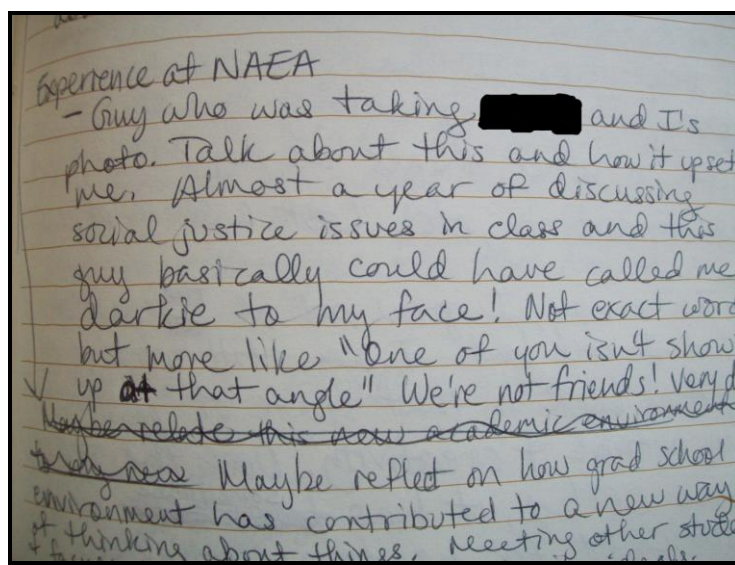
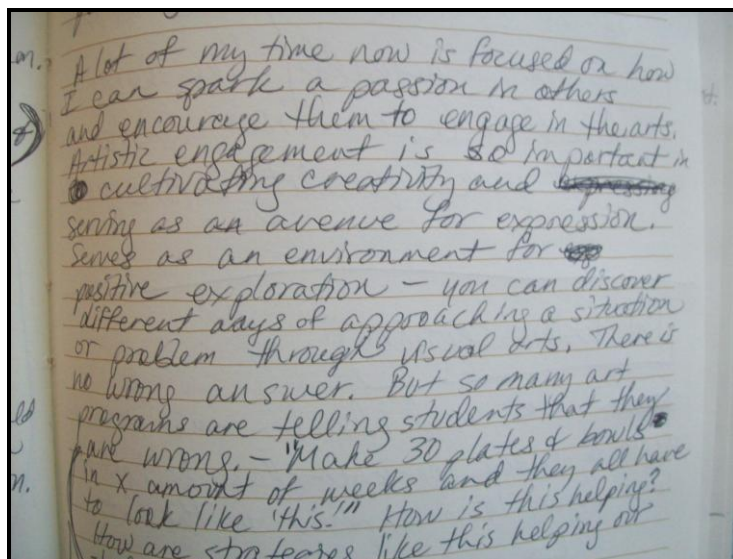


Figure 10: Untitled. This is a representation of me while painting.

## APPENDIX B

### Excerpts from My Journal

Content: The following are photographs of several journal entries. In this journal, I wrote very informally. I later edited the content to include in my more formal written autoethnography.



Past Artwork (Include in autoeth. section & revisit in conclusions)

- I used to draw all the time before going off to college. I loved it and everyone knew. But something changed when I got to college.

I felt like I was doing artwork for the purpose of receiving grades. I would look to other things as my outlet, such as my sorority, etc. Lost a sense of passion.

- In a way, I grew out of ~~the~~ passion that I once had. I am still working on getting back to that state of passion w/ my artwork & creativity. Over the years since college, it has ~~sometimes~~ <sup>sometimes</sup> been

Al  
I c  
and  
Art  
serv  
serv  
pass  
diff  
or  
no h  
prog  
are  
in x  
to  
How  
stude  
- I h  
Talk  
this in

Bad criticism in [redacted] class

- Not many people really liked her

- My refusal to pass made me more resistant to seeing her comments as constructive... just wanted to get it over with.

Seemed no matter what I did, it wasn't good enough.

\* Most professors seemed to praise the white students who were locked in the studio for hours all day or the Black students who seemed to "pass" and those Black students who obviously made the effort to "pass" by acting and sounding less Black.

Other students

You had to belong to that "culture" and if you were Black, your artwork had to



was being praised

\* Financial difficulties as well - I did not always have the money to purchase large canvases or even the resources to know where to buy inexpensive ones. Didn't have a car and access to get slides taken or buy a lot of art materials

↳ I would overhear groups of students talking about driving to some town to purchase materials together, but I was not involved or invited.

I have to say that there was no real art "community" among us. If you were friends with a person, then that's how you established relationships.

~~to believe that myself~~ if my

\* Passing in the academy

Speech team. Everyone made the conscious effort to sound more "proper" or more "white". Guys didn't have it to bad, but noticed more w/ the girls. Unless the girls had the more "bluesy" sounding voice. Mature. I don't think I ever had that quality; my voice always sounded young to me. Some girls talked "proper" already. I've always been a good speaker, but at those speech tournaments, there were mostly white and Asian participants. What I got out of that was that if you had a white sounding voice, white sounding speech patterns, inflections, etc., then you ~~were~~ were the champion of that speaking.

## APPENDIX C

### Institutional Review Board – Letter of Approval

Content: The following is a partial copy of the information I received from Penn State University's Office for Research Protections, allowing me to conduct my autoethnographic research study.

Dear Danielle Leveston,

The Office for Research Protections (ORP) has reviewed the eSubmission application for your research involving human participants and determined it to be exempt from IRB review. You may begin your research. This study qualifies under the following category(ies):

**Category 2:** Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observations of public behavior unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human participants can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants; **and** (ii) any disclosure of the human participants' responses outside the research could reasonably place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the participants' financial standing, employability, or reputation. [45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)]

#### **PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING:**

- The principal investigator is responsible for determining and adhering to additional requirements established by any outside sponsors/funding sources.
- **Record Keeping**
  - o The principal investigator is expected to maintain the original signed informed consent forms, if applicable, along with the research records for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.
  - o This correspondence will also be available to you in PRAMS at [www.prams.psu.edu](http://www.prams.psu.edu).
- **Consent and Recruitment Document(s)**
  - o The exempt consent form(s) will no longer be stamped with the approval/expiration dates.
  - o The most recent consent form(s) that you uploaded for review is the one that you are expected to use