THESIS PROPOSAL

EMPOWERING BLACK STUDENTS IN THE VISUAL ARTS:

AN EXAMINATION THROUGH THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS OF

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Empowering Black Students in the Visual Arts:

An Examination through the Reflective Process of Autoethnography

Introduction and Purpose of Study

Throughout my educational experiences, I've always been concerned about the low numbers of Black students enrolled in visual art programs. When I do hear about a new student of African descent joining one of my programs, or, if I see other Black people at art education conventions, I get really excited. The sense of excitement a Black person feels when he or she sees another Black person, especially in an academic environment, is nothing new. Of course, not everyone wants to pursue visual arts academically. We need scientists, lawyers, mathematicians, and dancers, just as much as we need artists. But I have always wondered how I could encourage more students of color to become involved in art-making experiences and realize that the concept of "visual art" isn't as limited or inaccessible as it may appear. I decided to look within myself, literally, to guide myself toward implications. The purpose of my study is to provide a critical examination of my own experiences as a visual arts student to help art educators better understand the reasons for some African American students' reluctance to participate in the visual arts as educational and professional pursuits. Furthermore, within this examination, it is my hope that educators, including myself, reflect on ways they can make their art classrooms and philosophical stances as teachers more inclusive to the needs of all students.

This paper serves as a proposal to further explain the purpose of my study, provide a background, contextualize its purpose, and discuss the significance of this study. Further explanation about autoethnography and its significance in qualitative research will follow, along with details about how I will conduct my autoethnographic process as my method of inquiry. Finally, I will conclude by highlighting my study's ability to provide implications of how art educators can better serve underrepresented students of color. These areas will be supported by a literature review relating to my research interests, and is particularly connected to this research study.

Problematizing the Situation: Underrepresentation of Black Visual Arts Students

As an African American woman, I often ask myself, "Why is it that my race is rarely represented in the visual arts?" Over the years, I have done informal research and have come to my own conclusions. But the question that remains the most important to me is, "How can teachers make Black students feel comfortable in the classroom and empower them to take part in arts-engaging activities?" Furthermore, how can we encourage African American students who are interested in visual arts to actually go through with pursuing academics and careers in the arts? There is no remedy or one single answer that will "solve" this "problem." I do not expect that all students (primary, secondary, traditional college age) from a specific subgroup will respond the same way to certain forms of motivating factors simply because they identify with the same culture. But we can draw from the experiences of some students and gather suggestions based on their personal viewpoints.

I realize that my own educational journey in the visual arts may hold many implications for educators. As a young, African American woman from a working-class background, I find that my experiences have been different from those of my non-Black colleagues. Many times I have felt "othered" and have been singled out as the only Black student. I've also 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 and art educator, I usually have to explain to people outside the field what it is that I "want to do" with my degree. I often feel the need to clarify "what I do" or justify why I want to do "what I do." Sometimes I am embarrassed when I can't construct a clear definition that people can understand, so I simply tell them I'm an art teacher to cease any further confusion. It also hurts when my family and friends do not really understand "what I do."

The previous situations I face are typical of many college students, especially when they are in the fine arts, liberal arts, humanities, and other "artistic" fields. But I notice that me being Black almost complicates these situations. I feel as if some African Americans outside of the field don't understand the

importance of my profession. Sometimes I feel like people think I'm stupid because they assume I just draw pictures and that art is "easy." When it comes to White people, I often think they assume that I really don't have artistic talent and are skeptical of me and my intentions to become an art educator. When I profess these feelings now, I'd like to think that I'm just being paranoid and that everything is not how it seems. But I've come to the conclusion that I take on these feelings because of the way I have been treated over the years. Some of the experiences I've had throughout my schooling, along with more informal interactions with people, have all contributed to my thoughts and feelings in regards to how I've been accepted or disregarded as an artist and art teacher.

In my quest to understand how educators can provide more moral and academic support for African American students studying the visual arts, I've decided to design my study as an autoethnography. Being a Black female, 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, to understand the personal struggles that underrepresented students in the arts may face during their education. Understanding the complex issues that some Black art students may face will assist us in better educating these students by making our classrooms, as well as ourselves, more accessible and welcoming to them. This is just a step in becoming better educators and supporters for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, skin color, gender, class, religion, or sexual orientation.

