Self Identification Through Intersectionality: Turning Inward to Center, Normalize and Validate My Existence

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Abstract

In the past, movements that focused on civil rights were separate and fixed: Black rights, Women's rights, Gay rights; today, people look to movements to be more inclusive of their overlapping identities. This call for more representation, and more space, for different kinds of people is indicative of newly evolving forms of identification. Intersectionality[1] is no longer simply a theory for explaining interlocking systems of oppression; people are using this theory for formation of their own personal identity[2]. Through the exploration of identity, blackness and intersectionality, I set out to position my work within the art world; specifically relating my exploration of identity politics to theories in craft and fibers. Intersecting identities create experiences that often vary from mainstream assumptions; rather than viewing these experiences as outliers, intersectionality creates possibilities to explore how different identity groups are impacted by individual experiences.

Keywords – Fibers, Intersectionality, Black Art, Post Black Art, Gender, Race, Identity

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw uses the term "intersectionality" to explain how social justice problems often overlap to create multiple levels of social injustice.

[2] Kimberlé Crenshaw. "The Urgency of Intersectionality," TED video, 18:49, Filmed October 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality

Introduction:

Although there are those who believe that the twenty-first century has represented the apex of human equity and equality, the reality has proven to be much less optimistic. The average American believes that equality has finally been achieved on all fronts. When Barack Obama was able to win a second election, and keep his position as President of the United States, many declared racism dead in America. Under Obama, women achieved more, Marriage Equality was obtained and more marginalized groups saw their voices being heard than ever before. While much has been achieved in the area of equal rights in the twenty-first century, there have been areas of extreme inequality as well. The huge impact police brutality has had on Black and Native American communities has sparked the creation of groups like Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM has taken an intersectional approach to their activism by not only advocating for victims of police brutality, but also tackling housing, immigration, and incarceration inequality, and standing up for trans women of color. After the election of President Donald Trump, the country has shown that identity remains important in the twenty-first century; divisions have become apparent along party lines, as well as age, gender, sexual orientation and race.

The creation of groups that tackle multiple issues, and include the multiplicities of being and experiences is not entirely new, but it is a major shift in strategy for activists. In the past, groups took a "separate but equal" approach in their fight to achieve their goals and make their voices heard. While there have been a few attempts to bridge the gaps between the movements for Queer Rights, Women's Rights and Civil Rights, those groups remained separate through the twentieth century. Going into the twenty-first century, however, people expect movements to be more inclusive of the

overlapping oppressions they face; this call for more representation is indicative of new forms of identification. Intersectionality[3] is no longer simply a theory for explaining interlocking systems of oppression; people are using this theory for formation of their own personal identity[4]. This isn't entirely new. However, intersecting identities have always existed; in recent years the alignment of different objectives within groups has changed how people relate to larger groups and identify themselves. For example, many more Afro-Latinos, Latino people of African descent, are defining their identities as Black and Latino. Similarly, modern explorations of romantic and sexual relationships take into account how romantic orientation, sexual orientation, gender presentation and interest in sex all impact one's identification. This has led to people who may identify as biromantic heterosexuals (romantically interested in more than one gender, but sexual attracted to the opposite gender) and people who may be homoromantic asexuals (romantically interested in someone of the same gender, but disinterested in sexual interactions), among other identifications[5]. Labels can be problematic, however on an individual level, greater self-knowledge and self-understanding help people advocate for themselves, resulting in labels assisting in the generative production of giving voice to personal experience. Intersectionality is the lens through which my body of work was produced and can be understood. Through the exploration of identity, blackness and intersectionality, I set out to position my work within the art world specifically relating my exploration of identity politics to theories in craft and fibers. Intersecting identities create experiences that often vary from mainstream assumptions. Rather than viewing

[3] Kimberlé Crenshaw uses the term "intersectionality" to explain how social justice problems often overlap to create multiple levels of social injustice.
[4] Kimberlé Crenshaw. "The Urgency of Intersectionality," TED video, 18:49, Filmed October 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality
[5] "Asexuality, Attraction, and Romantic Orientation". LGBT Center UNC-Chapel Hill. https://lgbtq.unc.edu/asexuality-attraction-and-romantic-orientation (accessed August 1, 2017)

these experiences as outliers, intersectionality creates possibilities to explore how the different matrixes of identity create unique personal experiences.

Part I: Identity

Those who oppose identity politics within the art world are concerned that the identity of the maker will begin to supersede the aesthetic quality of the work produced, the assumption being that we will choose work because of the race, gender or other identity marker of the artist to fill quotas, rather than letting aesthetic choices and technical execution decide who is shown. However, it is nearly impossible to remove the context of a piece from quantifying its success as an art object/piece. The average art viewer wants to know about the artist as if that knowledge will help glean the intent behind the work; by knowing about the artist, the viewer is able to make connections between the artist and the finished piece. Following this logic, Amelia Jones asserts that art is always about identity, or identification, as she prefers.[6] In relation to Jones' assessment, it is important to consider the canon of art history, which is overwhelmingly male, white and heterosexual. The work those artists made can be viewed through the lens of identity politics in the same way those who seek to champion diversifying art institutions/art history do. Where the latter use marginalized identifications to support adding more voices to these institutions, historically identity has been used to restrict access. Jones credits two moments in Euro-American history for the creation of our modern understanding of identity and the artist as creative genius: the first being the initial voyage Europeans took to the coast of Africa, and the second being the onset of industrialization (specifically, after the invention of reproduction techniques such as the printing press).[7] The artist is created as a response to reproduction, creating art out of a personal, lived understanding of self and society.

6 Amelia Jones. *Seeing Differently: a history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.
7 Ibid. 20.

The idealized artist, responsible for the conception of his own work separate from church or state, is a fiction; presented in foil to the factory worker who is no less a tool of the factory than the machines he uses.

The idea of an individual self is the basis for our modern concept of identity. In addition, contemporary ideas pertaining to identity are rooted in the idea of the "other", where historically the self is European and the other is colonized.[8] This set into motion the idea of identity as binary, every identity is created in opposition to another: man and woman, black and white, gay and straight, et al. As quoted by Jones, Hegel states, "the 'other' is also a self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual… They are, *for each other*, shapes of consciousness. … Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other"[9]. Without each other, the two individuals are unable to identify themselves; "the 'master' always already relies on the 'slave' for his status as master and so, in ontological terms, there is no inherently or essentially superior European or male subject… in the case of gender relations, the man must *enact himself relentlessly* as superior to the woman".[10] In binary identity, each person views himself as the "self" with everyone else serving as the "other".

