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Strange Fruit: Black Female Body Politics in Contemporary American Culture

Eleanor Kipping

University of Maine - Main, eleanorkipping@gmail.com

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**STRANGE FRUIT: BLACK FEMALE BODY POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN CULTURE**

By

Eleanor Kipping

B.S. New England School of Communications, 2011

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

(in Intermedia)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2018

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Laurie E. Hicks, Professor of Art, Co-chair

Dr. Susan L. Smith, IMFA Assistant Director, Co-chair

Alison Chase, Artistic Director and Choreographer

Amy Pierce, IMFA, Adjunct, Assistant Professor of New Media

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Susan

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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The African American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s was an organized effort by and for Black individuals and communities to receive equal treatment by law. Its legacy has much reason to be celebrated, not only for its accomplishments and successes in unifying the Black community but also in bringing issues of segregation, violence, and racial discrimination to the forefront of the public's attention. The decade was a pivotal point in contemporary race relations and served as an apex in attempts to build bridges between America's past and what America is striving to become. Today however, the social and political climate surrounding the Black community still leaves much to be acknowledged, developed, and understood. Over five decades later, many voices still speak loudly of racism, discrimination, violence, marginalization, and colorism that is still institutionally and

systemically played out interracially. Simultaneously, much of it is also perpetuated intraracially, between members of the same ethnic background.

Due to this turbulent and complex history, many social issues that are specific to the Black female community also leave much to be understood. The roots of these nuanced matters frequently lie within communities in which true intimacy and accessibility are often out of reach or inaccessible to those external to them, due to the oppressive structures under which they exist. The aim and importance of this work lie in the need for these conversations and exchanges to be furthered. A greater understanding of the Black experience as politically informed will aid in ending segregation and marginalization. It is my aim to gain a deeper understanding of some of the social phenomena are the result contemporary forms of colorism, or discrimination with favor given to the fair-skinned that was and is practiced both interracially and intraracially; racial passing as the involuntary or voluntary ability to pass as white, as well as in the hair politics of the Black experience.

Developed through a Black feminist lens, this body of work considers the embodied experience(s) of the Black female as “Other” in the United States and the gains and losses that derive from these experiences. It has been developed through an interdisciplinary research-based creative practice, explored at the intersection(s) of performance, installation, and social practice and draws on methodologies found in the Humanities, Social Sciences, Gender Studies, and Design Thinking.

With a background in digital video production, photography, illustration and theatre, I draw on process and materials from these disciplines while finding inspiration and context in popular culture, her/history, and personal narratives. This work reflects and builds upon a rich, pre-existing body of creative work found throughout art history, allowing the space to explore

and engage these topics while drawing exciting and significant parallels between United States history, Capitalism, and contemporary race relations.

DEDICATION

to the

Brown girls

keeping it real in the

Streets

preserving the Language

and the Dress and the Beats

like legit dope ass

Linguists

Designers

Musicologists

damn!

somebody, give these Girls degrees

shout out to the

Black girls

trying to

make ends meet and

don't know if or

where tomorrow's meal gonna

come from

holdin' it down
like you lay your Edges
in school, on the job, at your kitchen
even when all might be for nothing
it's for Everything

to the
Tokens
in the castles and towers
may your texture and
Tresses remind you that there's
still work to be done
may your darkened elbows, knees and cheeks keep you
from dismissing the fact that that you and we
still got long way to go

to the
Sisters
still in the fields working
slaving, sweating
may your sun-kissed Brow feel
a little less heavy today
may your Hands, Bodies, and Bones not ache

and while it won't change a damn thing

know that you are Loved

and that if i could i would

Liberate you today

- Eleanor Kipping, 2018

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“Black women, whose experience is unique, are seldom recognized as a particular social-cultural entity and are seldom thought to be important enough for serious scholarly consideration.”

- Barbara Smith, 1974

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION – I DON'T SEE COLOR

My interdisciplinary research-based studio practice explores the embodied experience(s) of the Black female as “Other” in the United States, and the gains and losses that derive from these experiences. This experience can be observed in the effects of colorism, or discrimination in which favor is granted to the fair-skinned and is observed both interracially and intra-racially; racial passing as the involuntary or voluntary ability to pass as a race different than one’s own, as well as in the hair politics of the Black experience. As one’s experiences are socially, culturally, and economically informed by the physical body, these experiences can be seen and understood to be politically informed. In the context of this research, an individual’s hair also contributes to these experiences. Drawing on methodologies found in Humanities, Social Science, Gender Studies, and Design thinking, I examine these topics at the intersection(s) of installation, performance, and social practice. With a background in video production, photography, illustration, and theatre, I draw process and materials from these disciplines, while finding inspiration in popular culture, her/history, and personal narratives. Using a Black feminist lens, I invite audiences into spaces in which they may consider their role(s) in these constructs and cultural relations, regardless of race, experience, or identity. While engaging with regional communities in the development, and investigation of my creative practice and research I also explore the interracial and intra-racial terrains of the communities within which I am working. This may take the form of collaboration and education, community building, participation, allyship and/or support. In addition, I am interested in the impact, and the role that individuals have and play in these social relations, as well as the influence of and on language, behavior, culture, media and politics.

Today, systemic racism is fueled and informed by the history of chattel slavery in the United States and the segregated Antebellum South. America’s slave-driven economy hinged

upon the notion that certain beings were persistently viewed as inferior. Societal standards and physical features, namely skin color, hair texture, and facial features were used to make these distinctions. Colonists, self-proclaimed in their power and privilege, granted favor to the fair, while disdain was directed towards the dark-skinned. Efforts made to secure the dominant standards that have come to define Western society went grossly unchecked for hundreds of years, and have transpired into the forms of regulation, slavery, segregation, and brutality targeted at Black bodies that are still evident. Today, this is observed in forms of racial and ethnic marginalization, oppression, and discrimination and exemplifies ways in which the Black experience is politically informed by the physical body.

Body politic, a term that is used to describe any nation regarded as a corporate entity or state (“Body politic,” 2010) is now used metaphorically to engage with conversations on the intersections of the body and the institutions that play significant roles in the body’s experience. In the context of this research, the term body politics will refer to the ways in which the physical body informs how one’s life is regulated, monitored, and influenced by institutional, societal, and governmental policy, and oversight. Seemingly separate from the issues such as reproductive health, gender, race, and violence, they are not. The systems of a body politic, such as the United States, reflect the ways in which production, labor, and resources are distributed and the ways in which these systems favor the “dominant body” in a literal and metaphorical sense. Physical markers serve as coded gatekeepers that grant or restrict power and access. Bodies are held up to a dominant standard of gender, race, sexuality, and religion. A piece on gender and sexuality studies published in the Oxford Handbooks discusses this. “Our social, economic, and political worlds are organized to reflect these habitual and legal patterns. The corridors of power are structured to accommodate the associated characteristics of male,

heterosexual bodies of dominant racial and ethnic groups” (Waylen, Celis, Kantola, Weldon, 2013, para. 1).

Historical and contemporary social constructs and relationships have profoundly informed the social and cultural workings of the Black community and the Black female experience. The Black community may be considered at both the macro and the micro: as Black individuals living collectively in the United States, or the individual experiences that define Black Americans in relation to one another. While writing on the intersection of race and political engagement, author Calvin O. L. Henry (1995) comments provides a working understanding of what can be understood by the term “Black community.”

The Black Community is Black America. Members of Black America are citizens of the United States of America. Also they are citizens of the states, counties, cities and municipalities in which they reside. The Black Community is a concept that goes far beyond the color of one's skin. It is the experience of being Black in the United States. (para. 1)

The Black community is identified collectively by the ways in which members are situated in American society and culture. My research-based creative practice focuses on the symptomatic, and reactionary relationships, behaviors, and phenomena that are reflective of Black history with a specific interest in the nuances and history of colorism, racial passing, and hair politics.

Thesis Question

My thesis seeks to ask: How might a hybrid practice of performance, installation, and social practice be used to explore issues surrounding Black female identity in critical consideration of Black female body politics in contemporary American culture: specifically, colorism, racial passing, and hair politics? In addition, my inquiry attempts to identify how and

what types of social engagement, educational practices, and pedagogy may be developed and employed to investigate these issues as they relate to certain groups and communities.

Note on Capital B in “Black” and lowercase w in “white”

There is significant debate among writers, copyeditors, activists, and others as to whether or not the words “black” and “white” should be capitalized when referring to race and ethnicity. Some publishers aim for consistency regardless of choice and political stance. Yet there is a select number of publications that capitalize one term over the other, namely white supremacist organizations with emphasis placed on “White,” and activists, Black writers, social critics, and certain thought-leaders with emphasis on “Black.”

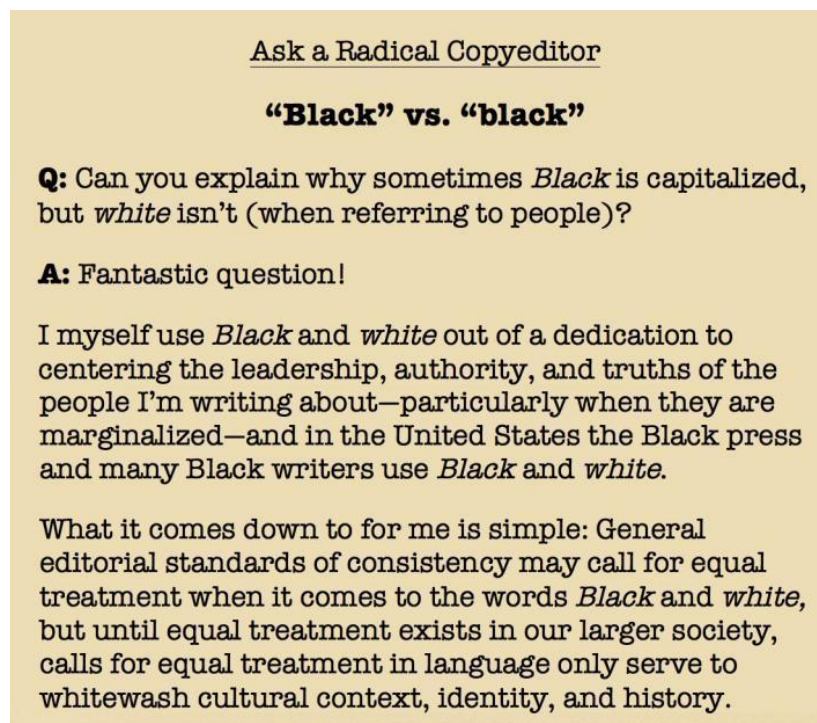


Fig. 1.1 Alex Capitan (21 September 2016) Ask a Radical Copyeditor: “Black” vs. “black”. [Online image] Retrieved from www.radicalcopyeditor.com

My use of the spelling “Black” is not an attempt to separate or divide, but rather join the collective efforts being made by other Black writers, historians, artists, and educators in their attempts to validate, legitimize, acknowledge, and respect the Black experience. Nor is my use of “Black” an attempt to position Black individuals as superior. Using “Black” literally acknowledges that the majority of Black African-Americans were forcefully stripped of the privilege of knowing their ancestors and still endure these effects. It points out that the Black experience is disproportionately informed by inequality and recognizes that the presence of an African Diasporic population in the United States is informed by a loss of lineage, language, culture, and family ties. In this sense, “Black” serves the same purpose as the letter “X” in Malcolm X. The Islamic leader and Civil Rights activist appended the letter to his name to represent the unknown lineage of his African ancestry as described in his autobiography (1965). When I do capitalize the word “white,” it is not an ethical designation, but a reference and naming of “Whiteness” in America as a culture and way of thinking, being, and engaging. This then comments on the degree of separation that the two social groups and identities experientially have from one another. CEO, Luke Visconti (2009) comments on *DiversityInc’s* use of “white” and “Black” by stating:

I do not believe “white” needs to be capitalized because people in the white majority don’t think of themselves in that way. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with this—it’s just how it is. The exception is white supremacists who have a definite vision for what “White” means—and they capitalize the W. Most American white people describe themselves in terms such as Irish American or Jewish. I will make the point that African Americans (descendants of slaves) cannot define themselves more accurately than an

entire continent because their ancestry was obliterated by the practices of enslavers, which included breaking apart tribal and family bonds. (para. 6)

Definitions of Terms

In the context of this research, the following terms will be used as defined below:

Black:

A non-white individual who does not identify as white and is of African and/or Caribbean descent.

Brown:

A non-white individual, who is not necessarily of African descent. For example, a person of Asian or Middle Eastern descent may identify or be identified as Brown, but not Black/African American or white.

Cisgender:

A male or female individual who identifies and presents as the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, a child born with female reproductive sex organs is most likely going to be assigned “female.” If she is cisgender she will identify and present as female in the means as accepted and prescribed by the dominant societal standards relative to where she is raised and/or lives.

Colorism:

Prejudice or discrimination against individuals who have a dark skin tone especially among people of the same ethnic background (“Colorism,” 2015). This can be seen interracially, between members of different races, but also intra-racially, between members of the same race.

Cultural Appropriation:

The unacknowledged or unpermitted practice of taking or making use of cultural practices and forms, especially by a dominant social ethical group from a marginalized and/or minority group, typically with social and/or economic gain.

Dark-skinned:

A Person of Color who identifies and/or may be identified as Brown, Black, a Person of Color (POC), and/or mixed race who is dark in complexion.

Good Hair:

A vernacular term used within Black communities to describe hair that has a smooth texture and as a result is easily styled, combed, and managed. Good hair lays flat with little to no manipulation required such as heat, gel, or other styling products. It must be understood in contrast to hair had by those of African descent, which is recognizably coarse in texture and has a curly or kinky pattern, or hair that tangles easily and is sometimes viewed as difficult to manage or grow. The term gained increased recognition with the documentary *Good Hair*, produced and hosted by comedian Chris Rock in 2009, that examines the culture and practices of the Black hair care industry.

Hair Politics:

I use the term “hair politics” to refer to the ways in which the political and institutional regulation of female rights and health, specifically as related to hair and beauty, informs individual and communal experiences. It is derived from the slogan “the personal is political,” first published by Carol Hanisch in 1969. Hanisch’s work had a significant influence on the 1960’s Women’s Liberation Movement and sought to demonstrate that there was not a separation between politics and a woman’s place and experience in the home. In this context,

hair politics are the socially, culturally, and economically informed experiences of Black individuals resulting from the efforts made by the dominant heterosexual white American cultural majority to regulate the Black body in direct relation to texture, and length, and style of one's hair.

Light-skinned:

A person of color who identifies as Brown, Black, Person of Color, and/or mixed with fair or pale skin and/or have observable Eurocentric features such as straight/light hair and/or light-colored eyes.