Background: Inequalities and Imbalance of Blacks in the Visual Arts

To clarify, when I say "visual arts," I am referring to forms of art that are visual in nature, created by the artist using specific tools to produce a primarily visible product or outcome. These forms of art include painting, ceramics, sculpture, printmaking, collage, mixed media, but can also take on the forms of more non-traditional work, such as installation art, public art, interdisciplinary art, performative art, and art with textual qualities. However, the essence of the artwork is primarily rooted in serving as a visual stimulus for the viewer. Many of these art forms are represented at colleges and universities as

academic disciplines or "majors" within the schools' visual arts or fine arts departments. Many high

schools have implemented visual arts "tracks" or programs for their students as well.

Generally, people within the African American community participate in visual arts-related

activities at a relatively lower rate compared to other racial groups in the United States (see Appendix A).

This imbalance is attributed to a number of factors, ranging from lack of parental support, misconceived

perceptions about artists' characteristics, to the underrepresentation of African American 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. Of course this does not apply to all

artwork, especially those created by Black artists. The factors that contribute to the imbalance in arts

participation, with Blacks weighing in on the lighter end of the scale, is partially due to the United States

of America's long history of inequality and institutionalized racial oppression towards people of African

American descent (see Appendix B).

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). We do not see

many African Americans in this "canon," which again, mainly consists of White male artists of European

descent. There has been a gradual shift away from "the canon" with the appearance of modern and

contemporary art, as well as certain movements intended to promote African American art and culture

(Africobra, Harlem Renaissance, Harlem Foundation – add appendix). But concerning Black artists and

their work, inequality within visual art is even more problematic due to the past and still existing

inequalities that people of African American descent have had to face in all areas of their lives. It is not

often that students in the art classroom get to hear about many African American artists at once (Young,

1995). To the same respect, most major art museums deal with Black artists on a "Black History Month"

mentality: there are a few here and there throughout the museum regularly, but it takes a special exhibit (month) to see the work of artists about whom you rarely hear.

Scholars have found that one of the reasons why some African Americans are discouraged from 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 minority backgrounds have faced, Blacks may be turned off from these professions and even 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 the Black community (Charland, 2010; Young, 1995). Others argue that many African Americans, 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. These are just a few conclusions that have surfaced.

Context of the Study: A Glimpse into My Experiences

Although Black Americans 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 arts-related educational opportunities as adults. I am one of these people. I made the decision early on to attend undergraduate school as a studio art major. Currently, I am in a master's program for art education and am also pursuing teacher's certification at The Pennsylvania State University. 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 professors in undergraduate school. For instance, during the development of my BFA thesis work, I hardly received any one-on-one direction 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 work before or design a studio exhibition. However, I was

expected to produce a paper to accompany artwork with only the guidance of my committee's less than helpful feedback every other week or so. During my 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 they told me that my exhibition wasn't among the worst they had seen.

With bad always comes good, so there were also many factors that kept me afloat during those challenging times. I belonged to an academic organization called the McNair Program, which prepared students for graduate school studies. The professors and staff members showed me that they truly cared by giving me encouragement, but also by setting up meetings to discuss academics if my grades weren't 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. During my 3rd or 4th year as an undergrad, I remember McNair scholars taking a visit to The University of Iowa. This is where I met Steve McGuire, who may have been the first art education professor to speak with me about the field. This was before I had even thought about applying to art education programs and coming to Penn State.

Nowadays, I continue to receive strength from several sources that keep me encouraged as I work on completing my current degree. All of my professors at Penn State have been extremely encouraging and supportive regarding my ideas and career aspirations. I also want to be a role model to other students who may be following the same path as I have. This desire to serve as a good example keeps me on track as well. Honestly, I have never really taken the time out to truly reflect on my own process of preparation in the visual arts 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 African Americans who are involved in the arts often take on marginalized experiences, which are quite unique from the experiences of their peers (see Appendix C). Through the autoethnographic method, I will explore the factors that encouraged me to pursue the visual arts academically, despite some of the challenges I faced as a working-class African American, who also became a first-generation college student. All of my experiences, whether positive or negative, have come as a result of how others treat me and most

important, how I treat myself. These viewpoints are most definitely based on my own characteristics, which include race, gender, and class. The intersectionality of these characteristics and how they affect my life as a student, teacher, and artist should no doubt be studied (see Appendix D).

As shown through some of the experiences I have already shared, I have not always had the most positive educational experiences in art during undergraduate school and in other times of my life. However, I have always had people by my side encouraging me to pursue the arts throughout my life. My family, especially my mother, has always been supportive of me. But the support and encouragement that I did receive by educators and mentors most definitely contributed to my confidence and helped me believe in myself as an artist and a student. It is important for young, Black visual art students to have positive encounters with mentors, teachers, professors, and artists who they consider to be role models. Of course, every student, regardless of race or academic interest, needs this type of relationship with an experienced person in their field. However, since there is such an underrepresentation of Blacks involved in the visual arts (Charland, 2010), it is all the more important for these students to receive the necessary support and guidance to keep them motivated in the field.