The problem with binary views of identities is that they leave many people caught at the crossroads of exclusion and erasure. When race, gender or sexuality is seen in binary, there's not much room for people who exist outside of black or white, man or woman, gay or straight to simply exist and advocate for their unique needs. Ken Gonzales-Day, in his brief essay exploring the creation of whiteness and blackness, offers compelling insight into how a binary view of race erases important information,

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[8] Amelia Jones. *Seeing Differently: a history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.
[9] Ibid. 37.
10 Ibid. 38.

such as the identity of those whose race lies outside of both whiteness and blackness. Within Gonzales-Day's research, he hopes to give a voice to the silenced lives of Latino peoples in the lynching statistics of California. Within this essay written in response to the exhibition, *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction* at the Laguna Art Museum, he recounts the lynching of a Chinese American teenager, Hong Di, after he was accused, and convicted, of murder and served a life sentence in 1877. "His very existence was seen as an unacceptable threat to the safety of the community, so much so that his lynching scarcely registered as an illegal act in the local newspapers".[11] The first issue here is the creation of a narrative where Hong Di is not solely dangerous for being a potential murderer, but he's dangerous for his otherness, written into public record as a sexual and moral deviant. However, in relation to identity, Hong Di's lynching is important for how the case was recorded into history; Walter White, a white passing black man, categorized any non-black lynching victims as white with his book *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*, the seminal text on lynching at the date of publication.[12] In another case of complicated racial history, in 1897 a court made the decision that former Mexican nationals living in the continental United States had been granted citizenship… since citizenship could be granted only to whites (at the time), and since many (the former) Mexican nationals were already citizens, then all Mexicans had to be categorized as "white".

Related, but more complex is the concept of gender and how it is formed and understood. Arguably opponents of identity politics are interested in prioritizing the human experience above the manufactured or biological identities of individuals,

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11 Ken Gonzales-Day. "Seeing Gray: whiteness and the erasure of difference." In *Whiteness, a wayward construction*, ed. Tyler Stallings (Laguna Beach: Laguna Art Museum, 2003), 123.
12 Ibid.

however, many still view the differences between men and women nearly impossible to ignore citing biological differences; biology is cited as the basis for the differing gender roles of men and women professionally, athletically, relationally, etc. However Judith Butler sees gender as more nuanced and complicated than a mere factor of nature. Butler asserts, "the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims… Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent".[13] The problem, as Butler sees it, is how leaders within the feminist movement can often replicate the oppressive power dynamics they seek to fight. She seeks a deeper understanding of the goals of such a movement as she questions the agents who carry out their agenda. Butler ponders if "the model of dialogue relapsing into a liberal model that assumes that speaking agents occupy equal positions of power and speak with the same presuppositions about what constitutes 'agreement' and 'unity' and, indeed, that those are the goals to be sought".[14] By examining how women experience womanhood differently, Judith Butler questions assumptions about what is "woman" or "female". Identity is often seen from a marginalized view, and the question posed is how women of varying degrees of marginalization, often at the hands of those less marginalized than themselves, find unity and solidarity. Butler seeks to answer the question of nature versus nurture here: are women joined (as a community, group, and identity) by their being women or do they only find unity in the experience of being labeled "other" because they are women. "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way… and what is "sex" anyway? Is it natural,

13 Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 3.
14 Ibid. 20.

anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal?"[15] If, indeed, sex is as much a social construct as gender, Butler questions what the difference between sex and gender are; of great concern is forming essentialist views of gendered experience. Mostly gender is understood as another form of "self" versus "other" where the individual (self) is male and the individual (other) is female. Within the gender binary, a person is his gender to the extent that he is not the other.[16]

To an extent, it is important to erase all assumptions about difference. Those who oppose identity politics often aspire to a world where individuals receive their equality through their commonality as human beings; however the equalizing here is a step used to erase difference and individual identity. Only through analyzing difference (social, cultural, etc.) and the socialization that follows can one begin to understand personal identity. This is the difference between a normal experience rooted in oppressive power structures, and a normal experience that takes into account the variety of human potential and possibility.

15 Ibid. 9

16 Ibid. 30.

Part II: Blackness

While race is largely acknowledged as a social construct, with no basis in science and unsubstantiated by facts, we are far from living in a society that is post racial. The social construction of race is often only thought of in relation to people of color, where whiteness is normalized and thus becomes the default for humanity. In her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Dr. Joy DeGruy asserts that using phenotype to construct race, as it often is used, is also a falsehood as there are many cultural groups that complicate the argument for " the existence of biological racial differences… dark-skinned people from India, or Egyptians who run the gamut from European-looking to African [looking]. And how do we identify those from the Middle East?"[17] However the creation of race is rooted in the creation of whiteness. Earlier, I noted Jones' statement that without the African to serve as slave, Euro-Americans could not have a sense of superiority. As quoted by Amelia Jones, Hegel "…elaborated on the unfittingness of people of African descent to be given the supposedly universal right to freedom because of their putative weakness: Negroes 'allow themselves to be sold without any reflection as to the rights or wrongs of it…'[18] This line of thinking is the basis for the creation of blackness, which is rooted in the Euro-American desire for absolution from the horrors of slavery. By fabricating blackness, Africans were said to be inferior, uncivilized and savage; all language which served to dehumanize them making chattel slavery, the most inhumane form of slavery, palatable and thus possible to exist with the theory that white people were civil and superior, despite clear barbarianism. Over time whiteness has evolved to include people who would not

17 Dr. Joy DeGruy. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications Inc. 2005). 21.
18 Amelia Jones. *Seeing Differently: a history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 36.

originally be classified as white; this in itself is a testament to the construction of race. During American chattel slavery, it was important for wealthy Europeans to create whiteness so that poor Europeans wouldn't join forces with the enslaved Africans; not only did the Africans outnumber the wealthy Europeans, but aligned with poor Europeans, the wealthy elite would be outnumbered exponentially. Whiteness was created to show poor Europeans they had value over the black slaves, and thus the allegiance to whiteness, rather than equality, cemented whiteness in opposition to blackness.[19] The dehumanization of black people persisted through slavery (rape, beating, separation of families, etc), with scientists claiming biology as a basis for the subjugation of Africans as stupid, lazy, and physically built for long hours of backbreaking labor. Life after the abolishment of slavery wasn't much better. The inferiority of blacks had been cemented in the minds of white Americans, and with thousands of former slaves without a place to live or jobs, life in the South had been turned upside down. The time after the Civil War, known as the Reformation, laid the framework for Jim Crow and the treatment of Blacks and African-Americans to the twenty-first century. Blackness, too, has had to evolve and change in relationship to changes in racial identity, power and forms of oppression. Ideas about blackness in the present are directly related to the formation of blackness in the past.