Natural Hair:

Hair worn by a Black male or female of African descent that has not been chemically treated. Instead, it is worn in one of many natural hairstyles that include Afros, Dreadlocks, Cornrows, braids and/or temporary extensions such as wigs, or twists that can be worn for 4–12 weeks with minimal to no damage. These synthetic styles are seen by the majority of the Black community as “protective” as they protect the natural hair from exposure to elements, heat, and stress without the use of glue or sew-in weaves/extensions, or chemical processors and relaxers. Black hair care is a booming global industry. In 2017, Black Americans spent \$54 million of the \$63 million that was spent on ethnic hair and beauty in the United States (Nielsen, 2018).

Mixed-Race:

Mixed-race individuals are those mixed with one biological parent of African/Caribbean ethnicity and one biological parent of Caucasian/European ethnicity: Black and white.

Person of Color (POC), Woman of Color (WOC):

A non-white/Caucasian individual, Person of Color (POC), or Woman of Color (WOC) of African and/or Caribbean descent.

Racial Passing / Passing:

Racial passing refers to the phenomenon of non-white individuals who voluntarily or involuntarily can be identified as white. Factors for passing include physical appearance, as well as name, class, behavior, language, and other physical identifying signifiers as associated with race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.

White:

An individual who is white-skinned and/or of European origin.

Research Methods**Black Body Politics**

I begin with the body. The breath. The skin. The blood. The hair. Everybody has a body. Regardless of the smell of that body's breath, the color of that body's skin, that body's blood type, or the texture of that body's hair, every body has an experience.

As our bodies both inform and respond to these experiences, the personal quickly becomes political and is the first place that must be considered regarding one's self. The nature of these experiences contributes directly to separation, control, and marginalization with power given to those whose bodies align to that of the governing standard. It is at this physical and metaphorical point of entry that I choose to engage audiences and communities through my creative practice, research, and scholarship.

Performance

Performance awards exciting liberations with the addition of time and space as mediums in the process and development of creative work. It also allows the physical presence of a coded body, in addition to movement, speech, and gesture. Performance invites audiences to examine their own bodies in the context of politics, society, and power.

Performance frees me from the confines of two-dimensional work, such as drawing and painting, and the malleable material of three-dimensional work such as sculpture. In a comparison of film and cinema, director Peter Brook (1968) states, “The theatre...always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This also is what can make it so disturbing” (p. 111). Brooks goes on to argue that it is the component of live action and time that sets performance apart from other mediums. In its ephemerality, performance expands beyond the confines of two and three-dimensional works and enters a fourth. While mediums may provide the *illusion* of reality, performance is a form of reality and therefore can only exist as it is once, at an exact time, in an that exact moment, in that exact space. This holds true even when it is chronicled. Documentation of live work is no longer performance; it is the documentation of such and becomes an entirely different work altogether: a transcript, a video or photograph, or even an oral recitation.

Other liberations that I have found in performance are the confines and limitations of the human body. The physiological realities of the body provide structure, and boundaries to explore in relation to space, time, and other’s bodies. To be presented with the body is to be presented with the self, or at least an alternative or potential version of the self. Brooks states, “The focus of a large group of people creates a unique intensity. Owing to this, forces that operate at all times and rule each person’s daily life can be isolated and perceived more clearly” (p. 112). Performer and spectator are ushered into dynamic reciprocal relationships that conventional art forms typically do not provide. This holds true even when the role of audience and spectator is shared.

When I perform, the cultural and political baggage and meanings of my body and actions are introduced to a space that is alive and responsive while also reflecting the history of

theatre and the public's relationship with live performance. In my work, audiences are invited to reconcile with a space occupied by a Black female body and what it means when the historical and societal relations that are known and thought to be understood are re-presented, exaggerated, altered, or collide with one another. As I explore and offer the notion of my body as "Other" I am able to scrutinize the coded dichotomies upon which racism in the United States is founded: repulsion/fascination, object/subject, female/male, Other/white through the embodiment and representation of the Black experience.

Lastly, with the body comes movement, action, gesture, or absence of any movement, action, and gesture. Actions such as spoken word, movement, repetition, and presentation of a gendered body echo with her/history, traumas, celebrations and culture(s) of Black women in America are employed to draw parallels between historical and contemporary ideas of race and gender.

World-renowned Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović is known for her time-based durational performances that push the boundaries of her own physical body in time and space. Art21 (2018) describes her work as, "Characterized by endurance and pain—and by repetitive behavior, actions of long duration, and intense public interactions and energy dialogues—her [Abramović] work has engaged, fascinated, and sometimes repelled live audiences" (para. 2). *The Artist is Present* (2010), pictured below, was a 3-month durational performance in which Abramović sat with individual audience members for as long as they wished. She yielded control of her body to those willing to engage with her. Abramović's career has continually demonstrated the ability of performance as a means to explore relationships with others, society, and notions about the female body.



Fig. 1.2 *The Artist is Present* (2010) Marina Abramović. [Performance, 3 months at MoMA] Photograph by Marco Anelli (for MoMA). Retrieved from www.art21.com

Collectively, the elements and structures of performance, as a practice and methodological approach to research, work together and offer audience(s) and artist(s) the freedom to choose if and how they will explore their relationships and roles to what is offered and discovered through the live use of the body. Even if the response is passive, it is a commentary on politicized relationships, action, space, and time.

Installation

Installation, along with performance art and body art, was born in the spirit of challenging the commodification of conventional art objects, and traditional notions of art as expressions of skill and craft to be displayed exclusively in the gallery and museum. Many early installation artists came to the medium through painting, drawing and sculpture. Duchamp's early readymades and sculptures, for example, informed and contributed to the development of

installation and provoked the art world's assumptions of art in relation to material, value, and object through material, process, and presentation.

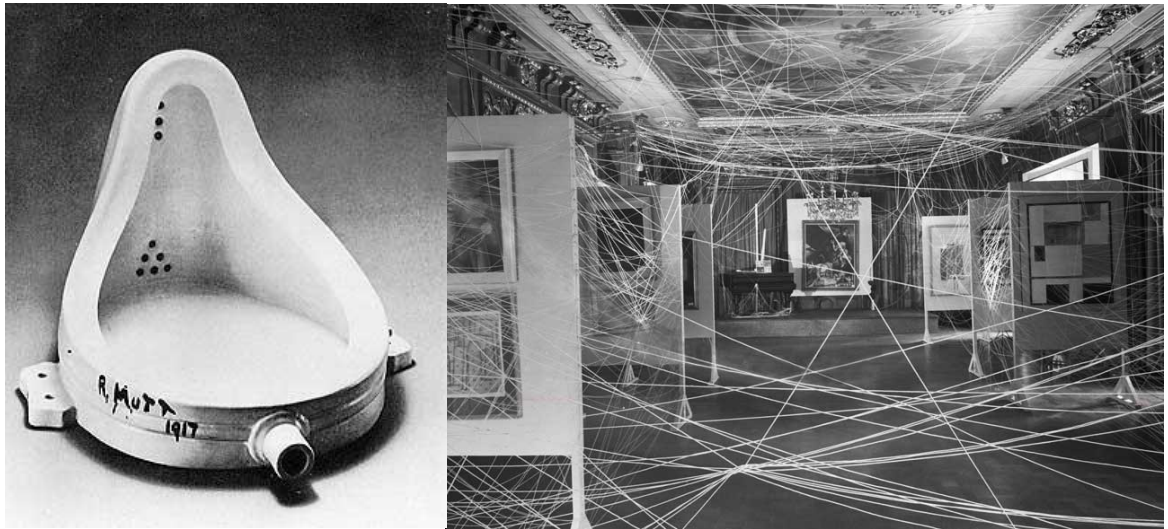


Fig. 1.3 (left) *Fountain* (1917) Marcel Duchamp. [Readymade] Retrieved from www.beatmuseum.org

Fig. 1.4 (right) *Mile of String* (1942) Marcel Duchamp. [Installation] Retrieved from www.tate.org

The construction of an installation calls for unconventional, found, and gathered objects, and requires audiences to experience the work and each other through corporeal relationships (size, shape, texture, sound) in specific spaces and environments. As in performance, the audience's relationship to the materials is significant and often critical to the work. Scholar, and art historian Julia Reiss (1999) explains, "There is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer" (p. xiii). Much like performance, there is a dynamic relationship between object (performer and action), space, and viewer while all are uniquely specific to time and place.

Chinese artist, activist, and refugee Ai Weiwei explores the dynamics and tensions surrounding migration and immigration in his multi-site exhibition *Good Fences Make Good Neighbors* (2017-2018), located across New York City. *Gilded Cage*, a sculptural component of

the exhibition, stands over twenty feet tall and, as a corral-shaped cage, allows audiences to walk in and through it. A rebellious few have even climbed it. Large gaps between bars allow audiences to reach in between and spin over-sized turnstiles, an obvious reference New York's well-known subway system but also walls, tunnels, passageways, and borders. Even the circular shape, a symbol often used to represent unity and connection, comments on the politics of division and separation. It is impossible not to notice the work's bright golden hue contrasted against a gray Manhattan landscape. Like much of Weiwei's work, the size, space, location, structure, material, and temporary yet commanding presence requires viewers to actively engage or remain passive. One must choose how they will position themselves in relation to the work, one another, and the meanings of the objects and materials used in the work.



Fig. 1.5 *Gilded Cage* in Freedman Plaza, Central Park, New York City, New York (2017) Ai Weiwei.

[Installation] Photograph by Vincent Tullo. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com

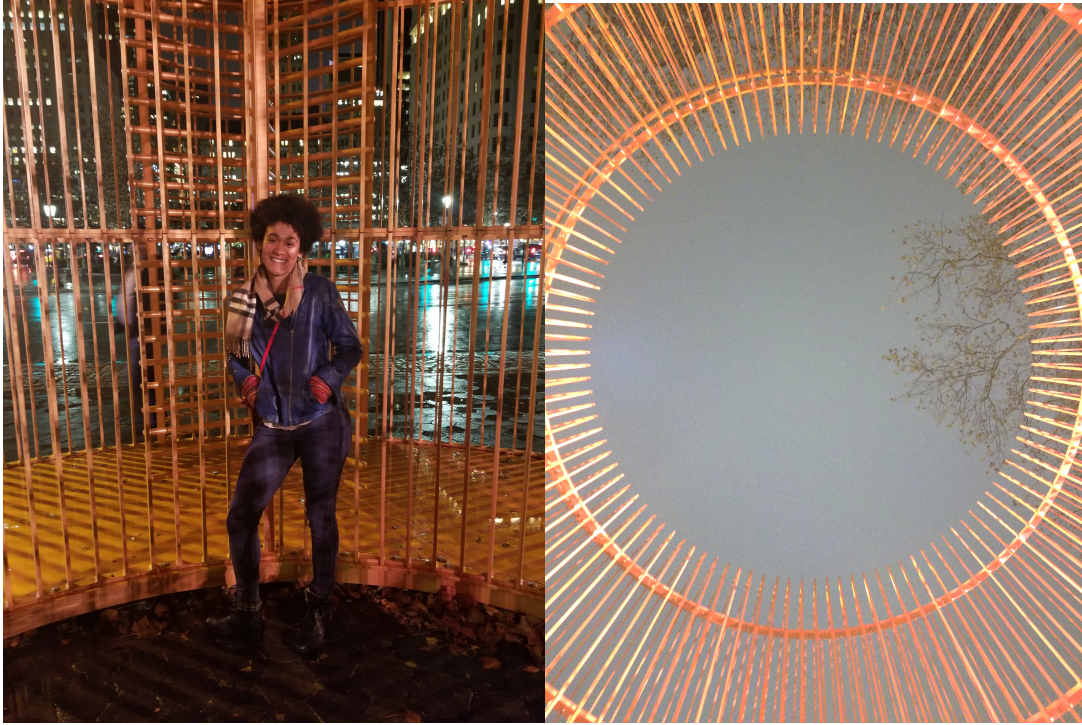


Fig. 1.6 (left) Eleanor Kipping standing in front of Ai Weiwei's *Gilded Cage* in Freedman Plaza in Central Park, New York City, New York (2017)

Fig. 1.7 (right) Looking up through *Gilded Cage* (2017)

Installation allows me to comment on the histories and meanings embodied in objects and therefore societal relationships and understandings of the histories and notions these objects hold. It serves as a means to consider Capitalism and colonialism in contemporary American culture. I do this by filling spaces with objects that resonate with contemporary culture as well as objects that may be associated with the exploitation, objectification, and regulation of Black bodies and cultures. In engaging with objects in ephemeral and site-specific spaces, audiences are provided with alternative or suggestive relationships and counter-narratives. Viewers are free to contextualize and reorient themselves both physically and cognitively to the roles that they play in the construction of race and Blackness in light of American culture and history.

Social Practice

Due to the sensitive topics of my work and research, I am always considering how important it is that the subject of my work, Black females in America, are not objectified or exploited. In addition, I am also sensitive to the fact that some, myself included, may view my work through a lens of privilege and bias, which may intentionally or unintentionally prevent them from engaging with the work in ways that serve my overarching goals of increasing dialogue, discourse, and understanding. Through a socially engaged practice, I strive to provide opportunities for all parties, regardless of race, to learn and engage with topics they may otherwise never encounter, especially in a state as predominately white as Maine, where much of my practice has developed. Social practice challenges traditional art forms by removing my work and process from conventional “art spaces” and making it more accessible to those that it is ultimately about. Through a socially engaged practice, my work is enriched through collaboration and participation, dialogue, and education. It should be noted that I do not suggest that either of these things can be present without the other, as I strongly believe they are intrinsic to each one’s success as well as my entire practice. However, I will consider them each here individually as approaches that take dominant consideration in the various kinds of works that I do.

Collaboration is risky by nature in that it requires the commitment and ability of multiple individuals. It is therefore vulnerable to the limitations, interests, and experiences of others. In this space, outcomes are often unpredictable, and difficult to guarantee or control; collaborators must be flexible. To create spaces where collaboration is possible, one must create a space where collaboration is necessary for the success of a work. If this is not the case, the work is merely one head with a group of interchangeable moving parts. However, in a true

collaboration, an endeavor's success hinges on committed individuals working together with a shared and trusted end goal. In this small space of collaboration, while I am still an "artist," I consciously enter into a relationship with one or more individuals. As we work together to create a work that, for example, "sheds light on colorism," we are able to shed light on colorism in ourselves and build relationships that are specifically reflective of our efforts. The efforts are just as much a part of the work as the goals or products.

Participation can take many forms. While participation is required for collaboration, collaboration is not required for participation. A project participant may be an invaluable collaborator, or exclusively an audience member. That is not to suggest that one is more important than the other. Consider this. *All* slaves participated in the practice of slavery, however, not all slaves *collaborated* in the practice of slavery. While forms of participation vary in my creative approaches, the common denominator is the involvement of another person. With the presence of another person is a body, and as we have already discussed, a body's experience is politically informed. When said bodies participate in my work, regardless of role, they are inherently invited into a politically charged experience. Whether as performer, assistant, researcher, or interviewee they are participating in an experience that is designed to challenge standards and modes of thinking on identity and bodies. While I cannot control how individuals will metabolize their experiences, I can at least aim to curate an encounter that is going to instigate, challenge, reinforce, or provoke with the hope to provide space for growth, exploration, and/or discussion.