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. The mentor does not always have to be African American or directly involved with the visual arts either. Although building a relationship with someone who possesses these characteristics may be extremely beneficial, it is more about the students receiving support and encouragement from someone who is a positive factor in their lives. My relationship with some of the staff members of the McNair Program is a witness to this concept. When looking back at some of my experiences as a student in a predominantly-White undergraduate institution, I can attest to the impact that many of these different types of positive relationships had on my life.

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

Involvement in the arts, including enrollment in visual arts classes, provide youth the 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 (Gasman & Anderson, 2003; 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 & Coolbagh, 2001; Heath & Roach, 1999). However, some students are not exposed to these experiences because they are not being provided the necessary opportunities due to racial and socioeconomic factors. This is what often happens to Black students who are not being exposed to the arts due to lack of information, which leads to lack of interest, and further distances their educational experiences from other students of different racial backgrounds. This lack of support places an unfair advantage on these students in relation to students of other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds who may be widely exposed to the visual arts.

One place where there is ample opportunity for all students to experience a quality visual arts experience is in the arts classroom. The problem is that some schools do not have arts programs available due to major budget cuts among schools nation-wide. Art teachers who are so fortunate to have their own classroom (or position) 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 learning environment or college professors, should uphold this responsibility. While undergoing my pre-service teaching experiences, some of my colleagues, who are White, would profess that they are worried about teaching in "urban" environments because they are not sure how to relate to students of color. This is an attitude that more educators should consider reflecting upon. This "worried" feeling is something real and it is should not be dismissed, especially if you intend

on becoming a successful art teacher who is an advocate to all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic background.

One way to challenge ourselves and come to terms with some of these issues would be to reflect on our own individual experiences that may lead to personal assumptions and biases in which we are not even aware (Knight, 2006). If we want all of our students to feel accepted in our classrooms, regardless of race or socioeconomic background, we must make sure that we are aware of our biases so that we can make a genuine effort to change our attitudes and connect with these students. Along with reflecting on the biases that we form, we should use our stories and personal experiences as evidence that embodies the essence of problems that we are most passionate about resolving. I encourage other educators to critically reflect on their experiences, but I also take on the 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, especially educators who intend on teaching non-dominant and underrepresented students from working-class neighborhoods.

Being that my life as a Black woman in the 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 the 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 visual arts community dialogue. 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. These accounts usually place Blacks in an undesirable position, as opposed to the position of Whites, or the position in which they should be seeking. By writing an autoethnography, I provide a "safe zone" to others by focusing on myself as the researcher and the subject. I am not pointing my finger at others, but making my research a reflexive process and using the evaluation of myself as a bridge between the subject and the researcher.

I also doubt that some of my experiences are unlike others who are underrepresented in the visual arts field. Although my story is unique in its own right, I am sure that I share the same concerns as others who may have struggled with their own identities as artists, students, and educators. My stories and analyses of my experiences will encourage others to look at their own experiences with a more critical eye. This information may be valuable to art educators, a population which is largely comprised of the White middle-class, who may not fully understand some of the challenges that people among the African Diaspora, specifically in the United States, face at the expense of preparing to become a visual artist or art educator.

The Method of Autoethnography

There are many benefits of writing this thesis project as an autoethnographic account. Ethnographic 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 (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Holt, 2003). 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).

In this autoethnography, I intend on examining my educational experiences in art over the years, both formal and informal, that have shaped my thoughts and opinions about myself as an artist as well as an arts educator. Formal experiences include instances in the classroom such as discussions and activities with teachers, professors, and fellow students. Informal experiences that I've had may include discussions with teachers, professionals, and fellow students 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 in the art community, or, times when I have felt "othered" by people in that community. 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 over the years?

Part of my analysis will be exploring the degree in which relationships with mentors, teachers, and professors have helped shape my decision to pursue the visual arts as an academic and career interest. Not only will I examine the positive relationships, but I will also look at the 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 definitely contributed to informing my decisions and opinions about the visual arts field and my capabilities to become a part of it. I also want to explore how artists as role models, specifically African American artists, have shaped my thoughts and opinions about my own future in the arts. I wonder if the exposure to them or lack thereof has influenced my decisions, as well as my ideas about who can be a visual artist. Furthermore, I wonder in what ways all these influences have encouraged me to pursue art education specifically.