Although black culture extends beyond the life former slaves and free blacks created after the abolishment of slavery, this study begins in that important historic moment. The acknowledgement of black people as citizens allowed black people to begin to form their own communities and begin the fight for rights, representation and their cultural identity. According to Dr. DeGruy, during American chattel slavery,

19 Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2011) 24-25.

enslaved Africans built black culture around "treating relationships as preeminent; attuning ourselves to temporal rhythms; emphasizing learning through subjective barometers and symbolic imagery"[20], these traits continued to evolve after slavery as mechanisms of survival and unity. While these behaviors ensured the survival of black people in the face of insurmountable oppression, other coping mechanisms developed that could be considered negative, including ideas related to self worth, ability to achieve and responsibility for the behavior of others within the black community. Black people have to contend with the false notion that they are less able, less worthy, and less valuable than their counterparts.[21] Dr. DeGruy believes this is the basis for Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, and it is combated by positive affirmation and countering negative behaviors. bell hooks points out the need to create beauty and culture out of the terror of slavery and the oppression of living a second class life, "Old folks shared their sense that we had come out of slavery into this free space and we had to create a world that would renew the spirit, that would make it life-giving".[22] This was the agenda of black art of a certain generation; art used to reclaim black image, pride and respect. Later in this paper I discuss how this can be a problematic requirement to place on artists.

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20 Dr. Joy DeGruy. *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications Inc. 2005). 43.
21 Ibid. 121-137.
22 bell hooks. "An Aesthetic of Blackness: strange and oppositional" In *The Object of Labor: art, cloth and cultural production.* Ed. Joan Livingstone, John Ploof (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 2007). 316.

Part III: Intersections

The civil rights period in America, considered here as 1960s-2000s, has had an impact on how current movements structure their activism and the demands individual activists have of these groups. While the movements of the 60s were happening separately (Black rights, Women's rights, Gay rights), members of those three groups worked within various capacities within each group, but still, the agendas remained separate and certain voices hushed or silenced completely. Within these three movements specifically, the dynamics of the leadership often mirrored the power structures of the oppressive majority. As noted in *Black Like Us*, "Issues of sexual identity complicated relations within the emerging women's movement as well, just as gender and sexual orientation had proved controversial in the civil rights and black liberation movements. Consider, for example, the National Organization for Women (NOW), whose initial response to lesbianism was at best cautious and at worst unabashedly hostile."[23] While there were leaders who had the foresight to call for the inclusion of activists from different movements on the grounds of similar goals, the exclusive nature of social justice groups has persisted in recent history. Today however, more activists are demanding that the movements they work with are intersectional, making space for the diverse voices within the social justice arena. Intersectionality is a theory coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw during the 1980's to speak specifically to the oppression faced by black women at the intersection of racism and sexism. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", Crenshaw explores why domestic violence often goes unaddressed in communities of color. Despite legislation to protect women from domestic violence,

23 Devon W. Carbado, Dwight A. McBride, and Donald Weise. *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual African American Fiction. (Berkeley: Cleis Press Inc., 2002). 114.*

there are groups of women who are unable to benefit from the protections afforded them due to immigration status, cultural and social pressures related to their race. Another important point is how "people of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intracommunity problems."[24] Crenshaw makes a strong case for using specificity in identity recognition in an effort at advocating for those underserved and ignored by the law. Intersectionality can also be useful in the self-identification process. Specifically relating the theories of Kimberlé Crenshaw to identification is Sheena C. Howard whose work with black lesbian women has led her to create a black queer identity matrix. The cornerstone of the matrix is the understanding that people who experience more than one marginalized identity don't experience oppressions independently but interdependently. These individuals also feel various levels of connectedness to the communities they belong to. In the case of sexual minorities,

> feeling part of a community similar to one's own may allow sexual minorities to make positive social comparisons to other people like themselves, instead of making negative comparisons based on heterosexist stigma to members of the out-group…not all sexual minority individuals feel, or have the opportunity to feel connected to the LBGTQ community…Community connectedness varies greatly by social status, with working-class individuals generally demonstrating less connectedness to the community than more affluent individuals.[25]

Howard's research helps to also explain how intersectionality can explain the different

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24 Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement.* ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995). 361.
25 Sheena C. Howard *Black Queer Identity Matrix.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2014). 11.

ways similar identities can be presented as a result of the different combinations of intersecting identities. Within the text she explains how gender expression within black lesbian women differs from that of white lesbian women, specifically noting how gender performance in black lesbian relationships more closely resembles heterosexual relationship dynamics. The explanation for this phenomenon is the exclusion of black lesbian women from lesbian liberation movements in the 70s; black lesbians were not challenging notions of gender in the same ways their white counterparts were, "since many black women were never fully part of white lesbian-feminist leadership or on board with all of its goals, they were less influenced by efforts to replace butch and femme identities with androgynous presentations of self."[26]

Just as the work of Howard is related to Kimberlé Crenshaw's work with intersectionality, Howard is not without peers in exploring the intersections of race, gender and sexual orientation. Black Queer Studies is a field of study proposed by black queer people who view a need for scholarship at the intersection of queer studies and black studies. Black Queer Studies explores the way black queer identity is formed, how black queer culture is created, and "how race does or does not factor into queer political organizing, how issues of poverty, homelessness, and health care affect the black gay community, and how institutional social science disciplinary formations further [reinforce] racial and sexual exclusionary practices."[27] Black Queer Studies also explores those living outside of the heteronormative power structure of mainstream society. Within Howard's research she looks at how intersectionality is necessary when highlighting the needs of groups in ways that target them specifically. "Structural

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26 Ibid. 78.
27 Mae G. Henderson, E. Patrick Johnson. Introduction to *Black Queer Studies*, ed. Mae G. Henderson and E. Patrick Johnson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 7.

factors such as social class and economic status, far more than individual decisions, explain the patterns of HIV infection among U.S. women… this shows that the lives of individuals who have been historically oppressed are rooted in structural inequalities based on intersections such as class, gender, and race."[28] This theory of intersectionality can be expanded to understand those whose identifications lie outside of marginalized experiences. However, it is hard for those people to grasp some of the experiences intersectionality initially set out to explore, from a theoretical perspective:

> A person's location in the class structure shapes and limits his or her understanding of social relations… standpoint theory recognizes that no one has a complete view of social hierarchy and social status; however, those who are members of the nondominant group are more likely to be affected in a negative way by power structures because they do not hold the authority or dominance afforded to the dominant group… the choices and opportunities of the subordinate group are limited…subordinate groups have to struggle in order for their vision of social life to materialize. [29]

Thus, the proposition is intersectionality as a method of self-identification and understanding, not just of marginalized identities, but also identities that are positioned close to power and privilege.

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28 Sheena C. Howard. *Black Queer Identity Matrix*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2014). 8.
29 Ibid. 68.

IV. Fibers, Craft and the "Other"

Today, marginalized groups have realized that liberation is impossible if they ignore aspects of who they are in order to achieve equality in one area of their lives; these matrixes of oppression must be dismantled simultaneously to reach true freedom. Within the world of art, interest in intersectionality has brought about nuanced work, and scholarship, that investigates who artists are and how their histories have impacted their artistic ethos. The exploration into their identities often find these artists, such as Mickalene Thomas and her use of rhinestones and glitter within her paintings, experimenting with processes and materials that are related to marginalized communities who historically ended up outside the art history canon. With shifts in what is considered "outsider" and "other", those who belong to marginalized groups, and also those whose intersections lie in the majority, are able to begin speaking to the nuances of existing and producing under the rules built into American society.