Ensuing participation and collaboration is dialogue. When engaging with communities through a creative practice, individuals are welcomed into geographic and medium-specific spaces in which they are able to engage with one another on a particular topic. When my

installation, *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018), was open at the University of Maine, thousands of individuals were in dialogue on the topics presented. While I discuss it in more detail later, I want to point out that the engaging components of development and exhibition of the work called for a conversation that took place between community members, clubs and organizations, departments, institutions, individuals, and the work. The dialogue was not regulated, only prompted and facilitated.

In addition to aesthetic considerations, I also consider dissonant critique of social practice as an art form. Critic and author Claire Bishop (2006), discusses socially engaged artists and their tendency to forfeit their roles as creators. She makes important note of the trend that follows in which a great deal of socially engaged work is not critiqued at all simply due to the artist's "good intentions." She argues that due to the very tendency to position itself against traditional art institutions is more reason to critique it as an art form within the frame of art history and aesthetics (p. 180).

Let us consider the work of Vanessa Beecroft and her iconic photograph *White Madonna with Twins* (2006). The creation of this work is chronicled in the documentary film *The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins* (2009), in which Beecroft attempts to adopt two Sudanese twins. She coerces an entire village into aiding her in the steps required for the twin's father to give up custody of the children. While in Sudan, she completes a series of strikingly beautiful self-portraits in culturally and socially appropriative scenarios, which angers, frustrates, and divides her from the community that she claims to be aiding. This is not the only work in which Beecroft positions herself as problematic. Critic Jason Miller (2016) considers the work of Beecroft in the context of socially engaged work and the ways in which Beecroft's methods and approaches are problematic. He notes the danger of assuming the position of "savior" and

leaving the indigenous and “Other” bodies in a position of need, dependency, or disillusion for the sake of creative capital. Miller writes:

...Beecroft is either oblivious or indifferent to the ethical dimensions of an aesthetic performance that seeks to peddle an ethics of awareness through blunt antagonism.

Consequently, the aesthetic failure of VB61, *Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?* is tied to its failure as ethical stimulus. Good intentions aside, feelings of shock and discomfort produced by the performance fail to elicit a convincing moral response. (p. 176)



Fig. 1.8 (left) *White Madonna with Twins* (2007) Vanessa Beecroft. [Paragraph]. Retrieved from www.arteseanp.blogspot.com

Fig. 1.9 (right) *Still Death, Darfur, Still Deaf?* (2007) Vanessa Beecroft. [Performance] Retrieved from www.arteseanp.blogspot.com

Comparatively, Miller comments on socially engaged artist Santiago Sierra’s work in that it “intends to drive home the reality that actual human relations are often exploitive and dehumanizing” (p. 177). Sierra does not engage audiences in collaboration or democratic participation and his subjects are often on public display in humiliating and distressing positions and scenarios constructed by Sierra. His work is intentionally exploitative and provocative in

practice and in aesthetic. I note these artists to exemplify the complexities and variations of the aesthetics and methods used in social practice and socially engaged works as well as to make note of the care and consideration with which socially engaged work must be approached and considered.



Fig. 1.10 *HIRING AND ARRANGEMENT OF 30 WORKERS IN RELATION TO THEIR SKIN COLOR* (2002) Santiago Sierra. [Film screenshot] Retrieved from www.artnet.com

In the end, I ultimately strive to educate those who encounter my work and the various modes of collaboration, participation, and dialogue that can be found in an ethically responsible socially engaged practice. As many of my educational efforts take place in traditional educational settings such as classrooms, papers, lectures, etc., I also consider my body of work as a whole to be educational. The individual pieces and processes are individual components which sometimes work together to irk, agitate, provoke, and agitate tensions around the topics I am undertaking, yet I still situation them as educational engagement.

These disciplines, methods, and tools work together to challenge and develop the theories and inquiries that emerge during my literary and experimental research. They form my practice while informing one another and provide me with material and inquiries to continue to develop my work. Strongly influenced by relationships that are located between historical findings and narratives, as well as contemporary popular culture and national imagination, I do all of this work in consideration of my own experience as a Mixed-race Black female, as well as experiences had by others.

Creative Examples

My experience with the University of Maine Hip-Hop Dance Club and my performative self-portrait *Am I Pretty Now?* (2017) demonstrate how these disciplines unfold and develop within my practice and research.

Am I Pretty Now? is a performative self-portrait that culls from histories of labor and mining. The Brown female character is engaging in painstaking performative efforts to change her appearance. The process and results of her efforts are messy and imperfect, and reference the beauty industry, popular culture, and the absurd extremes women take to meet dominant beauty standards. The character poses before the camera and gazes directly at the viewer. It is not clear to the audience if she is aware of her uncanny appearance or if she thinks she is “passing” for beautiful, for white, or Black. Her gaze is altogether provoking, stoic, sad or even unsure and hesitant. Her face is smeared with two layers of color: black and white.



Fig. 1.11 *Am I Pretty Now?* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performative self-portrait, digital photograph 24"x16"]

The first layer is white bentonite clay, a white powdery mineral-rich clay often used in its natural form to remove toxins from skin, hair, and the gut. It is also known to reduce hyperpigmentation and scarring in women of color. Blogger and skin care therapist, Airst Dion Newsome (2017), is a skin care specialist who maintains a skincare and lifestyle blog. She proposes, hyperpigmentation or dark spots that result from inflammation or acne, are one of the most common skin concerns amongst Women of Color. “For most women, achieving a clear, even complexion seems like the most difficult task in the world...” (para. 1). Layered over the clay is a clumpy layer of black charcoal, another natural beauty ingredient known for its

detoxifying properties. While the entire beautification ritual is performative, the audience sees only the portrait, making conclusions based on performative results rather than process.

The colors and the minerals comment on the absurd efforts made by women to meet dominant beauty standards: hair dyeing, skin bleaching, or permanent makeup tattooing known as cosmetic micropigmentation. It also references blackface, the 18th Century theatrical practice of blackening a white performer's face, and/or body, though the literal application of black paint/pigment but also with exaggerated performance, speech, and mannerisms that relied on and propagated racial stereotypes. Author Robert C. Toll (1978), whose research focuses on the history of the minstrel in America writes:

No one took minstrel shows seriously; they were meant to be light, meaningless entertainment. But it was no accident that the blackface minstrel show developed in the decades before the Civil War, when slavery was often the central public issue, no accident that it dominated show business until the 1880's, when white America made crucial decisions about the status of blacks, and no accident that after the minstrel show died, the basic stereotypes it had nurtured endured-the happy, banjo-strumming plantation "darker," the loving loyal mammy and old uncle, the lazy, good-for-nothing buffoon, the pretentious city slicker. (para. 2)



Fig. 1.12 The vaudeville star Bert Williams (n.d.) Samuel Lumiere. 2015. [Photograph] Retrieved from www.theatlantic.com

The practice of blackface became popular in the early 19th century, roughly 40 years before slave emancipation. After the Civil War, Black performers gained the attention of white audiences by marketing themselves as “authentically Black” while proclaiming to be ex-slaves, and more skilled in their racial caricatures, thereby feeding the country’s dichotomic intrigue with the “Negro.” The National Museum of African American History and Culture notes on their website that, “By distorting the features and culture of African Americans—including their looks, language, dance, deportment, and character—white Americans were able to codify whiteness across class and geopolitical lines as its antithesis” (Blackface: The Birth of an American Stereotype, para.1).



Figure 1.13 Billy Van, the monologue comedian (1900). This image is available from the United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs division under the digital ID var.1831. Retrieved from <https://nmaahc.si.edu>

These early and extreme representations of Black individuals were the beginnings of many stereotypes still seen today in film, literature, and popular culture that depict Black Americans as one-dimensional and problematic characters whose roles were to serve only as Black characters and entertain the dominant White gaze. While viewed as derogatory and offensive by many, blackface is astoundingly still practiced in alternative contemporary forms. In the example below, a Twitter user shared a Snapchat screenshot of California Polytechnic State University Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity members posing in blackface and dressed as gang members. The photo was supposedly taken at a party during a multicultural celebration.

So this is happening at Cal Poly's Lamda Chi Alpha
frat....disgusting humans
Don't send your kids here if you want them to be safe
#calpolyhate. #yourkidsarentsafehere #KSBY report
this



Fig. 1.14 A Twitter post depicting Lambda Chi Alpha, a California Polytechnic State University at a gathering in April 2018. Twitter user: @calloway. [Twitter post] Retrieved from www.twitter.com

The exaggeration of these acts and gestures by the character in *Am I Pretty Now?* comments on the problematic racial and gender misrepresentation as well as pressures felt by marginalized individuals to assimilate into a society that has not made it safe for them to exist as themselves.

The character's dress is also significant and reappears in some of my later work (*Strange Fruit*, 2018). Not unlike a baptism robe or wedding gown, the white cotton empire-cut dress has a ruffled neckline and hangs informally off one shoulder. It could be read as sexually

suggestive, virginal and/or child-like and playful. A double-string of pearls fall at her neck and she gently touches the end of a long braid. Her fingernails are long and curved.

Each of these details is significant in cultural resonance yet clutter the reading and may confuse the viewer. In every sense, the image is culturally ambiguous. In a Black or indigenous context, these details may reference the Caribbean, South or Central America: flowing dresses, long braids, decorated hands, fingers and nails, and pearls sought from the depths of local beaches. When viewed through the lens of imperialism, their values shift as they reference trade, colonialism, and slavery.

Dr. Natasha Eaton (2016) discusses the notion of what she calls the xeno-figure as related to pearls in her piece *In Search of Pearlescence: Pearls, Empire and Obsolescence in South Asia*. She describes the xeno-figure as the value of an object as it is related to the exotic, and the threat that the exotic as a self-advocating agency is to the colonial—therefore rendering it fit for control. She states, “this value is inextricably entangled with histories of colonialism. The xeno-figure...encompasses the mysterious, sometimes threatening alter agency of exotic things in relation to empire (p. 32). This luster made pearls the objects of fascination and international rivalry” (p. 36). She later describes the rich and decadent rituals of central-Asian Mughal religion, rituals, and class through the use and donning of pearls. “This Mughal celebration of pearls and pearlescence kick-started much anxiety for British colonial officials, who were anxious to partake in mimetic rivalry with elite Indian and to emulate its visual and material culture” (p. 38). While the pearl has an opulent mythological, social, and spiritual association with regions from all over the world, it was the colonist’s obsession with its beauty that turned it into a global currency to be donned by the rich and pale, and those owned by the rich and pale.



Fig. 1.15 (left) *Posthumous Portrait of Mary I Stuart (1631-1660) with a Servant* (c. 1664) Adriaen Hanneman. [Oil on canvas] Retrieved from <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/>

Fig. 1.16 (right) Detail of *Posthumous Portrait of Mary I Stuart (1631-1660) with a Servant* (c. 1664) Adriaen Hanneman. [Oil on canvas] Retrieved from <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/>

Am I Pretty Now? considers the ways in which historical and contemporary racial representations can be explored through Black female experiences. Works like *Am I Pretty Now?* are sometimes brief in development and execution but provide me the opportunity for character development as well as the means to explore the relationships between my body and the materials, media, and processes used in my work. For example, *Am I Pretty Now?* took the form of both video and photo. While the video provided interesting visual results, it was the photograph that I found most striking. The self-portrait, while referencing a large body of art history, is still a digital “selfie,” (a self-portrait taken with readily available digital technology), in my use of unflattering fluorescent lighting found in my workspace, and other common objects. While self-identifying visual works have existed since man picked up a marking utensil, it is contemporary social media and technology that has made the “selfie” as democratic and personally political as it is today. Nearly anyone can participate in or challenge the

absurdity of the beauty industry, labor, consumerism, and even social media and art history. These short bursts of experimentation provide initial explorations in my practice that often resurface in other projects, or simply serve as diving boards for additional research and experimentation.

My experience as a member of the University of Maine Hip-Hop Club is another example of a research method through which I sought performative personal experiences or exaggerated displays of my own identity as a cisgender female of color in my everyday life. This all-inclusive dance club met once a week with the goal of performing at the end-of-the-semester juried Dance Showcase. With three evening performances, it is one of the University's most popular student-organized events, with Hip-Hop Club being a campus favorite. In a club of about 50 students, I was not only one of the oldest, but I was one of about three members who identified as Black, and one of about five who identified as non-white. All four club officers were young undergraduate white women, as was the majority of the club. Despite the Black-American, African, and Caribbean history of hip-hop dance and culture, the presence or acknowledgment of Black influence was absent. During the 16-week rehearsal period, the history or contributing cultural significance of Black and African history was never introduced or explicitly acknowledged. Meanwhile, Black news and current events went undiscussed, unless they related to Black pop music such as that performed by Beyoncé. Meanwhile Black aesthetics were laughed at and played with through hypersexual or aggressive performance, presentation, and social banter. The space invited members to "try on" Blackness, yet never critically discussed the Black experience. For most of these students, it was permissible that Blackness was left at the door on Sunday at 10:00 p.m. when the studio doors were locked. After rehearsal, I walked home alone knowing that both my gender and race increased my

chances of being sexually assaulted (Sexual Assault Response Services of Southern Maine, para. 9).



Fig. 1.17 University of Maine Dance Club performing to the music of Beyoncé’s *Crazy in Love* in the 2018 Spring Dance Showcase. Photograph by Justin Russell. Retrieved from www.facebook.com/justinrussellphotography

Improvisation and the narrative of marginalization within the Black experience feed heavily into the aesthetic and development of Hip-hop dance and other forms of traditionally Black art genres. It serves as a statement, a form of rebellion, provides a voice and has become a culture and a lifestyle for many. As described by hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose (1994):

Hip-hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community. It is the tension

between the cultural factors produced by postindustrial oppression and the binding ties of black cultural expressivity that sets the critical development of hip-hop. (p. 21)

While my personal experience certainly does not represent all collegial cultural gatherings across the United States, it is difficult to ignore the important fact that the opportunity for cultural education and informed appreciation was missed or ignored. Instead, cultural appropriation quickly set the tone for social dynamics, gestures, dress, and performance among the club. Due to the club's prolific social status, this seemingly harmless practice instructed thousands of individuals to approach Black history and art as White, universal, disposable, and transferable. It is, in essence, an application of a white dominant lens onto the Black experience with little to no consideration and accurate representation of that experience and/or likeness as a Black individual so as to make it more appealing to white audiences and participants, a practice colloquially known as whitewashing. Blackness is exploited as an object with little to no consideration of the implications.