To recollect my experiences and guide my writing process, I intend on combining various methods, which will include journaling, engaging in dialogue with others, narrative writing, creating artwork, and analyzing past artwork that I have created. Throughout my examination, I will refer to arguments made by scholars that provide support for my theories based on the experiences I have had, as well as evidence that may challenge my beliefs. Overall, seeing how my experiences all come together will help me acquire more insight about myself as well as the people who have helped shape my experiences. I believe that my story will further help other art educators understand the impact that they can have on their students' lives and potential interest in art.

Conclusion: Further Implications for Art Education

As stated earlier, some of my main concerns as a student and art teacher are the lack of Black students participating in the visual arts, and, if it is possible for educators to somehow empower and motivate them to become more involved. This autoethnography about my own experiences in the visual arts will hopefully bring to me a better understanding about what educators can do to advocate for these students. I also expect that other educators can gain some understanding about how they can provide better moral and academic support for African American students studying the visual arts. I believe everyone deserves the chance to participate in the arts. However, some are not always provided the opportunities or the support adequate enough to keep them interested. The findings from this study will no doubt need to be considered. Implications from this study concern all art educators, especially those who intend on teaching non-dominant and underrepresented students. It is important that teachers seek to know the stories of their students, even when they feel they are not able to connect with them initially. Taking a glimpse into my personal accounts might encourage educators to take the initiative to make stronger, deeper connections with students.

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APPENDIX A: Participation and Involvement in the Arts

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

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APPENDIX B: Institutional Racism, Racial Oppression and Inequality

Fordham, S. (1993). Those loud Black girls: (Black) women, silence, and gender "passing" in the

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    Southern California. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 90*(1), 12-40.

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    racism's hidden injuries. *Sociological Perspectives, 53*(4), 551-571.

APPENDIX C: Marginalized Experiences of African Americans in the Arts

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.

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      achievement of Black females. *Visual Culture & Gender, 2.*

APPENDIX D: Intersectionality

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.

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APPENDIX E: Timeline

Summer 2010
Thesis committee meeting
Submitted the first draft of thesis proposal to committee

Fall 2010
Thesis committee meeting
Proposal revisions requested
Change from ethnography to autoethnography
Started writing autobiographical experiences
Made additions to existing literature review

December 2010
Submitted second draft of proposal

January 2011
Started journaling
Continued writing autobiography
Met with thesis committee
Made revisions to proposal
Third draft of proposal submitted

February
Continued journaling
Continued writing autobiography
Made additions to existing literature review
Third draft approved with pending revisions
Met with thesis chair
Revise structure and appendices
Add theoretical framework
Submit final proposal revisions (end of the month)

March
Schedule an April committee meeting
Continue journaling
Complete the initial literature review
Review and categorize literature based on sections within the theoretical framework
Make direct connections with the literature to my autobiographical experiences
Start writing the autoethnographic sections of the paper

April
Meet with thesis committee (beginning of the month)
Schedule a May committee meeting
Schedule defense date
Continue journaling and writing
Complete the autoethnographic section
Work on the findings, conclusions, and implications sections
Submit a first draft of the thesis paper to committee (end of the month)

May
Meet with thesis committee (beginning of the month)
Schedule defense date (if not April)
Make revisions based on committee suggestions
Complete the findings, conclusions, and implications sections
Submit a second, full draft to committee (end of the month)

June
Meet with thesis committee (beginning of the month)
Revise paper and work on defense
Monday, June 13th – Last date to submit a draft of the thesis paper to the graduate school
Meet with thesis committee (mid-month)
Friday, June 24th – Last date to hold thesis defense

July
Monday, July 18th – Last date to submit final thesis paper to the graduate school

APPENDIX F: Outline of Thesis Paper

I. Introduction
- a. Purpose
- b. Problem Statement
- c. Background/Context
- d. Significance

II. Methodology
- a. Autoethnography
- b. Method – what I will do
  - i. Write about experiences
  - ii. Keep a journal
  - iii. Analyze own artwork

III. Theoretical Framework
- a. Feminist theory
- b. African American visual arts (Marshall)
- c. Intersectionality (race, class, gender)

IV. Literature Review

V. Autoethnograpic Study
- a. Childhood
- b. High school
- c. College (undergrad)
  - i. "Othering" and perceived racism
  - ii. Academic support
- d. Transition to graduate school
  - i. Initial feelings
  - ii. Successes and "setbacks"

VI. Conclusions
- a. How have my experiences affected me as an artist and educator?

VII. Implications
- a. Implications for education