The typical narrative of identity politics places the self in opposition to an "other": man versus woman, heterosexual versus homosexual, black versus white. Arguably, the nature of human existence is to label, investigate, and categorize what is outside oneself, however this binary is related to the investigation of writers during the sixteenth century in relationship to what is known today as the Western world; the Western world being Euro-American cultures, with other worlds, African, Asian, Indigenous/Aboriginal, being in opposition. [30] This phenomenon is easily identified in the way color, pattern, and decoration are positioned as culturally other, most easily identified through orientalism and "exotic" aesthetic[31]. This binary view of identity is found within the art world as well, however during the 90s, many artists were moving

30 Amelia Jones. *Seeing Differently: a history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 20.
31 Michael Taussig. *What Color Is The Sacred?*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. 3-34.

away from simple binaries to challenge notions of identity. The black woman, the biracial man, the queer artist all started to investigate different ways these polarities erased their experiences, and challenged notions of difference that placed their identities on opposing ends. Post millennium, identifications are concerned with experiences and how they present themselves along a spectrum of presentation. As expressed by Judith Butler in relation to gender, there is a performative nature to identity, which means how identities are expressed is as much personal as it is social and interpersonal, "We simultaneously cling to a belief in the veracity of visual signifiers to convey the truth of who people are and consistently doubt what these signifiers convey"[32] In reality, the essence of identity is malleable, and artists use this knowledge to transform and transcend its limitations. Through the subversion of how artists are expected to talk about identity, artists have been able to have complex and nuanced conversations about race, gender and sexuality related to how viewers are identifying themselves. As the interest in identity in a globalized world increases, the conversation surrounding identity politics will continue to shift and change.

Materiality in the age of multifarious identification is a phenomenon when understanding the "other" in art. There have been distinctions made within art history between the hard arts (sculpture, painting, architecture) and the soft arts (crochet, weaving, knitting, embroidery); those distinctions also have been gendered with the former representing masculinity and the latter representing femininity. During the 60s and 70s, feminist female artists were interested in reclaiming the feminine arts of embroidery, weaving, knitting, etc. in order to respect the contributions of women to society; these crafts were also "reclaimed" in order to define the work of women artists

32 Amelia Jones. *Seeing Differently: a history and theory of identification and the visual arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xviii.

as outsider artists. These women turned to craft and textile art because they weren't considered fine art mediums, often because they were considered female. They were able to create work that served as a counter movement to the traditionally male mediums presented in museums and galleries, where some of their work eventually landed. According to Glenn Adamson, "Feminists conceived of amateurism as a strategy that held both the traditional home and the mainstream art world at arm's length. Craft was the most material expression of that strategy. It served double duty as a symbol of unjustly quashed creativity, and a token of the Feminist desire to break out of the stultification of domesticity"[33]. The issue here is that many of these crafts weren't gendered, nor did they exist across class lines. The artists of the feminist movement of the 1960s were rooting their activism in the experiences of mostly white, middle-class, and educated women, neglecting the experiences of women outside of their narrow purview. However, this knowledge does not negate the association soft craft has with embodying the feminine other. In a modern context, these distinctions have been blurred and muddied, however that history is still being used by artists today working around identity politics. Fiber and craft used within fine art is often used for its connection with outsider art (the history of amateur artists, female artists and often artists of color). This connection is mostly in the minds of those who know this history, as the art world has generally accepted this work, and it no longer occupies a solely outsider status. While not all artists using craft are interested in the history of craft and its connection with feminism, the history has become part of those processes. Alison Saar, whose skills and craft knowledge exceeds what is visually represented in her work, is using folk art and craft to force viewers to confront their expectations of black women

33 Glenn Adamson. *Thinking Through Craft.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007) 152.

artists. "Working with salvaged 'found' materials, as well as with specifically selected and sought-after materials, Saar began to create a body of work celebrating fusion, cultural borrowing, and intermixing that bears witness to a poetics of soul"[34]. Here, bell hooks is using Alison Saar's use of found objects, and folk art aesthetic, to talk about a way of making that subverts expectations. Notions of gender don't only follow processes, but also the thoughts of the maker through their labor. Adjacent to the distinctions between hard and soft art[35], is the debate surrounding decoration[36]. Often seen as frivolous, many see decoration as additive, with utility seen as the pinnacle of design. The gendered processes, especially embroidery, are seen as decorative, and thus follow the belief that decoration doesn't require intellect. In Adolf Loos' "Ornament and Crime", he states that

> changes of ornament lead to a premature devaluation of the labor product. The worker's time and the material employed are capital goods that are wasted… the form of an object lasts, that is to say remains tolerable, as long as the object lasts physically… woe if a desk has to be changed as quickly as a ball gown because the old form has become intolerable; in that case the money spent on the desk will have been lost.[37]

In Loo's summation, the frivolity, but also changes in taste, of women's special occasion garments should not be applied to a functional, utilitarian object. Of course, he is

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34 bell hooks. "The Politics of Soul: Art For Everyone" in *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics (New York: The New Press, 1995). 12.*

35 Elissa Auther notes *Soft Art* (1969), a show at the New Jersey State Museum, *Soft and Apparently Soft Sculture (1968-69)*, and *Soft as Art* which was reviewed by James Collins for *Artforum*; this is my basis for the term "soft art".

36 Elissa Auther. *String, Felt, Thread.* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2010). 43-45

37 Adolf Loos. "Ornament and Crime" in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750-1940.* Ed Isabelle Frank. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 290.

ignoring the labor that goes into making said ball gown, showing bias against the labor used to create women's garments, labor which is often, but not always done by women. Through the use of these different forms, artists are able to pull from these histories, and enact their own ideas upon them.