Am I Pretty Now? and performative participation in my local community through the University of Maine Hip-Hop Club both provide important examples of how my practice is very much informed by my experiences as a Black female. They are also examples of ways that I the Black experience through alternative avenues such as performance, character development, materials, method, and repetition.

Additional Methods and Tools

Literary research and the process of developing an understanding of current vocabulary, academic research, and knowledge of the issues that incorporate and surround my interests is central to the development of this body of work. Literary sources include historical texts, political speeches/transcripts, popular culture in the form of film and music, poetry, blogs and

online journals. This material may be hundreds of years old, or newly published. Popular social media networks provide insight to mainstream thought on news and current events. Networks such as Tumblr and Facebook are virtually endless threads of conversation and written response to and debate on race relations, history, and culture. Social media networks provide massive databases of user-curated rich media (photo and video), both found and original. These digital resources provide invaluable insight into popular thought and also provide access to information and materials that I may not otherwise come across. I also consider other artists, performers, musicians, writers and those who have spent time exploring these topics. Those such as Marina Abramović, Kahlil Joseph, The Last Poets, Sean Leonardo, Ana Mendieta, Dread Scott, Lorna Simpson, Kiki Smith, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, among many others.

Conclusions

Entering into my creative development and production process, use of materials and techniques vary, but it is the overlap and intersection(s) of performance, installation, and social practice that provide the structure upon which my creative practice is formed.

CHAPTER 2: COLORISM – YOU’RE PRETTY...FOR A BLACK GIRL

First coined by feminist author and activist Alice Walker (1983), colorism is a socially impeding “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (part 3, chapter 5, para. 1). Colorism is seen and experienced between members of the same race, but can also be observed interracially, between ethnic groups. While colorism is closely linked to the practice of chattel slavery in the United States its impact can still be seen and felt around the globe and in the United States today. To understand this, we must first examine the relationship between slavery and Capitalism. From there we may consider the ways in which social orders based on skin tone began to develop in a slave-driven society and economy.

History

To comprehend colorism as it abides today, one must consider the ways in which slavery influenced U.S. social consciousness while also influencing global race relations. The presence and practice of colorism in the United States can be traced directly to British colonization and European influence. The “peculiar institution” of the southern United States is rooted in the murder, division, and control of Indigenous and non-white bodies for the means of labor, and financial gain (Grandin, 2015, para. 3). Educator, author, and Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago for three decades, Eric Williams (1944) explored the histories and relationships between Capitalism and slavery in the U.S. and global economy. He expands upon the introduction of the “Negro” slave as an economic means. Native American slaves were abundant upon early settlement of the United States. However, their constitution did not render them fit for ownership (Williams, Chapter 1, location 147). America’s indigenous peoples were much more difficult to coerce and were well acquainted with the local terrain, making escape a possible option (Russell, K. Wilson Ph.D., Midge, Hall Ph.D., Ronald, 1992, p. 10). Earlier forms of slavery took the form of indentured servitude. Eager to begin life elsewhere, citizens of

England traded their labor for a voyage to the New World. Low in numbers, indentured servants were given a guaranteed termination date, making them an uneconomical investment and form of labor (Williams, location 382). African slaves were cheaper, able-bodied, and “different” (Williams, Chapter 1, location 420). These characteristics were used to subdue any disquietude surrounding the issue while laying the foundation for race relations in the United States. With the implementation of slave labor, industries began to grow, creating a close-knit relationship between American consumerism and slavery.

Writer for online publication *Racked*, Caroline London (2018) traced the slave labor boom down to a specific dress worn by Marie Antoinette, as depicted in the portrait pictured below. The painting depicts the young Queen wearing a diaphanous cotton dress that London claims aided in transiting slave labor from a predominantly “home-based” or domestic practice to a highly productive workforce that literally served the world. London writes:

Marie Antoinette and her fellow fashion trendsetters made cotton desirable. Technology and slave labor made it affordable. It was the perfect storm. The affordability increased the desirability, resulting in an even higher demand, which in turn increased the mass production so that the price dropped even further. The cycle caused “King Cotton” and the institution of slavery that it stood to rule the South. (para. 15)



Fig. 2.1 *Marie Antoinette en chemise* (1783) Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. [Oil on canvas, 92.7 cm x 73.1 cm] 2018. Retrieved from www.nga.gov

Global demand for exclusive luxury and excess, as defined by Europe, was met through slave labor. Author and frequent contributor to the online publication *International Socialist Review*, Lance Selfa (2002) quotes Karl Marx stating:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production (para. 5)...Capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt. (Section 6, para. 6)

The mere donning of cotton “in public” was considered improper and unpatriotic. yet those who could followed suit as they were eager to mimic the famous Queen’s taste (London, para. 9). Merely a teenager when she took the throne, Antoinette quickly grew bored with her responsibilities as the Queen of France and in her unconsummated marriage with Louis XVI. Infamous for her extravagant taste, her disregard for criticism of her exuberant spending, and refusal to regard her subject’s needs, she quickly became wrapped up in a series of scandals and was blamed for the nation’s woes. Despite the fact that her unchecked privilege and power led to her death, she has come to represent the epitome of beauty, Whiteness, lavishness, and power in a long line of European royalty (Covington, 2006).

While the massive number of slaves throughout the Western world is not exclusively linked to a scandalous portrait of an infamous young queen, it does exemplify the pivotal influence that the European “standard” had on the economy, the inseparable relationship between slavery, racism, and Capitalism, as well as the significant impact of the body on politics.

The success of the U.S. agriculture industry hinged upon mass production to keep up with the demand for cotton, tobacco, coffee, and fruit. It can be said that the weight of the global economy was literally placed upon the backs of slaves and the demand was predominantly European, as described by Fogel (1989) in *Without Consent or Contract: The*

Rise and Fall of American Slavery. Fogel writes, “This intimate connection with trade, especially long-distance trade, differentiates New World Slavery from the general form of slavery of the ancient world, or that in Africa and the Middle East in more recent times” (p. 22).

Successful implementation of slavery required consistent interracial mingling of Black slaves and white owners. Merely logistical, in order for to maintain white power, it meant more than just physical control of Black bodies, but also psychological, mental, emotional, and sexual control. Every aspect of a slave’s life was subject to oversight and intervention from their owners. As described by Woodward (1974), “The very nature of the institution made separation of the races for the most part impracticable. The mere policing of slaves required that they be kept under more or less constant scrutiny...” (p. 12).

One of the most important factors that led to the success of U.S. slavery was the fact that slaves lived and worked so closely together. Also essential to efforts made to solidify the economic viability of the country, was the construction of a society in which the control of human bodies en masse was validated and thereby acceptable. This meant that every social entity of an American’s life had a Black counterpart that was defined and regulated in such a way that Black bodies were continually inferior. While slavery was not a new concept at this point in world history, this was a unique opportunity in the New World to dehumanize based solely on African and Indigenous ethnicity and appearance. The development of racist ideas was advanced through science, religion, and law so as to instill the belief that Black individuals were inferior and therefore in need of care. These notions were ingrained both in whites and Black communities.

Dr. Joy DeGruy (2005) discusses this in in great detail in her work, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*. “They [Africans] were inferior, first because they were not European, and

second because they were not Christian. Thus, Africans were viewed as impure, irreligious and uncivilized, fit to be slaves...” (p. 59). She goes on to describe that this was “the Christian thing to do,” as taking care of those inferior was the work of Godly folk (p. 52). Laws were put into place to protect slave owners in their abuses and are now referenced as Slave Codes. These codes further politicized race relations while actively degrading slaves to chattel and legalized the abuses they were required to endure. An example described by Fogel (1989):

At the mere behest of a planter, courts would order the dismemberment or death of a slave. Planters were also shielded from prosecution if, in the attempt to compel the labor of a slave, the slave should be killed. In all this, sharp distinctions were drawn between the status of a white servant and a black slave, and a racist ideology was steadily evolved to justify the distinction. (p. 37)

Slave Codes essentially granted masters unlimited and unchecked access to their property with laws that operated in their favor. While slave codes protected masters from persecution, they made slaves vulnerable to a multitude of abuses that were justified by law while simultaneously shaping the national imagination that understood Africans as inherently criminal and violent through coercion, control, and management.

The Birth of the Mulatto

The result of plantation success and interracial living brought about the birth of the Mixed-race slave. As plantations prospered so did land owner’s estates and families. Their domestic and intimate needs were typically met with the work done by light-skinned slaves. On individual estates, the role and treatment of a slave were often determined by the shade of their skin. The darker the skin of a slave, the less attractive, intelligent and worthy they were deemed as they were less like their white owners. The lighter a slave’s skin, the more intelligent and

attractive they were perceived. This line of thought gave way to an intra-racial separation of Black individuals based on skin color that we still see today in the form of colorism. Dark-skinned slaves were assigned roles as field slaves and were required to take on the hardest physical labor in harsh conditions such as blistering heat and frigid cold. Though still slaves, light-skinned slaves found themselves in the middle of a racial spectrum and were granted the privilege of navigating a white-dominated world much differently than their fellow slaves (Russell, K. Wilson Ph.D., Midge, Hall Ph.D., Ronald, 1992, p. 126).

In their deemed intelligence and exotic beauty, the light-skinned were “good enough” to keep the home and care for the master’s children and family. Often times, light-skinned slaves lived in separate quarters, were adequately fed, and comfortably clothed. Some were granted an education and had dark-skinned slaves performing tasks for them. Light-skinned slaves were privileged in comparison to the dark-skinned slave’s experience. Feminist social critic, bell hooks (2000) writes, “Since racially mixed slaves often received greater material benefits from their slaveholding white relatives even when those relatives did not publicly acknowledge these blood ties, they often had more resources than their darker counterparts” (p. 90). hooks brings up an important part of this discussion: blood ties. While interracial bonds between Caucasians and African Americans, Caucasians and Native Americans, and African Americans and Native Americans were not uncommon in the New World, “...the rapid proliferation of White-Black race mixing was causing them great alarm. For slavery to gain moral acceptance, it was essential to keep the races apart” (Russell, K. Wilson Ph.D., Midge, Hall Ph.D., Ronald, 1992, p. 12). Despite this, female slaves of all shades were often raped and subject to other sexual abuses by any white male who desired. With little to no accountability, time spent with slaves went unmonitored. Thus, the practice of rape ensued, and the birth of Mixed-race slaves

increased. These light-skinned children would eventually become known as mulatto, a dated and offensive term used to describe an individual with white and Black parents and/or grandparents. Despite some of the comforts provided to mulattos, they were still slaves, and their very existence was a reminder of the fact that their bodies did not belong to themselves.

With the visual proof of rape becoming much more difficult to ignore, colonists had to address the issue and again did so politically. “Departing from traditional English law, in which the status of the child was always determined by that of the father, the colonists voted in 1662 that children in Virginia would have the same status as the mother” (Russell, K. Wilson Ph.D., Midge, Hall Ph.D., Ronald, 1992, p. 13). Though a concerted effort, it was ensured that Black newborns maintained their slave status, rather than inherit the freedom of their father. Harriet Jacobs (2001), a Black woman born and raised in slavery, wrote and published her accounts focusing heavily on the master-slave relationships that she endured. Reflecting on teenage encounters with her master and mistress she recounts:

My master was, to my knowledge, the father of eleven slaves. But did the mothers dare to tell who was the father of their children? Did the other slaves dare to allude to it, except in whispers among themselves? No, indeed! They knew too well the terrible consequences. (p. 32).

Southern white women were complacent in this practice and presented themselves content to marry plantation owners knowing they raped and fathered slaves yet did not hesitate to take out disgruntled jealousies or anxieties on their husband’s slave victims through harsh treatment rather than challenge the institution (p. 33). This was undoubtedly lucrative, as well. “In house” reproduction cost nothing and led to additional slaves, sometimes kept and sometimes sold off.

Artist Adrian Piper (1991), whose work will be discussed below, refers to F. James Davis' views on the Mixed-race child. Davis states:

...by defining all mixed children as Black and compelling them to live in the Black community, the rule made possible the incredible myth among whites that miscegenation had not occurred, that the races had been kept pure in the South. (p. 15)

This laid the foundation for the conceptual framework of colorism that continues to plague Black communities today. Being mulatto then, nor does being Mixed-race today, automatically grant access into the white community, promise a life of passing for white, or equate to freedom. Eventually, it was expected that plantations would have numerous light-skinned slaves. To recognize these children as white would make explicit the ways in which Black women were being raped, and the ways the Black female body was being treated as property. Dissociation also reinforced ideas of White Supremacy. To openly acknowledge that Black women and white men were having relations, would have suggested that miscegenation was acceptable. To combat this, Black females free and enslaved were often blamed for their sexual advances, rather than white men held accountable (Siegel, p. 4). Poor and/or Black women, in particular, were viewed as hypersexual and promiscuous and were therefore "asking for it" (p.3). Acknowledging the white man's role would also have granted white women similar permissions with Black slaves; the very notion of white female sexuality being granted to a Black male was seen as barbaric. Within a fundamentalist society founded on Puritan Christian morals, white female chastity and virginity were of value and meant to be protected. Black female sexuality was used as a tool of oppression and Black male sexuality was a feared unbridled threat. Born into slavery, Ida Bell Wells-Barnetts details her thoughts:

I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, still continue without let or hindrance, check or reproof from the church, state, or press until there had been created this race within a race - and all designated by the inclusive term of “colored”. I also found that the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinking in white women. They could and did fall in love with the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls as well as black ones, but they professed an inability to imagine white women doing the same with the Negro and mulatto men.

Whenever they did so and were found out, the cry of rape was raised... (Simkin, location 4665)

From this, we can begin to understand the ways in which the toxic and stereotypical tropes of Black sexuality emerged in literature and film today. One example is the “Jezebel” trope, a forlorn hypersexualized, light-skinned and often Mixed-race female. Think Lydia Brown in the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), who cannot help arousal whenever Stoneman is verbally abusive or demanding. On the other side is the Black male, hypersexual, uncontrollable, primal and animalistic. Think Black Gus in the same film, whose mere presence drives Flora to jump off a cliff to her own death!

Artist Kara Walker, best known for her large-scale silhouettes and illustrations, looks at some of this history through her crude depictions of power and gender in the Antebellum South. While her work is simple and stark with its contrasting solid black and white shapes, the narratives are violent, graphic, and hypersexual. The silhouette plays a notable role in both art history as well as race relations. John Casper Lavatar’s 17th Century physiognomy research included outlines and studies of the human skull and lead the way into thought on appearance as trustworthy indicator of intelligence, morality, and moral as discussed by Stemmler (1993). The

practice of physiognomy as a means of social and racial stratification has an inseparable tie to the popularization of silhouettes in the western world and the literal defacing of Black identity. Art historian Lessa Rittelmann expresses the powerful use of the silhouette in Walker's work and others by stating:

Its [the silhouettes] transformation of a complex three-dimensional subject into a unified two-dimensional form functions in much the same manner that racial stereotypes reduce otherwise complex subjects and social anxieties into facile caricatures. Initially employed to reinforce Enlightenment concepts such as absence/presence, black/white, positive/negative, and moral/immoral, in the hands of African Americans artists like Walker, Simpson and Ali, the silhouetted form has proven equally useful in dismantling these same binary constructs. (p. 295)

Walker's gigantic narratives are exaggerated or even mythological yet drip with an unsettling and ugly truth. They are uncomfortable to sit with yet make it difficult to ignore the ways they draw directly from history, stereotypes, and racially charged relationships.



Fig. 2.2 *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) Kara Walker. [Cut paper on wall] Retrieved from www.Vice.com



Fig. 2.3 Detail *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) Kara Walker. [Cut paper on wall] Retrieved from www.Vice.com

Post-Slavery

After the Civil War, a desperate attempt to maintain white racial purity was set into motion. The Racial Integrity Act of 1924 determined that those who had *any* amount of African ancestry were to be legally deemed as Black (Virginia Health Bulletin, 1924). While Black slaves were free, interracial marriage was criminalized and race was to be determined and documented at birth. Yet another institutional designation over the Black body. What colloquially has become known as the “one-drop” rule became a governing factor in determining race in the early 19th century.

The one-drop rule situated an individual with any sub-Saharan-African ancestry as Black. This was strengthened by Jim Crow Laws, a set of laws and policies that legalized and

regulated the pre-existing practice of segregation. This lasted until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s when it was overruled by the Supreme Court in 1967 in *Loving vs. Virginia*.

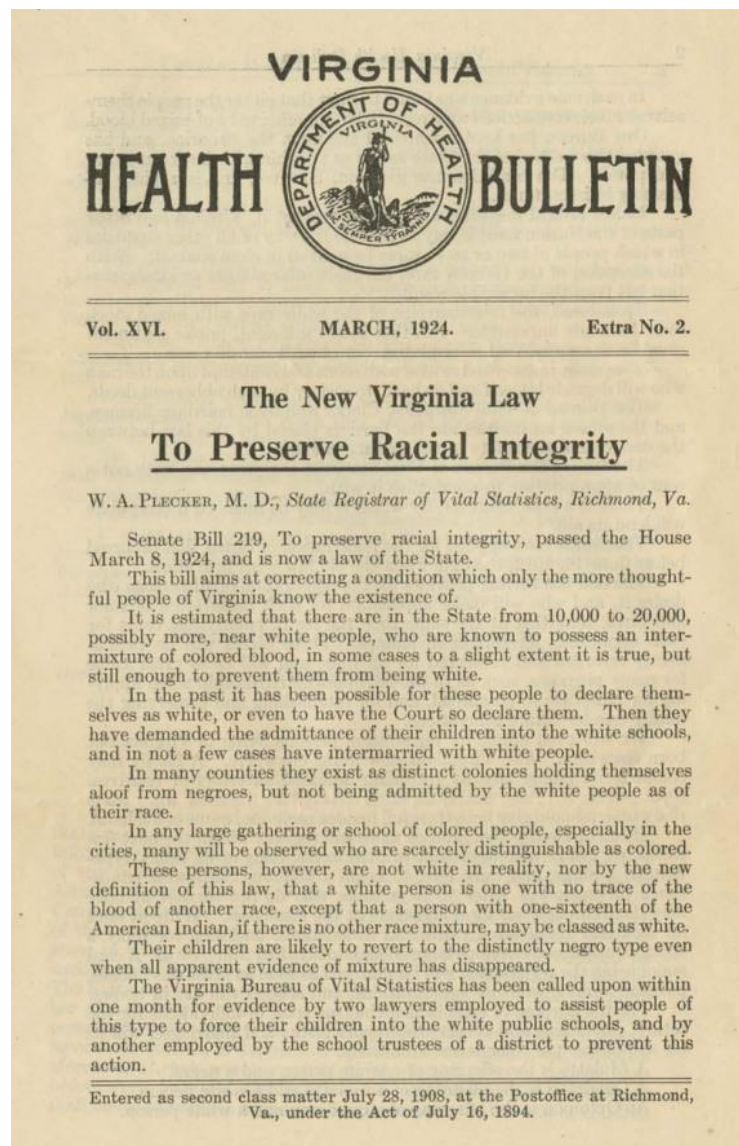


Fig. 2.4 Virginia Health Bulletin, vol. XVI, March 1924. [Pamphlet] Rockbridge County Clerk's Correspondence, 1912-1943. Local Government Records Collection. The Library of Virginia.12-1245-005/006/007. Retrieved from <https://lva.omeka.net/>

Colorism today

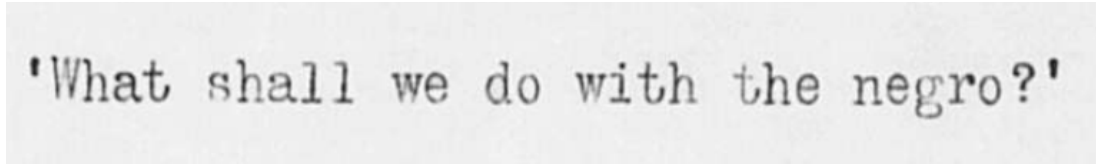


Fig. 2.5 Convict Lease System (1893). [Screenshot from Manuscript/Mixed Material] Retrieved from the Library of Congress at <https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.01008/>

Historical forms of colorism have bled into contemporary race relations today. In the history described above we can see the early standards of beauty that would be used to continue to separate and control post-Civil War America as well as control and police female sexuality. The liberation of slaves did not happen overnight, nor did it automatically rid Black communities of the complexities of colorism. The Emancipation Proclamation did not grant automatic liberation and in some cases, many slaves did not even realize that the south had lost the war and that they were now legally entitled to a paid wage for their labor. It took time, and as Blacks began to migrate north and urban industries began to develop in urban areas like Detroit, Chicago, and New York City, the competition for jobs, education, and stability increased, not only between whites and Black job seekers but also between Black laborers.

Now that interracial mingling was not an economic necessity, Slave Codes were quickly replaced by Black Codes in an attempt to maintain regulation and control of the Black body. Despite the fact that Black Americans were now citizens, their freedom was shaped by the fact that every aspect of Black life was still regulated by White life, and in some cases by a continued state of enslavement. For example, a free Black man could be imprisoned for looking at a white woman. Black Codes regulated every aspect of a freedman's life including work, travel, voting, and finances—everything was segregated and controlled (DeGruy, 2005, p. 81).

Despite their new status as free, society undoubtedly perceived Black Americans as a lesser class.

The toll of these efforts on the Black community was immense. Inferiority was internalized, and a Black individual's sense of self was defined by Whiteness. Raoul Peck's recent motion picture film featuring original text by James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2017), evokes this sense of not belonging. Baldwin (1965) says that "It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you" (p. 23). In an attempt to receive institutional affiliation fraternities, sororities, and even churches would be "color cast," segregated by shade. Churches would practice the paper bag test, the comb test, or the door test to grant entrance into the congregation as well as the physical church itself. Using these tests, upon entry to the building, the shade of one's skin would be compared to a brown paper bag or a door that had been painted brown. Those darker than the designated shade of brown would not be permitted entry. The results of the comb test were less subjective to the proctor, as a fine-tooth comb was pulled through one's hair. If this was done with ease, admission was granted, an early nod to the notion of good hair.

From this developed a disdain for natural hair and dark skin later inherited by future generations, paving the road for forms of colorism that we see today. Contributor to an anthology by C.L. Dews (1995) on class and education, Mary Cappello recounts her youthful attempts and struggles at applying to college as a young Italian-American woman:

I received a rejection from Princeton University, only to learn that a less scholastically able football player at my high school was accepted there. The rejection made the message clear. Not only was passage to higher education going to be rare, but the only

ticket in might be the body, and at that, only one particular version of the body... (p. 130)

Despite her ability to perhaps meet the academic standard required for success, Cappello's body served as its own gatekeeper. "You're pretty for a dark-skinned girl," is a statement that countless dark-skinned Black women receive, including Kahlanda Barfield Brown (2016), *InStyle's* Fashion and Beauty Editor. Such statements directed at Black women indicate that dark skin is not meant to be viewed as pretty to begin with, but that one may make the cut due to something else about her appearance: perhaps her chemically straightened hair or Eurocentric/non-Black features. Brown recounts, "I never felt so humiliated and degraded in my life. Crazy thing is, the guy who made the comment was darker than me" (para. 2).

Unfortunately, in communities of color, contemporary forms of colorism are heavily perpetuated by the Black male. This is not to say that Black women do not participate in this form of colorism, however, when they do, it is often directed at other Black women in their competition for the acceptance of males. Ellis Cose (2002), author of *The Envy of the World: On Being A Black Man in America*, considers the tense relationships between Black men and women today. He shares several accounts in which his Black female friends confided in him on their inability to find love and intimacy with Black men. He spoke with sociologist Donna L. Franklin on the phenomenon of deep tension and discourse between Black men and women. Unsurprisingly, the topic of skin tone was discussed:

Color considerations have not disappeared, and they still have something to do with the relations between black women and men. There are still many of us who are somewhat color-struck; who, in the Jim Crow past, would not have dared approach a white woman, but who has had a definite preference for lighter-skinned blacks. In this new age, when

many racial barriers have fallen, that preference plays itself out in somewhat expanded ways. (p. 135)

These “expanded ways” are in the workplace, in relationships, and in education, as well as in popular depictions of Black women in film, music and literature, as briefly mentioned earlier. Author Cose shares his sister LaVerne’s perspective on the role of media. She shares, “All the women on display, dancing away, were several shades lighter than she, and it pained her to think that this was the only desirable black female image that video makers could see” (p. 135). Hip-hop produced for mass audiences plays a major player in the representation and definition of Black life and culture, perpetuates toxic racial divides based on skin-tone. Dark-skinned women are often seen as hypersexual, animalistic, and unlovable backup characters, while light-skinned women are key players, seen as innocent, sensual, looking for and deserving of love and romance. This is most obvious in their depiction and prominence in music videos as well as in the lyrics themselves. For example, rapper Kendrick Lamar (2012): “We speeding on the 405 passing Westchester/You know the light skin girls in all the little dresses, good Lord” (*The Art of Peer Pressure*) or Childish Gambino (2010): “Let me pay for what you sip tonight/Mixed girls from Williamsburg, that’s my fucking Kryptonite” (*Put It In My Video*). Both of these lyrics exclaim a sexualized preference for light-skinned women. Some hip-hop artists aim to challenge colorism. For example, Azealia Banks (2010) criticizes the Black male preference for light skin in pointing out that the world favors the fair: “Light skin girls, light skin world / Switching his vanilla ‘cause he like that swirl” (*L8R*).

When it comes to representation, especially in Black hip-hop and popular culture, dark-skin is often punished with abuse, neglect, shame, and control, while light-skin is rewarded with love, access, and freedom. The trauma of abuse, rape, and slavery experienced by the Black

community had been deeply internalized and inferiority had been learned. Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1972) warns that the oppressed not take on traits learned by their oppressor, but also acknowledges that it is one of the necessary symptoms of exploitation that must be overcome to reach liberation. Within this negotiation, he refers to the oppressed as “sub-oppressors.”

The very structure of their (the oppressed) thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of the existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot ‘consider’ him sufficiently clearly to objectivize him - to discover him ‘outside’ themselves” (p. 45).

Creative Contemporary Connections

As Blacks began to work, attend school, organize and advocate for their own betterment, those with fair-skinned continued to find favor. This perpetuated the “field slave syndrome” in the Black community and the ideas that lighter skin would and should grant one closer access to one’s master and resources. Playwright Adrian Kennedy (1969) explores colorism and identity in her piece *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, in which the main character, Sarah explores the complexity of her Mixed-race identity in a 50-minute play which takes place in Sarah’s bedroom and mind. The piece comments on the internal dialogue and struggle had by the Mixed-race female in White America. Sarah becomes obsessed with striving to reconcile with her hatred of her Black father and her longing for her white mother. The script reads:

As for myself! I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be. I ask nothing except anonymity. (p.168)

Writer for the New York Times, Neil Genzlinger (2006) describes the protagonist's obsession:

She surrounds herself with things pale. Her boyfriend (Danny Camiel) is white. The statue of Queen Victoria (Trish McCall) that she keeps in her room is a thing of astonishing whiteness. Then there is her hobby: 'I write poetry filling white page after white page'. (para. 3)

Kennedy's violent and nightmarish depiction of Sarah's experience was both timely and noteworthy in its 1960's production and exposed a truth experienced by the non-white female during a movement when Black Power and the Black diaspora was publicly dominated and articulated by the image and voice of the Black male.

Fiber artist Alicia Henry takes a similar and visually jarring approach in her fiber works which reference African masks and costume. She refers to her works as non-portraits. Exploring ideas of beauty, body and identity in relation to society and the self, Henry's artist statement, published on Zeitgeist gallery's website (2016) reads:

I re-examine the social relationship these images have had in shaping the stereotypical and idealized figures in the media by reinventing the paper doll and depicting generalized figures representing what I hope is a broader vision of society (racial, gender, economic, and social levels), my goal is to make visible that which still often goes unseen. (para. 6)



Fig. 2.6 *Untitled (woman)* (2015) Alicia Henry. [Mixed media 30 in x 21.5 in] Retrieved from www.zeitgeist-art.com

While Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* heavily references the white of Europe, and Henry's work on the black of Africa, both artists reference history and the impact of racialized trauma on the psyche of the Black female. They do so through the use of an internalized experience juxtaposed with outward projections and imagery.

Congolese artist Pierre Mukeba also limits his color pallet and through the use of the unexpected and direct gaze confronts audiences with the impressive violence of Black history. Mukeba, explores trauma experienced by himself, refugees, and those afflicted by war and war crimes. In a statement on Mukeba, art critic Ashley Crawford (2017) quotes Mukeba:

I use the colour red as our prehistoric ancestors saw it as a sign of fire and blood. Red is usually associated with war, strengths and power. The color blue is used to represent

piety and sincerity. Lastly, the colour yellow which represents happiness and joy. Most of my artwork contains a lot of red paint as I believe that the colour red represents the emotions and lifestyle my people in Central Africa experience on a daily basis. (para. 3)



Fig. 2.7 (Left) *Infinite Pain* (2016) Pierre Mukeba. [Brush pen and fabric applique on cotton, 245 cm x 113 cm] Retrieved from <http://gagprojects.com>

Fig. 2.8 (Right) *Hostile* (2016) Pierre Mukeba. [Brush pen and fabric applique on cotton, 175 cm x 113 cm] Retrieved from <http://gagprojects.com>

Like Walker, Kennedy, and Henry, the characters of Mukeba's fiber works employ the likeness of the body to expose experiences and challenge notions of Blackness and African affiliation, and therefore the African Diaspora. Black skin and cotton backgrounds echo with histories of war, violence, and politics. His characters present audiences with the experiences had by People of Color and explore the ways in which ethical, social, political, and cultural

ideals have been shaped and played out for centuries at the cost of the freedoms of certain groups of people and to the benefit of others. In the same light, his work comments on the complex and often nuanced relationships between Blacks and/or Africans that have been strained and informed by colonialism, war, and genocide.