In response to their shifting world, many black artists have been able to spark new dialogue around their identity with a number of contemporary black artists contributing to the Post Black Arts movement. Many of the artists within the Post Black movement were born during or after the Civil Rights movement, and as such, these artists feel less of a connection, or responsibility, to the values and tactics of that period in time. In interviewing artists like Kehinde Wiley and Kara Walker, journalist Touré found that "Many of the visual artists [he] talked to spoke of the liberating value in tossing off the immense burden of race-wide representation, the idea that everything they do must speak to or for or about the entire race"[38] These artists feel less of a connection to the assertions of the Black Arts movement, which saw art as a way to uplift and bring respectability to the race[39]. Artists who find themselves in the Post Black movement are not post-race, or done talking about race, however, they are interested in making art that takes their race for granted. Americans understand blackness, or can make assumptions about blackness due to the way black cultural identity has permeated American culture[40]. Post Black artists are interested in creating art from a place of personal development and investigation, as such, in opposition to the values of the Black Arts movement, these artists are willing to critique black history and

38 Touré. *Who's Afraid of Post Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free, 2011). 29.
39 bell hooks. "An Aesthetic of Blackness: strange and oppositional" In *The Object of Labor: art, cloth and cultural production.* Ed. Joan Livingstone, John Ploof (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 2007). 319.
40 bell hooks. "The Politics of Soul: Art For Everyone" in *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics (New York: The New Press, 1995). 10, 12.*

black culture in order to raise questions and concerns, or satirize that history to point out blind spots or hypocrisy. While not every black artist in the twenty-first century is a Post Black artist, many of these artists exist during a time when the conversations surrounding identity have moved past an essentialist view of what it means to be black in America during the time of a black president and black billionaires. If blackness is not connected to the struggle for financial, political, housing equality, etc., then what exactly is blackness and what is its value? These are some of the questions Post Black artists ask. Of course, total equity has not been achieved, and in reality there have been wealthy black people since the end of slavery, but these artists are investigating blackness on their own terms; blackness that intersects with womanhood, queerness, queer gender presentation and many other aspects. A number of the artists working within a post black framework acknowledge the infinite possibilities blackness affords them in terms of existence. In the past, there were those who would police the way black people were represented by black artists, but today there is more room for these artists to question the status quo, and produce work from a personal place that is at once black and infinitely more.

Through the theory of intersectionality, identity politics becomes engaged with the multiple ways identifications combine to form the personal experiences of individuals. Born out of the theories used by Kimberlé Crenshaw applied to laws pertaining to women of color (WOC), initially intersectionality was looking at the matrixes of oppression faced by people whose identities laid at the intersection of different marginalized groups[41]. Through her work creating a black queer identity

41 Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement.* ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995).

matrix, Dr. Sheena C. Howard has presented the opportunity to "focus on cultural underpinnings of the Black lesbian community and ascertain the ways in which a people's history and worldview influence communication patterns, both verbal and nonverbal…"[42]. Taken further, Howard's research speaks to the shared cultural experience of those whose experiences are similar, but looks at the points of differentiation among them as a way to explore the multiplicities within these groups; for Howard, that focus is on black lesbian women. Intersectionality applied today relates to a complex globalized world where people's cultural connections don't only follow their ancestry or genetic make up, but also the places they choose to live and the families they build for themselves. This phenomenon is seen most clearly in the blending of cultures that has occurred as a result of a shrinking, cross pollinated world; another way to talk about the intersecting of different cultures and identities is hybridity. Artists have taken these ideas and started producing work that blends and expands upon the different ideas and cultures they claim as their own. This way of working acknowledges shared histories, as well as shared experiences, and imagines shared futures. According to Derek Conrad Murray, "The success of African-American gay and lesbian artists has played a significant role in re-conceptualizing blackness as a set of visual and critical rhetorics"[43]. In his discussion of the queer influence on Post Black art, Murray is making the case for an intersectional approach to understanding the work of artists like Kehinde Wiley, whose view of the black male form is at once celebratory, challenging, sexual and sensual; shifting the narrative of black masculinity through a queer lens. Through intersectionality, artists are able to speak a language that relates to the world many people inhabit today: identities that lie on spectrums and

42 Sheena C. Howard. *Black Queer Identity Matrix*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2014). 76.
43 Derek Conrad Murray. *Queering Post Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity after Civil Rights* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016) 29.

are self-contained and self-defined, beginning within and projecting without.

Artists are post-identity in the sense that their work is less about defining their identifications in relation to others who share those identifications, but are situating their work in the knowledge people have of group identity dynamics and questioning their own position within those structures, assumptions and rules. By examining the identities they prescribe themselves, which in the past would have positioned them as other, these artists are able to use the language of the other to subvert expectations of their work.

V. My Body of Work

My body of work is concerned with expressions of my experience as it traverses overlapping identities. There are points within my body of work where imagery, materiality and content speak directly and indirectly to personal experiences. Ultimately I have attempted to work in a way that begins to center my narratives: black, queer, fat, etc. Marginalized people often have their experiences placed as counterculture or other; by using materials and techniques that can often times sit outside of the expected art media, I begin to investigate value and subvert expectations. Julia Skelly speaks to this in her book *Radical Decadence:*

> It is no coincidence that these artists are using craft materials (fibers, ceramic, rhinestones) to engage with taboo subject matter. Indeed, I want to propose that the ostensible 'excessiveness' of craft materials – positioned as superfluous, decorative, and unnecessary in traditional and modernist art histories – make them the perfect materials for the representation of ostensible excesses in the lived experiences of women.[44]

Often, black queer people have to choose which identity they will align themselves with. In opposition to this narrative, I seek to make visual the experience of being both black and queer simultaneously. When my father, with whom I have a tumultuous relationship, realized I am queer, he asked my mother "if his baby sparkled"; this conversation between my father and mother greatly impacted my art practice as I became interested in metallic and glitter as signifiers of queerness. Skelly relays this when explaining the history of decadence which "was gendered masculine, but it was

[44] Julia Skelly. "Introduction: Decadence, Feminism, and "Excess"", in *Radical Decadence.* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). 3.

usually conceived of in relation to a problematic, worrisome, 'non-normative' masculinity. Arthur Symons, author of 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), identified excess, self-absorption, chaos, and effeminacy as characteristics of the decadent male".[45]

With my headpiece series, I set out to show how hair is a huge part of the black experience: hair can act as a source of identification, pride, and ire. Artists like Lorna Simpson and Shoshanna Weinberger, whose work abstract and investigate female beauty, inspired me. As I began to make these pieces, I explored the processes and materials that reminded me of hair. For the first two headpieces I designed, *Madame Walker* (fig. 1) and *LaBelle* (fig. 2), I used rope, dye and crochet because they reminded me of hair braiding processes.

Figure 1.

[45] Julia Skelly. "Introduction: Decadence, Feminism, and "Excess"", in *Radical Decadence.* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). 6.

Figure 2.

Initially I was interested in how those pieces would enact black identity on a myriad of people of diverse backgrounds, but further investigation led me to center black experience in an effort to comment more on the complexity of difference within black identity. The weight of the initial rope headpieces led me to investigate other materials. When I went back to yarn, I wanted to investigate materials I could add to the headpieces to further the aforementioned exploration of blackness as it intersects with gender and sexuality. This exploration led me to silicone, mostly for its bodily associations, and to the hardware store (where I had sourced the rope found in the first headpieces). I'm interested in how materials have intrinsic meaning, and how I can use or subvert that meaning. Hardware items such as washers and nuts, vinyl tubing and copper fittings can lend viewers to imagine masculine and utilitarian notions, however, by spray painting them or using them in relation to other materials, the assumption of

what masculinity or male objects means can be shifted. What exactly is the difference between a washer and a sequin? (fig. 3)

Figure 3.