Figure 2.9 Detail *James 2:10* (2017) Pierre Mukeba. [brush pen and fabric applique on cotton, 182 cm x 290 cm] Retrieved from www.churchieemergingart.com/

Conclusions

Rooted in America's past, colorism cannot be considered without looking at the origins of American slavery. As Capitalism has hinged upon the oppression of certain bodies made to withstand the dominance and power of others, we must also consider the ways in which this is still done today. Along with many African and African Diasporic artists, I am considering this

in my creative practice through the use of materials, process, understanding and depiction of how history has shaped my findings.

CHAPTER 3: RACIAL PASSING – WHAT ARE YOU

Racial passing is the acceptance of one racially categorized individual being accepted as another by the differing racial group, it is also the act and deliberate decision to aim to do so (Kennedy, 2001, p. 1). Historically, passing was practiced by light-skinned African Americans, who due to their fair complexions could pass as white. However, it was and is a phenomenon that is seen across other racial and ethnic groups, as well as class, gender, and sexuality. Many who do not identify as heterosexual have lived their lives “in the closet,” passing as heterosexual to avoid familial or religious spurning. Jews passed for white to escape social ostracization and eventually death in concentration camps. Recently, Andrea Smith, a white female who has worked as a social rights advocate in Native American communities was accused as dishonestly passing as Cherokee (Jaschik, 2015, para. 2). Despite numerous genealogy test results which reveal otherwise, Smith (2015) still claims to identify as Native American (Allen, 2015, para. 5). As it pertains to the history of Black Americans, the complexities of racial passing are historically rooted in slavery, racism and colorism. Additionally, the factors by which one might pass, voluntarily or mistakenly, vary and are closely related to appearance and the physical body. In line with my creative practice, this chapter investigates the political, social, and personal gains and/or losses of racial passing and the ways in which skin color, hair, and other factors contribute to ambiguous identities, and the ability to pass.

Bodies and Codes

I was seven years old. It was just the three of us: my six-year-old brother (Brown and Mixed-race like me), my white widowed mother, and me. After the death of my third-generation West Indian Black father earlier that year, we all moved to Florida from Maine. In a new city, my mother was in search of finding an adequate school for my brother and me; we

were going on our third transfer in less than a year. Garden City Elementary was a technology-centered magnet school located in Fort Pierce in which enrollment was primarily minority students. Mom stood in the admissions office in front of a Brown woman sitting behind a desk. The woman made a phone call in favor of our admittance on the spot in front of all three of us.

“They can pass,” the woman said urgently to someone on the other end of the line, my mother recounts.

“Pass as what?” Mom wondered silently. She quietly hoped that it would be a pass that would grant admission to one of the best schools in the area and finally afford us a sense of security and stability in our efforts to feel settled. Perhaps the school was at Caucasian capacity and we would need to be enrolled as one minority or another. Perhaps it was the other way around and our white mother granted us our proof of whiteness as per laws past of miscegenation (see Chapter 2). Whatever the pass was, it was granted, and we were in.

I do not remember this. More than two decades later, my mother shared this story with me. She never inquired as to the details of how we got in. When we were chatting about it, she simply said that she “knew that it had something to do with race,” and was just thankful for admittance, she feared that too many questions may have spoiled our lot. I had a positive and privileged experience at Garden City. The exposure to technology at such a young age shaped my future plans and eventually my career. I later went on to enroll in United Technology Center, a vocational program in High School where I studied Commercial Video Production and later went on to pursue a Bachelor of Science in Video Production. The years that I would spend in Florida and at Garden City marked the beginning of an increased awareness of race and identity, an awareness of what it meant to be Black, what it meant to be white, and what it meant to be Mixed-race in the United States.

History

Today, racial passing and colorism are remains of the racist and segregationist ideology that shaped the country. The phenomenon of racial passing cannot be made sense of today without understanding how race influences one's social standing both individually and collectively. On racial passing, Randall Kennedy (2001) notes that individuals, namely the "white Negro" chose this path of deception due to the social access that whiteness guaranteed in a society defined by race and ethnicity (p. 1). Racial passing maintains the marginalization of the Black body while preserving the privilege of the white body. Allyson Hobbs (2014), a Stanford University history researcher and author of *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* highlights that the desire to "pass as white" stems from the desire to "pass as free" (p. 34). Once it became that Black individuals made up the majority of the U.S. slave population, whiteness was equated with freedom, and freedom was equated with moving through the world as a human rather than an object. Slaves understood that to successfully pass as white, entailed learning the physical and behavioral performance that came along with freedom (p. 39). Black slaves were not the only ones in the know, however. An 1845 notice for a runaway slave in the *Alabama Beacon* reads:

Ranaway, on the 15th of May, from me, a negro woman named Fanny. Said woman is twenty years old; is rather tall, can read and write, and so forges passes for herself. Carried away with her a pair of ear-rings, a Bible with a red cover, is very pious. She prays a great deal, and was, as supposed, contented and happy. She is as white as most white women, with straight light hair, and blue eyes, and can pass herself for a white woman. I will give five hundred dollars for her apprehension and delivery to me. She is very intelligent. (Simkin, 2014, location 4736)

Written passes, as the one mentioned above, permitted slaves to travel for errands or other work, and were granted by their owners (Hobbs, p. 39). Descriptions of slaves such as this, written by overseers, demonstrate the efforts that slaves would take to pass as white, such as learning to read and write. It also comments on the need to prevent slaves from gaining any form of education, lest slave masters be outsmarted, and slaves lose tractability.

Racial Negotiations

About a three years ago, I met Elliott Sanders, a fellow University of Maine graduate student from Idaho. Elliott and I were both presenting at a symposium where we spotted each other from across the room. I assumed that he was Mixed-race and was interested in meeting him. We did meet and within a few minutes of chatting, he actually asked me if I was Mixed-race first. Elliott and I soon became friends and have spent a lot of time discussing race, especially as related to our Mixed-race identities and experiences. Elliott agreed to be interviewed for this work.

Elliott describes his identity as existing “on the fringes of white and Black.” In some ways, he does not imagine himself to be Black at all, while in other ways such as socially, or even regarding his involvement with the church, he does. In other ways, he does not see himself as white, but is white, looks white and identifies with white culture and society. Elliott is tall, with long dreadlocks and light skin. At first glance, most do not realize that he is Mixed-race. In his words, only those who are “in deep,” for example those researching culture and race such as me, another Mixed-race person, or someone hyper-aware of ethical and cultural nuances, would recognize him as such. A great deal of his experience is directly related to his childhood and upbringing. Growing up most of Elliott’s neighbors were white, and he has experienced a range of reactions when people learn of his ethnic background. It still surprises him to learn that

people assume his ethnicity to be white. While making friends in college, he came to realize that when his friends would speak to him about Black individuals, they assumed that they were engaging with a white male. “It took my closest friends a year to realized that I was not white,” states Elliott. He says that he does use this to his advantage and passes as white when the opportunity serves him, such as when encountered by a police officer. He states, that while he does not always blatantly reveal a particular identity or ethnicity, he does not deny one either and admits to enjoying the ambiguity and confusion that it causes people. “I am not interested in the mainstream culture of either identity,” he states.

While getting to know Elliott, this was and still is interesting to me. In many ways, we have had very similar experiences when it comes to our identities being informed by two very present cultures. We both have white mothers, and Black fathers who are now deceased. We both grew up in white homogeneous states, attended college in Maine, and we both shed and embrace these tensions as a means of exploring and forming who we are in our Mixed-race identities. However, externally, our experiences differ, and this is a direct reflection of the way that our physical bodies inform our experiences. I understand that in order to pass as white, I would have to take far greater efforts to pass than Elliott does. For example, while Elliott and I both wear our hair natural, I would have to straighten and perhaps even dye mine, simply due to the color of my skin, and gender. I would need to be thoughtful about the way I dress, my makeup, and what jewelry I wear. I would need to shed any and all Black female likeness so as to not “out” myself. I also understood that within the Black community I am light-skinned, but in the Mixed-race community I am dark-skinned. Early in our friendship, I was uneasy about the notion of meeting some of Elliott’s friends. I feared that Elliott’s association with me would “out” him or reveal his race to his white friends in a way that he did not feel comfortable. I was

concerned that they would suddenly see him as darker than he actually was, merely by association and wondered if people would suddenly see a resemblance in our features now that they had the opportunity to compare. This anxiety was painful and suffered alone because I also recognized that my fears were linked to the White Supremacist notion that association with Blackness is inherently negative. In no way did I want my Blackness to have a negative impact on Elliott's life or our friendship, yet my own anxieties were hindering a naturally free-flowing relationship. No matter how socially consciences I had strived to become, I still had a lot to unpack in my personal and subjective life. I have now known Elliott for three years; having met some of his friends, this anxiety has somewhat subsided and we still have long chats about race and identity.

What this story exemplifies is the complexity of racial passing and identity within Black communities. The anxieties and pressures to identify with one race or another, and the toll had on the psyche of individuals is physically embodied and informs nearly every single interpersonal and institutional relationship, regardless of how articulate or aware an individual may be of these tensions. While interracial negotiations vary between individuals, they still shape and inform identity and future negotiations, thereby creating a complex cultural system that is undulating beneath the surface of White America.

Many still seem to grapple with the notion that identity is fluid and that due to its intersectional nature one cannot be identified by external markers alone. It was only in 2000 that "biracial" appeared on the national census (Pérez-Peña, 2015, para.3). A study conducted by Pew Social Trends (2015) notes that 61% of Mixed-race Americans (of all ethnic backgrounds) state that they do not identify as multiracial and that 41% of them state that it is because they "look like one race" more than the other (p. 40). While being mixed was a saving grace for

some slaves, the Mixed-race experience is still a reflection of a strictly “black and white” society as the physical body always has and still does informs one’s experiences and thus their sense of self.

Black Hair

All humans have an individual relationship with their body, which inevitably includes their hair (or lack of). Black and Mixed-race women, in particular, have a deeply complex relationship with their hair and skin. All cultural and societal experiences aside, the acknowledgment of my own Blackness did not begin to happen until I made a commitment to properly care for my hair respective to its thick, unruly, coarse texture. This meant a change in products with close attention to ingredients, washing schedules, and learning how to do protective styles by myself. I realized that I had to care for my hair and skin as a Black woman, therefore making me a Black woman. This is not an uncommon revelation. For the production of the installation *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2017), I spoke with ten women who identify as Black, Brown, and/or Mixed-race. Most of them expressed a very specific moment in which the decision to properly care for their natural hair strongly informed not just their identity as Black women, but also their acceptance of themselves as Black women. Those who did not have this revelation were raised to care for and appreciate their natural hair and their acceptance of their Blackness began as children rather than being something that they had to seek or grow into. There is, however, risk that accompanies a decision to wear natural hair. Some institutional dress codes and policies prohibit natural and traditionally Black hairstyles, and while many Black men elect to their hair short, women are left to decide how to strategically cope. Pamela Walker was fired for wearing cornrows to her job at the Chicago Regency Hyatt (Byrd, D. Ayana, Tharps, L. Lori 2001, p. 104). Executive Editor of *Essence Magazine* Susan L. Taylor

chose to decline a speaking engagement at a historically Black university because of its “no braids, no dreadlocks policy for its students (Prince, 2009, p. 88).”

While Black women have been contending with politically charged experiences with their bodies for decades, white women have profited and benefited from their use of the “Black aesthetic.” In 1979, white actress Bo Derek appeared in the romantic comedy *10* wearing tight blonde cornrows (small pleats that are braided close to the scalp) with beads on the ends. The hairstyle, traditionally known as Fulani Braids (Callendar, 2018, para. 3), quickly became popularized and dubbed as Bo Braids. They became a trendy and pricy hairstyle worn by wealthy white women living in Los Angeles and New York City (Byrd, D. Ayana, Tharps, L. Lori 2001, p. 103). Nearly 40 years later celebrities like Kim and Khloe Kardashian, Kylie Jenner (Day, 2018), and Marc Jacobs’s benefit from appropriating, renaming, and rebranding traditionally African and Black American aesthetics (Oliver, 2017) on the runway, social media and in media appearances.

Class

Not all passing is voluntary. Sometimes, it happens intentionally. This too is closely tied to the historical influences of race on class and education. In addition to appearance, the ability to pass requires one to also pass in class, education, and behavior. Revisiting Hobbs, “Looking white is contingent in many ways on *doing* white” (p. 45). Perceptions regarding a Black individual are made based upon these variables. An individual may be assumed to be white or remembered to look altogether different than they actually do. Today these assumptions are often based on their behavior and how well individuals navigate through academics and professional settings, as these are spaces where one’s intelligence is made public and open to scrutiny. Ability to navigate academics with ease is subconsciously connected with appearance.

Appearance then influences treatment and access. This feedback loop privileges the light-skinned, while those that do not make the cut have greater difficulty getting a break. A study released by SAGE Open Journals involved a series of tests that evaluated the perception of skin tone in relation to the education level of Black men. Data revealed that those who were more intelligent, educated, and successful were remembered as being lighter than they actually were (Ben-Zeev et al, 2014, p. 7). This reveals deeply embedded implicit bias that favors the fair-skinned and assigns cultural norms of success and affluence, or “Whiteness,” with appearance. The choice to racially pass is inherently correlated with class and social mobility.

Exclusive of race, many individuals who seek upward mobility express a shared frustration of having to pretend that they belong to a certain class before they actually do or prove that they are in fact members of a particular socio-economic class if it has been assumed otherwise. This is often seen in the pursuit of higher education. People of color they often find their existing cultural norms are in conflict with those of the class to which they aspire to be associated with or fraternize. This difference in cultural norms often puts them in a position of not belonging. This may relate to dialect, religion, or even behavior. Gloria D. Warren shares her own story in a collection of essays entitled *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class* (1995). Warren, an African-American woman shares her reluctance to take out an education loan. She expands on how ideas surrounding money in the Black community were developed when African Americans were “separate but equal,” during the time when Jim Crow Laws were established. Black communities worked hard to place themselves so as not to be in need of the “white man” and to be as financially independent of the government and the American banking system as possible. Few were taught how to use credit and debt as a tool, and instead viewed debt as dangerous and something that should be

avoided at all costs, as it was a ticket to further enslavement (p. 121). While Warren had not chosen to pass as white, to successfully navigate the terrain of upper-middle-class society and academia, she had to drastically redefine her ideas of financial health and reject that which was closely related to her Blackness, so she could socially pass as well as succeed. I consider my friend DaShawn (name has been changed) for example, who after being accepted into a college in New York City was completely overwhelmed with the process of completing his FAFSA and concluded that “he didn’t have the money” to pursue his education. Neither his mother, sister, grandmother, other relatives or friends were able to help him navigate it either. I wish he had asked for my help! This reluctance to take financial risks combined with the cultural practice of many Diasporic communities to expect children to contribute their financial earnings to their immediate and grand families has led to a continued lack of education and upward mobility among many Black families.

While the gains awarded with racial passing are often political and social, the losses are often personal and even tragic. “To pass as white was to make an anxious decision to turn one’s back on a black racial identity and to claim to belong to a group to which one was not legally assigned” (Hobbs, 2014, p.5). The decision to participate in racial passing is closely related to shame. If passing is an individual’s decision rather than the family’s, blood ties are often severed once an individual has successfully acclimated into white society. Historically, during the era of Jim Crow, being white afforded a better place to live, could make it possible to land a better job, and provided greater educational opportunities and resources. It can then be assumed that association with Blacks would equate the opposite, leading to shame and marginalization. As this would have been counterproductive to upward mobility for future generations, it resulted in individuals completely cutting themselves off from their families and communities.

Hobbs shares the story of a young Black woman who married a white man and raised white children after moving to California just out of high school. Decades later, she received word that her father was sick and dying, and it was suggested that she return home. She refused to return to see him as it would require her to lie or reveal a lifetime of lies to her family. Her children had been raised white and did not know that their mother had deceived her way out of the “one-drop” rule.

A similar story belonging to Gregory Howard Williams is told by Randall Kennedy (2001). Howard’s father, a light-skinned Black man, was passing for white. It was a shock for Williams to learn of his lineage after his parents divorced:

I never had heard anything crazier in my life! How could Dad tell us such a mean lie? I glanced across the aisle to where he sat grim-faced and erect, staring straight ahead. I saw my father as I had never seen him before. The veil dropped from his face and features. Before my eyes he was transformed from a swarthy Italian to his true self—a high-yellow mulatto. My father was a Negro! We were colored! After ten years in Virginia on the white side of the color line, I knew what that meant. (p. 1)

Today, racial passing may not be as permanent and severing to relationships. Often it takes the form of racial fluidity, or the ability to pass for both white and Black depending on the context and social setting, as exemplified in my elementary school admittance and in Elliott’s experiences. This may be the result of an increase in Black individuals leaving Black communities in which they were raised in pursuit of upward mobility and education, as well as an increase in different opportunities for employment, placing many people in more diverse social circles, regardless of race. It may also be the result of an increase in interracial relationships and Mixed-race children who are deemed as light-skinned in some settings and

dark-skinned in others, enabling them to pass only when needed, even if unconsciously, or embrace a respective racial identity when beneficial. Just decades ago, such fluidity could be as simple as taking a sip of water from the white-only water fountain or sitting in the white-only section of a cinema. Today this might look like passing as white in a business meeting, when test-driving a car, or when being confronted with law enforcement. Author of *Passing as Black: Racial Identity Among Biracial Americans*, Niki Kahana (2010) was interviewed by NPR lead blogger, Casey Gane-McCalla. Kahana comments on the findings during the research for her book:

...we found individuals would present themselves as Black or white. As white, you know, not uncommon were people presenting themselves as white in the workplace...they perceived it was advantageous for them to do so to move up in the workplace and move ahead, climb that ladder. (p. 11)

This is what is known as code-switching, or “the process of identification and de-identification (is) often dictated by the constraints or opportunities of the social milieu” (Swanson, 2013, para. 1). The act of de-identification is not always with the dominant race, as it is circumstantial. To those in Black communities, such as Jamaica, Queens, where my father’s family lives, I speak, look, and behave in a manner that some may describe as white, or at least foreign to that particular environment. When walking down the street strangers often ask where I am from. Before I even speak, I am “othered.” The same is true in Orono, Maine, where I lived and worked during my graduate study. In 2016, I received a traffic ticket and was curious to see a “B” written above “race”. Why didn’t the police officer just ask, and why did it matter? I am a Maine-native. I regularly get pulled over in Maine, often for trivial or novel reasons. I have never been pulled over in any other state in the country. Many are surprised to learn that I am

not adopted and that I was born in Bangor. Yet, they seem to nod in understanding that both of my parents are from New York, as if it explains my swarthy complexion and demeanor. Over the years I have learned to avoid each of these “site-specific” confrontations, as they often leave me feeling alienated in my attempts to engage. To do this requires a change in behavior and language, as well as an understanding of the culture, and space that I am occupying. I have also learned to anticipate how my presence will be read in varying contexts. This form of code switching and situational passing grants one the ability to reap the benefits of their mixed ancestry while not damaging their personal lives and relationships.

When it comes to passing, there is also an unspoken social obligation that is also linked to shame. It goes without saying among Black communities that you do not “out” someone who is choosing to pass. When one can, regardless of their ideas towards it, they undoubtedly receive insight into the party in which they have passed. Elliott and I often joke about his ability to “go undercover” as a means of better understanding white people such as the ideas and attitudes harbored towards Black communities, and so on.

This also provides insight into the layers of contemporary forms of systemic and individual racism that still exists today. Rosa Mari Pegueros, an academic and Latina who straddles different classes of identity, shares her experiences in the Mediterranean Jewish community she adopted from her husband. One evening, while sitting at a dinner table next to Pegueros, a woman viciously attacked Hispanic work ethic, culture, and appearance. Pegueros, with noticeably non-white features, sat and listened in silence. The woman then turned to Pegueros and asked if her striking features were due to Sephardic ancestry. Angered, Pegueros proudly exclaimed that she was of Mexican descent and stormed out of the dinner. From that moment forward she promised never to detach herself from her own identity (Dews, 1995, p.

99). These stories of gathering “Caucasian intelligence” can be empowering for communities of color and may provide ways to combat racism and marginalization through understanding, such as Walter White who passed as white to travel south in investigation of lynching (Kennedy, 2001, p. 1). First, through gaining first-hand experience and the opportunity to listen to continual racist ideology, the Black community sees an opportunity to understand where these views come from and know what is thought of them as a cultural group. Whether this is helpful in combating segregation is debatable. However, as in Pegueros’ case, such painful reminders of racist ideology can actually strengthen communities of color and personal identity through solidarity.

The decision to pass varies, be for social, political, educational or financial mobility, or to avoid discrimination altogether, is closely related to the physical body. With the inclusion of gender, class and education come great complexity and intersectionality that must be acknowledged if we are to understand the ways in which racial passing unfolds in contemporary American life and the ways in which they are closely linked to and influenced by historical notions of racism, segregation, and politics.

Creative Contemporary Connections

Many artists, such as Adrienne Piper, Ellen Gallagher, and Rashid Johnson, employ the use of repetition and performance as a means of exploring the internal emotional and psychological terrains that evolve as the result of being Black in America. It is artists such as these that my work in conversation with.

American-German visual and performance artist and scholar Adrienne Piper (1991), is known for her two-dimensional visual works, her disruptive and humorous performative work as well as her academic research and scholarship. She explores racial passing while especially

focusing on her own experiences and others. Piper has very light skin, yet consistently and openly identifies as Black both ethnically and culturally. She frequently proposes that most people in the United States have some Black ancestry, whether or not they realize it, and has discovered it to be an uncomfortable and painful point of entry when attempting to explore stereotypes and notions of race with white audiences. She states:

No reflective and well-intentioned white person who is consciously concerned to end racism wants to admit instinctively recoiling at the thought of being identified as black herself. But if you want to see such a white person do this, just peer at the person's facial features and tell her, in a complementary tone of voice, that she looks as though she might have some black ancestry, and watch her reaction. (p. 16)

Piper now lives in Berlin and explores ideas of alienation and disillusionment of the Black experience in light of American culture and national imagination. Between 2010 and 2013 she completed a series of works in which she inscribed the words “Everything will be taken away” on objects varying from doors to chalkboards. Curator Paul M. Farber (2015) quotes Piper:

[The] Everything series evolved from my need to cope with the loss of my illusions about the United States... Since I’ve been living in Berlin, the meaning of the work changed... I perceive a population characterized by the removal of barriers and how it has constituted itself anew: the fall of the Berlin Wall; the slow dissolution of a facade of normality. (para. 2)

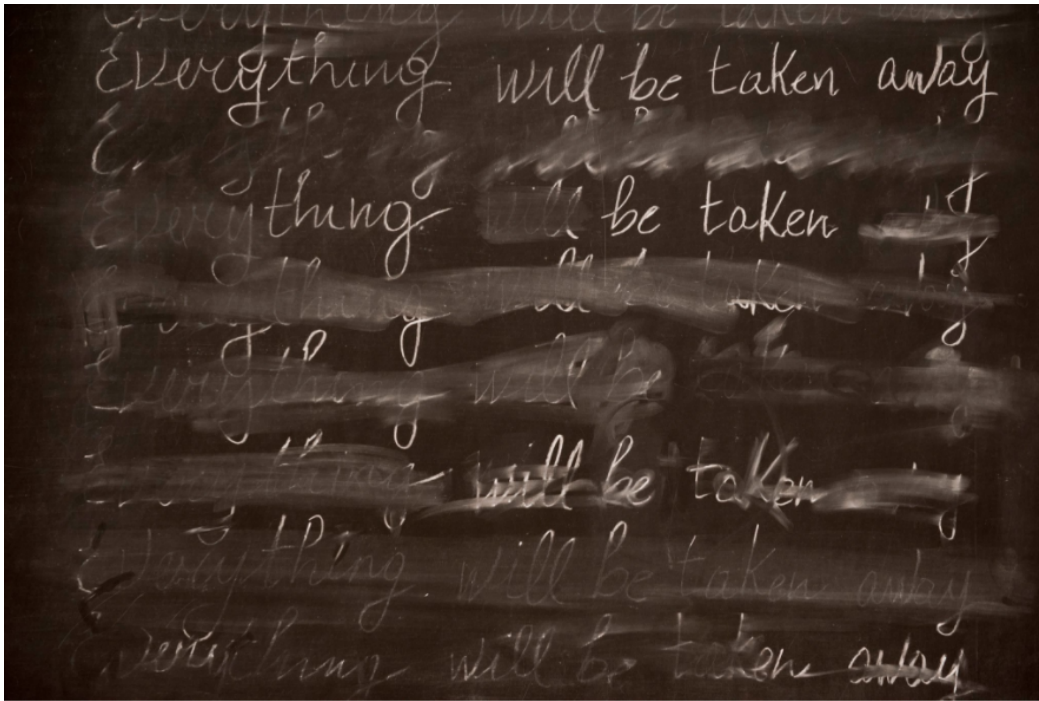


Fig. 3.1 Detail *Everything #21* (2010-2013) Adrian Piper. [consists of four blackboards, each covered with a single sentence repeated 25 times in handwritten cursive text] Photograph by George Etheredge for The New York Times. Retrieved from www.newyorktimes.com

Like Piper, Irish-American Ellen Gallagher works with everyday objects and found materials, such as writing paper and imagery. Through the repetitive process of “writing lines” or hundreds of the duplicated images, Gallagher’s work is performative in process while commenting on the repetitive aesthetic of Black and African music, dance, art, and even hair. Gallagher’s repetitive and sometimes cartoonish illustrations, new media collage, and sculpture use shapes, icons, and materials as a means to consider the ways in which racism and the beauty industry instruct and pressure women of color to assimilate.

Looking at the work of Rashid Johnson, we find similarities. On *Untitled Anxious White Audience*, a work of Johnson's, critic and curator Oscar Laluyan (2016) writes:

Etched faces expressed anxiousness and even perhaps, at a sweeping glance, one could easily dismiss them as identical. However, if you took time on each visage, you might see them as being individuals. Quite tribal like and graphic in style, the faces had shades of Jean-Michel Basquiat. (para. 2)

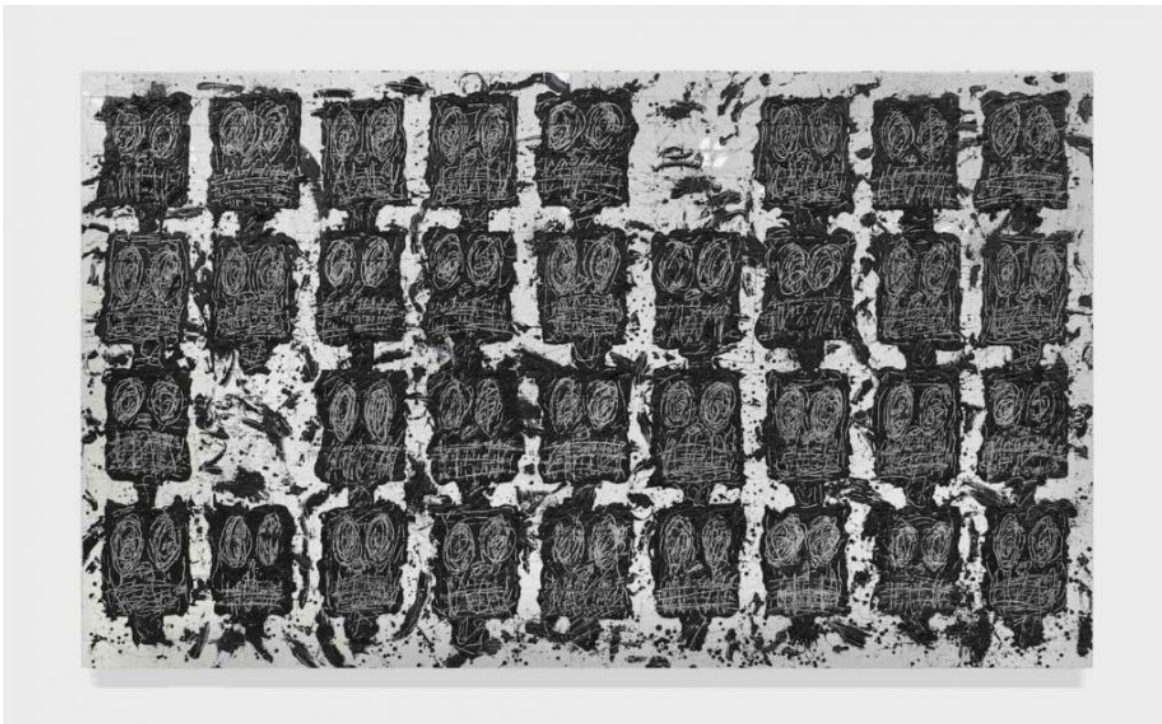


Fig. 3.4 *Untitled White Audiences* (2016) Rashid Johnson. [Black soap, wax] Retrieved from www.mandatory.com

My own work and process is performative in nature as well. I am interested in the iterative process of the body as it assembles materials for construction and the fatigue, development, and creation that takes place in that process. Scholar Tricia Rose (1994) likens repetition, resampling, and breaks found in hip-hop and oral traditions, and cultural ways of

becoming. She quotes musician and educator Christopher Small on African drumming and music sessions:

A call-and-response sequence may go on for several hours, with apparently monotonous repetition of the same short phrase sung by a leader and answered by the chorus, but in fact subtle variations are going on all the time...The repetitions of African music can have a function in time which is the reverse of (Western classical) music—to dissolve the past and the future into one eternal present, in which the passing of time is no longer needed. (p. 67)

Within repetition, a work, an idea, or an identity is evolved and serve as a means of processing the repetitive experience of work, grief, celebration and life. Writer and critic Stuart Hall (1981) notes two notions of culture. The first being of “... ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other...” (p. 223). This echoes the sentiments of Du Bois’s (1903) notion of double-consciousness, or a “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity as significant to the Black experience” (p. 2). The second reflects the sort of repetition of culture practiced within the Black community that serves as the *becoming* of Black identity through existence and reiteration, much like the repetitive drum in Small’s African song. Hall writes:

...there are several critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather—since history has intervened—what we have become’...Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some

essentialist past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power.
(p. 225)

These artists employ the nuances and aesthetics of Black life in America as a creative tool to further understand and perhaps shed light on the complexities of their own coded identities and perhaps also “become” through creating. This takes the form of both an internal creation as well as a societal construction that is appended to one’s sense of self. The donning of a race and identity is complex and as seen in some of the examples that we have considered is also performative. Can it be that a post-racial society simply is one in which we recognize that identity and culture are mere performances solidified and made real through repetition? Is as simple as Judith Butler (1988) proposed in her groundbreaking critique of gender in which she argues that gender is a performance?