The process of photographing the headpieces on bodies as opposed to display forms proved to be an important juncture. Photography offers possibilities to view the headpieces less as abstract objects and more as the hair they are meant to depict. I have been interested in the conversation between photographer, subject and headpiece. In her 1995 essay on the significance of photography to black culture, bell hooks states,

> Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic. Before racial integration there was a constant struggle on the part of black folks to create a counterhegemonic world of images that would stand as visual resistance, challenging racist images…. The history of black

> liberation movements in the United States could be characterized as a struggle over images as much as it has also been a struggle for rights, for equal access.[46]

By juxtaposing the different headpieces on the same model, and the same headpiece on different models, I seek to make physical, and visual, the identifications I have experienced and explored. (fig. 4-6)

Figure 4.

[46] bell hooks. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life" in *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics (New York: The New Press, 1995). 57.*

Figure 5.

Figure 6.

The photography seeks to show how cultural identifiers (hair) can enact shared culture, but also how those within it build that culture. By showing the multiple models wearing one headpiece, viewers are able to juxtapose how different people's bodies change the identification of the headpiece. Offering narratives of hair that are rooted in feminine identity (all the headpieces are titled after female celebrities, athletes, scholars, etc.), and putting them on bodies that can be read as male or female, I challenge existent

conversations of hair within the black community that often leave black men and gender nonconforming individuals out of the conversation.

Within the apparel I designed, I investigate how not only race, but gender, or genderqueer identity more specifically, can be codified into clothing. The silhouettes were designed out of my desire to remix and elide what we accept as female and male clothing. By focusing on athleisure, which is a style of dressing that often mixes athletic wear with luxury or leisure clothing, I begin to speak to a hip hop sensibility. I reclaimed items from the Goodwill (fig. 7) to produce new clothing that is all at once gendered and genderless. The garments were draped on female and male forms, cut, layered and reformed to create garments that are unique to my ideas surrounding gender and race. (fig. 8)

Figure 7.

Figure 8.

By taking thrifted items, remixing them, and enacting my imagery upon them, I am able to have a subtle conversation about the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. (fig. 9)

Figure 9.

My approach to the print design was inspired by visits to two historic sites. I

visited Ossabaw Island and saw the tabby houses (fig. 10), which had been built by enslaved Africans, an experience that was visceral.

Figure 10.

The descendants of those people had lived in those houses until the 1980s, adjusting the structure to suit their needs. Around the same time I went to visit the different historical sites located within the city of Savannah. That journey led me to the King-Tisdell cottage (fig. 11), one of the first homes purchased by black people in the city, where I experienced a similar feeling.

Figure 11.

I felt a connection to this history here in Savannah, a history that overlaps with many black Americans who find their history rooted in the history of enslaved Africans, reformation and migration. These two locations spoke to a shared experience that was transcendent as both houses expressed family, history at the same time. I decided to mix those two houses as a way of enacting my experience over them, a connection to history that doesn't shy away from slavery as a reality and embraces the complications of that history (fig. 12). I want to celebrate the contributions of both of these families who are being celebrated for different reasons; I relate this to a history of black people feeling the need to prove their worth despite slavery. Enslaved Africans had skills that they used to build culture, protect their families and transcend their station in this country.

Figure 12.

It is important to point out the connection of photographic prints to my earlier discussion of the importance of photography to black culture. In this way, the print that elides the tabby house with the King-Tisdell cottage functions to document history and project into the future (fig.13-15).

Figure 13.

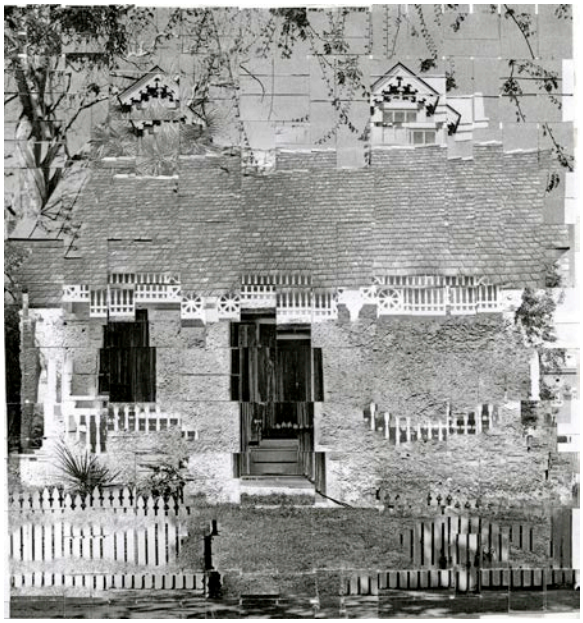

Figure 14.

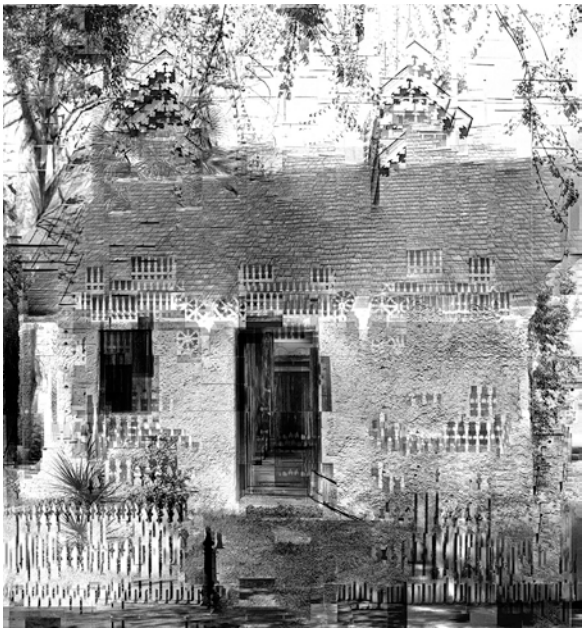

Figure 15.

In a similar manner, I have used the text, woven structure and digital imagery to explore these ideas cerebrally. Where the headpieces and apparel live within a physical exploration of ideas pertaining to process, hair and identity, the woven pieces take an approach that commands viewers to decipher their meaning well beyond their often simple imagery. The poetry is written to function on multiple levels, connecting my personal experience with experiences that relate to greater experiences with black, black queer, and queer culture. The interaction of text and textile is an important link to make, in the same way the woven structure produces these pieces, so does the text with a poem begin to create the images I explore. By obscuring text, often extracting portions of the poems, I explore the struggle to understand all perspectives on issues of identity. In their book *Intersectionality*, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge point out the connection between hip hop and intersectionality:

> When youth confront schools, labor markets and other social institutions as part of the structural domain of power, and experience

> policing of the disciplinary domain of power, they turn to other venues for political expression. Music, dance poetry and art of the cultural domain of power and personal politics of the interpersonal domain grow in significance… Hip hop is not identity politics in abstract. Rather, hip hop constitutes an important space for developing the kind of collective identity politics that informs contemporary intersexual praxis…[47]

Poetry, especially with a hip hop sensibility, makes sense throughout the work as I remix imagery and images. It is also important to realize the place hip hop holds within the black community, initialized as a movement rooted in youth and self-actualization. Poetry throughout the work references a history within black culture of hip hop as radical and progressive; hip hop offers voice to those who are underrepresented.

Within my body of work color plays an important role in a number of the pieces. Many artists have used color and fine art to explore how skin color relates to race, culture and social constructs. While discussing Bryan Kim's *Synecdoche (1991-present)*, Ryan Wong notes how the artist's work, while being both dynamic and elegant, "explores the false duality we're often given: that art that deals with race can't be conceptual or can't be minimalist or can't engage with other formal qualities".[48] Kim's work features hundreds of painted squares whose color correspond to a person's skin tone. Similarly, in *Phenotype|Genotype* (fig. 16-17), I've used color to directly relate to the ancestral DNA testing I did.

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[47] Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins. *Intersectionality.* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016). 117-118.
[48] Jessica Lynne, Ellen Tani, Anuradha Vikram, and Ryan Wong. "Can Art Change the Future for Racial and Ethnic Identity? A Roundtable Conversation". Artsy.com. https://www.artsy.net/article/the-art-genome-project-can-art-change-the-future-for-racial-and accessed August 1, 2017

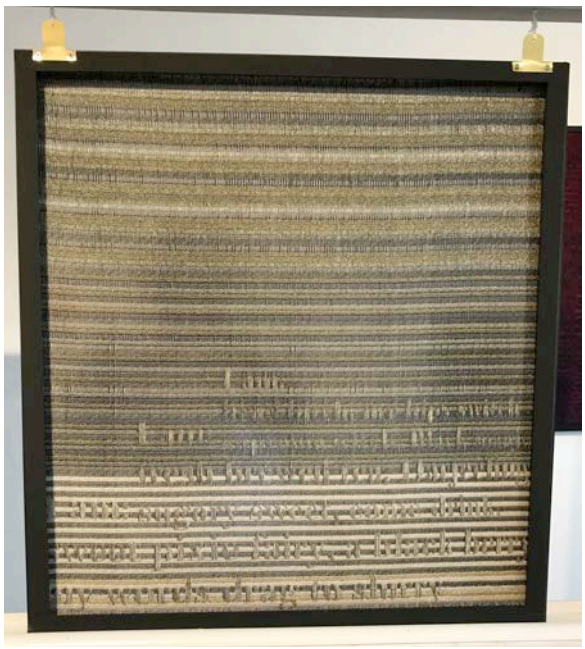


Figure 16.

Figure 17.

In that piece I explore what it means to be black and what it means to be a blend of different races by using black, white, grey, metallic silver and metallic gold thread to represent African, European, Native American/East Asian and Oceanian identity,

respectively. In *Blown Dissonance* (fig. 18), white is juxtaposed with purple, an exploration of color as difference.

Figure 18.

While both pieces are identical, and both have a color, one is seen as a non-color (whiteness) and the other is seen as color (purple). Within his book, *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor relays an anecdote about Robert Smithson who comes upon a pink Plexiglas box whose florescent tubes and color give him "a glimpse of another world or, rather, several other worlds: the past-present worlds of minerals and crystals, and the future-present worlds of science fiction".[49] In a similar manner I set out to use color to intentionally displace time. In a lecture about his work, textile artist Josh Faught mentioned his use of forecasted colors for fashion as a method of dating his sculptures. When the season is over, those colors are out of style, cementing his sculptures in a specific time[50]. Within my own work, black, red and yellow have served as a reference to

[49] David Batchelor. *Chromophobia.* (London: Reaktion Books: 2000). 109.

[50] Josh Faught and Anne Wilson. "Artists' Talk: Anne Wilson and Josh Faught," YouTube Video, 1:36:12, Filmed February 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTeC7efz5uY

work made during the black arts movement, positioning those works in the past; purple and blue reference afrofuturisic works, positioning those works in the future; and pink, orange, brown served to represent the present. I sought to subvert history as a linear construction; I find that the ideas and concepts we discuss today, especially in relation to black culture, are cyclical and timeless.

Intersectionality is a lens through which I make work, but it is also a lens through which other artwork can be viewed. While my work is deeply concerned with my personal experience, rooted in black queer culture, the ideas expressed within this paper can be applied to other artists. Intersectionality is not only for artists whose intersections lie within marginalized identities, but also applies to people whose identifications don't lie within marginalized identity or oppression; white, cis, males for example. There are artists making work about identity that isn't as obvious or direct as my work, but their work can be viewed through this lens, one such artist being Hernan Bas, whose use of imagery explores his experiences at the intersections of gayness, whiteness and maleness. While creating this body of work, and exploring my intersecting identities, I achieved a deeper level of self-understanding. The process of self-identification addressed and detailed throughout this study underscores the prevalence of juxtaposing experiences, and importance of building upon our multifaceted existence. When we engage in deliberate, thoughtful, and conscious self-work, our communities are impacted positively, and it is the work of the collective that many artists, including myself, wish to contribute to and claim as a major achievement.

Appendix A - Poetry

Cognitive Dissonance

I won't be a martyr for your cognitive dissonance
Worried about your feelings as we bleed heavy: merciless.

Toothless:

Washing history clean, squeaky whiteness.
Lies, missionary. Forced – entry.

One hand steals, while the other whips
Jerking to our bodies, shaming the kinks:

Thick hips, wide nose – pouted lips.

You pillaged the village of our collective minds
You can't see. can't find.

We dance we write we sing we run

Spilling seeds to nurture
Not mammy, not sambo

Something new, something brilliant – glowing

No need for invitations, your actions speak volumes.
Can't stop taking, half baking:

This melanin tempting.

Not waiting for you to acknowledge –
Taking my humanity

But open to communication
leave the vanity.

Ears. Eyes. Minds. Open blossom bloom

Anachronism

Within my mind, I had an idea;
thought I knew how I'd feel.
Protect myself so I wouldn't be killed.

Puffed up my chest just enough
Pretended that I knew the rest
Suffocated in my duress.

I grew into a body that tried to contain
the thoughts and feelings I couldn't tame:
for a while I was what I ain't.

So I understand your confusion:
became the thing you don't condone,
that I was hiding all along

Knew I couldn't survive unless,
I found my inner confidence.
Make myself small, kneel down; repent.

Along the way I uncovered your scars
Through you, taught myself how to care;
We aren't as different as we appear.

Candied Yams

This body doesn't only belong to me,
this body is ours, relationally.

Rolls and curves, hips and thighs
coy smiles and warm eyes

Sweet morsels on my lips
filled with joy from head to finger tips

Watch you glide as you stir
those pots sing, your pans purr

Communion at your table
we'll move when we're able

Off hand jokes "in jest".
Watch what you ingest.

We've been betrayed
A jokes been played

Along the way, lines got crossed
this body got a new boss

How small do I have to get
before I become the perfect fit?

Rituals

Kneeling at the altar
imbibing communion.
Blood, body, spirit
triumvirate union.

Sprawled on the altar
an offer for burning.
Beg for forgiveness,
my body is yearning.

Dirt on your knees
from the prayers
where you pleaded,

Bruised on my knees
from the boys
I've defeated.

Offering praise
giving humble exaltations.

Hands to the sky
for holy exploitation.

Breathless praise
as my body ascends.

If this isn't church,

why did I moan

"Amen"?

Blackberries

I am:
sweet pixie fairy, a black berry
My words drag to slurry.

I am:
queen empress, serving my best,
Impressed? Not yet?

I am:
fresh brewed tea, Darjeeling.
Sugary sweet, come drink.

I am:
head bitch, my hips switch
Supreme witch. Black magic.

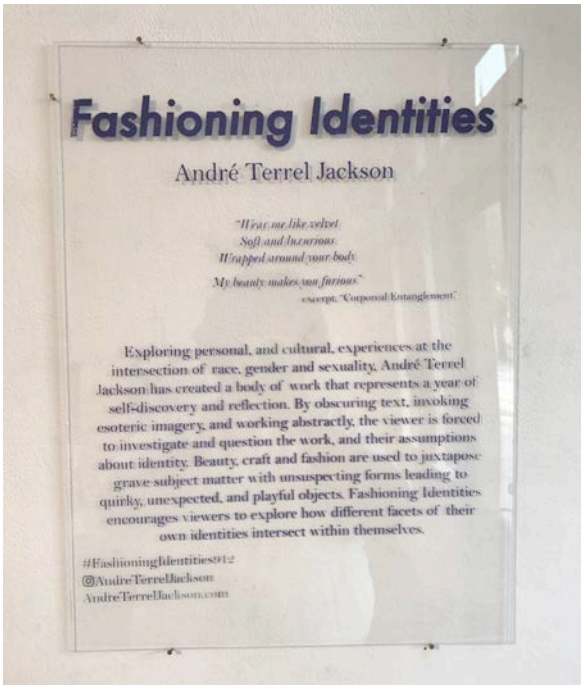
I am:
parasol, hard to control
My tongue's quick; my lisp bold.

We are blackberries/Daintily scary/Lace pansies

Excuse the carry.

Appendix B – Exhibition Images

List of Images



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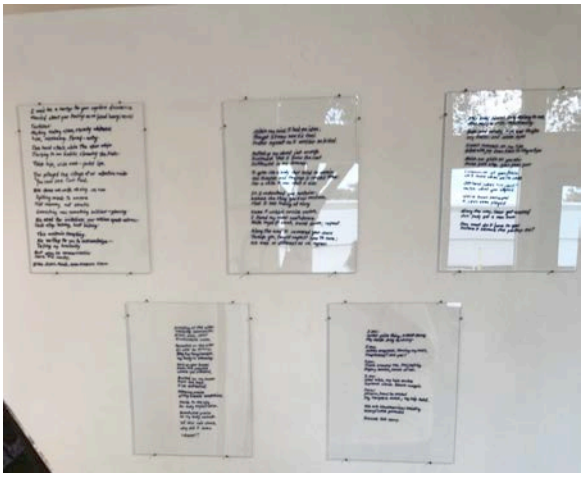
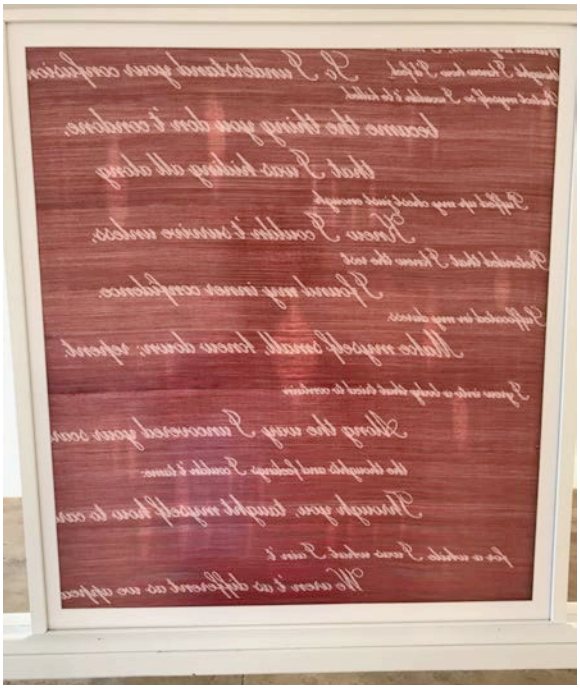


Figure 2.

Figure3.

Figure 4.



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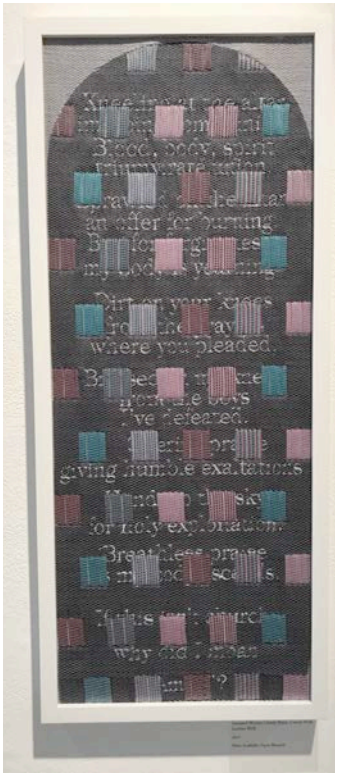

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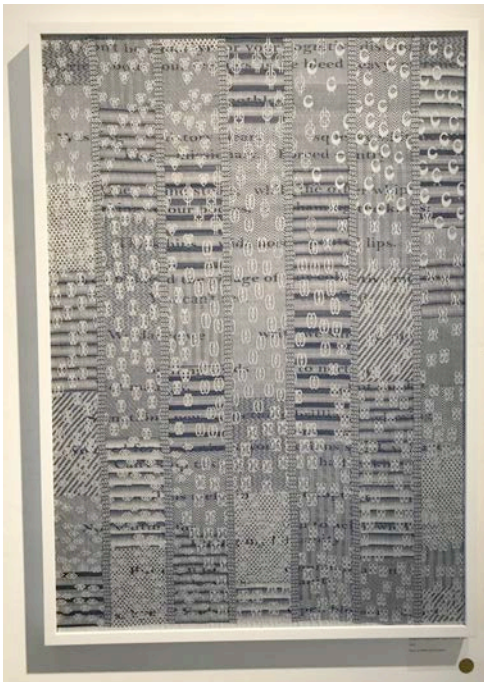

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

Figure 15.

Figure 16.

Figure 17.

Figure 18.

Figure 19.

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