The story of artist and activist Rachel Dolezal poses the same questions. Dolezal, former branch president of the NAACP chapter of Spokane, Washington, made national headlines when her Caucasian parents outed her as white. Dolezal is light-skinned but clearly tans, and wears wigs, weaves, and extensions that hide her short blond hair. Dolezal, whose name has recently changed to Nkechi Amare Diallo, claims to be “transracial” and deceptively presented as Black for many years to friends and community members. *The Rachel Divide* (2018), directed by Laura Brownson, chronicles Diallo’s journey and reveals an unsettling mosaic of severe abuse, deception, and trauma that Diallo believes has led her to where she is today.



Fig. 3.5 Photo of Nkechi Amare Diallo, formally Rachel Dolezal, 2015. Retrieved from www.economist.com

While Diallo’s story and perspective comment on the significance of experience regarding identity, what she does not seem comfortable in doing is acknowledging the pain and disappointment that her intentional deception has caused. Not only were hundreds of individuals disillusioned, but one must also consider the reputation of women of color in politics, and Black activist organizations in general. This is especially the case in consideration of even more recent controversies in which she was charged with welfare fraud this past May (Haag, 2008, para. 4). At this point, Diallo could have been of more service to the community by working as an ally who identifies with or can relate to the Black experience, rather than a white woman claiming to be living the Black experience because of familiarity with struggle or having close relationships with Black community members and family. At one of Diallo’s talks, an attendee proposes that Diallo has not earned the right to be Black as she has not “endured the initiation process” of the Black female experience (Brownson, 01:00:44). Another woman states:

You could be doing so much more with all of your knowledge and passion if you were coming from an authentic place of “I grew up this way. I was born this way.” But you know what, I am for these people and I believe in their struggles... (Brownson, 01:02:04).

Elliott, whose experiences I mentioned earlier was friends with Diallo’s son Isaiah. Elliott, once very active in his undergraduate alma mater Black Student Union had the opportunity to meet Diallo and asked for her advice with administration. Elliott was surprised to find that Diallo was not approachable, avoided eye contact and seemed to look at him as if thinking “who is this white guy?”.

Conclusion

As with colorism, racial passing has deep roots in the American south; and as with colorism, leaves us with much to understand. Racial passing is a symptom of a nation that has consistently relied on skin color and ethnicity as markers of social standing. As a phenomenon, racial passing is elusive and unpredictable due to the very nature of its secrecy yet can yield its head in life-changing ways that affect more than just those in disguise. It has many forms and has and is witnessed in varied ways, however, the body maintains its position as a constant variable. It is one of the many remaining practices of physiognomy that serves as proof that the country still has a long way to go before it can become the melting pot that it boasts to be.

CHAPTER 4: CREATIVE PORTFOLIO – LOOK AT THAT BODY!

Following is a selected body of work completed between September 2015 and May 2018, descriptions of the work, and thoughts on the work in the context of my research, creative practice, and creative predecessors and contemporaries.

Creative Portfolio

Grief Kit: Tools for Mourning and Lamentations, 2015

Artist multiple: wooden box with living-hinge, paper, candles, matches, postcards, stamps. Designed and assembled by Eleanor Kipping.

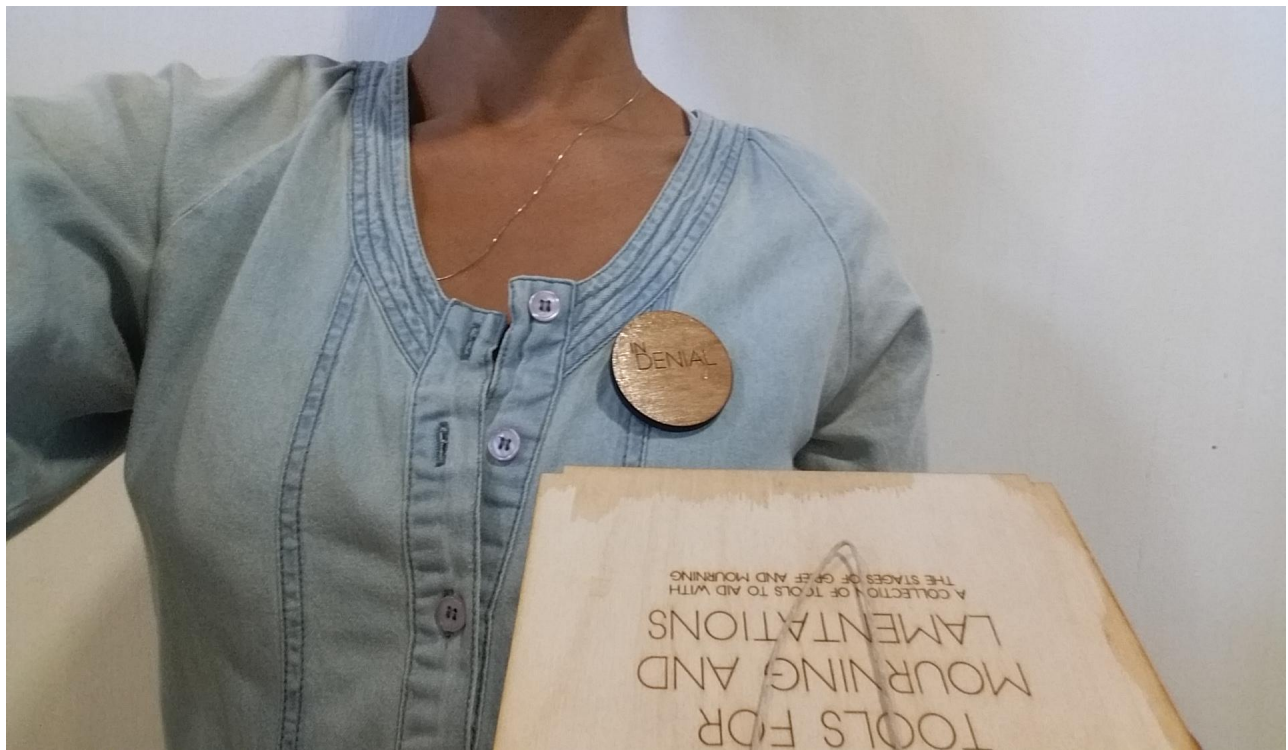


Fig. 4.1 *Grief Kit* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. [Artist multiple] Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

An artist multiple consisting of seven wooden badges, approximately 1 inch in diameter.

Laser cut on the front of each badge is one of seven stages of grief, an expansion of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (Kessler, n.d., web) five stages of grief (Dryden-Edwards, MD, n.d., para. 8). As written, they are: *Shocked, In Denial, Pissed, Depressed, Looking for a Bargain, Hopeful, and Over It*. On the back of each button is a pin to fix the badges to a lapel, jacket or shirt.

Accompanying the buttons are several candles, a small bundle of matches wrapped in a small piece of twine, and postcards printed with varying scenes of grief found in the public domain or attributed with a Creative Commons license. The images vary in context and narrative and include a variety of grief scenarios that have been depicted throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries in the form of paintings. One example is *The First Mourning* (French: *Premier Deuil*), 1888 by William-Adolphe Bouguereau, in which Adam and Eve grieve over the death of their murdered son Abel.



Fig. 4.2 *The First Mourning* (1888) William-Adolphe Bouguereau. [Painting] Retrieved from Wikipedia Commons

Grief Kit draws on historical notions of public expressions of mourning that were once placed upon women as social obligation between the early 1800s and the mid-1900s. Grieving women living in England were expected to publicly perform in a state of solitude and

bereavement, expressing it through dress and behavior after the death of a family member or loved one. Individuals were expected to mourn for strict lengths of time depending upon class, age, and relation to the deceased. The fashion and textile industry capitalized on this and began to profit off the vanity and duties associated with mourning. Lisa Levy (2014) quotes Walter R. Houghton et. al. (1889) for her piece published in the JSTOR Daily:

In the United States no prescribed periods for wearing mourning garments have been fixed upon...The deepest mourning is that worn by a widow for her husband. It is worn two years, sometimes longer...The mourning for a father or mother is worn for one year...Mourning for a brother or sister is worn for six months. (para. 8)

Her article describes *Death Becomes Her* (2015), a past exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, a show which first piqued my interest in the topic of grief. Such social and cultural expectations would at times place women in a grand position of inconvenience. Abolitionist and author of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* (1862), Julie Ward Howe, is known for stating:

My mourning has been quite an inconvenience to me, this summer. I had just spent all the money I could afford for my summer clothes, and was forced to spend \$30 more dollars for black dresses. The black clothes, however, seem to me very idle things, and I shall leave word in my will that no one shall wear them for me. (Tucker, 2014, para 6)

The kit's buttons are intended to be worn throughout the several stages of grief in any order that the mourner deems appropriate and is reflective of their current grieving stage. The piece attempts to speak for the wearer as an invitation for conversation, or perhaps even as a cue to avoid conversation altogether. The kit's candles offer a small space for ritual and reflection or

are put to another use as seen fit by the grieving. Lastly, the postcards include stamps and prompts to aid those in mourning in telling those they must of their loss(es).



Fig. 4.3 (left) *Grief Kit* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. [Artist multiple] Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Fig. 4.4 (right) *Grief Kit* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. Grief pins up for grabs at UMaine Studio Ajar

At a distance, the work is seemingly unrelated to my specific explorations of the Black female experience and body. However, the piece was an early experiment in beginning to explore and process the hidden, but ever-present relationships between contemporary social practices and the influence that Europe has had on American customs and norms that often go unquestioned. While it is expected that many will wear black to funerals and memorials and that grieving individuals will mourn long after ceremonies and rituals of respect are over, very little is done beyond what takes place in small circles and intimate spaces. Those in grief do not wear black for months or years on end, nor is it expected that they will sustain from remarriage, or “move on” within an expected period of time. I was interested in looking at ways that mourning rituals (funerals, memorials, services, etc.) could be expanded upon but also still reflect the historical practice of mourning fashion. I also wanted to look at ways people may be able to bring additional forms of mourning and loss into the conversation.

Later iterations of this piece took the form of a large quantity of button reproduction and placing them in public spaces and at social gatherings, accompanied by a prompt for attendees

to select and wear a button of their choice. This resulted in conversations on experiences of divorce, death, financial strain, family/relationship changes, political disappointment, and more. One event, in particular, stands out. During one Studio Ajar party, a small, casual and public open-studio hosted by University of Maine Intermedia MFA students, I placed a large bowl of buttons out with very little instruction. This was shortly after the election of Donald Trump in November of 2016. The group in attendance that evening selected buttons such as “shocked”, “depressed” and “pissed”, leaving those that read “over it” and “hopeful” as leftovers.

Fishnets, Lace and Family Photos, 2015

Digital Prints: six 24 in x 36 in digital prints, digital photographs, 35mm scanned photographs, scanographs of underwear, tights, garter belt, condom. Authored and assembled by Eleanor Kipping.



Fig. 4.5 *Snow Pants: Fishnets, Lace and Family Photos* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. [Multimedia 24" x 36"]

Six 24-inch x 36-inch digital prints hang next to one another to form a 12-foot horizontal panel. Each print is divided into two images. The right side of each print consists of scanographs of underwear, fishnet stockings, a condom, dental dam, and other pieces of clothing owned by me and directly linked to my sexual narrative, practices, experiences, or identity and body.

Juxtaposing my own childhood narrative with imagery of my own femininity, sexuality, and intimate life, *Fishnets, Lace and Family Photos* explores the correlation between Western society's hypersexualization of women and children practiced alongside aggressive special sexual prudence.

In Western media, nearly every commercial exchange is marketed in a way that instructs audiences to want sex, have sex, or be sexual. Additionally, and disturbingly so, this has included the sexualization of children. It is now so frequent that it has become normal, signaling that many are desensitized to their own children being subjects and targets of sexual objectification. In the same breath, Americans are still grappling with Victorian and Puritan prudish behavior and ideals. The topic of sex is avoided at dinner tables, in classrooms, and in public spaces, resulting in a society that develops into sexual maturity in solitude, or seeks out alternatives such as porn and distorted popular culture to fuel its sex education. This is perpetuated when young people are taught that sex is for adults and becomes known as the transaction called “it”. It is dirty. It is for adults. It is to be kept secret. It is expected that males want and need it, while girls are shamed for it. And it goes on. Robert Jensen (2007) shares his childhood introductions to sexuality in *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. He writes:

My first recollection of viewing sexual material is from early grade school, when one of the boys in my school got his hands on a biker magazine that had pictures of women with exposed breasts. I have no recollection of the specific images but do retain a clear memory of gathering in the backyard of a neighborhood boy’s house to look at the magazine, which we had hidden under a leaf pile...So I was consciously becoming aware of sexuality, my first recognizable cultural lesson on the subject came in a male-bonding ritual around men’s use of an objectified woman, who existed only to provide sexual excitement for us. (Kimmel, M. Messner, M., 2010, p. 378)

Fishnets, Lace and Family photos is a visual exploration and juxtaposition of the private yet significant biographical (and biological) narration that takes place within individuals,

through my own body and experiences. The adults that we become are the results of the experiences we have as children. How are our current sexual identities: likes, dislikes, attractions, etc., the conclusive result of childhood identity and experiences. Beyond that, what is socially constructed?

Looking back at this work, it is now clear that I was one, beginning to formally and openly look at my own identity as a Black female in the United States and consider that in relation to the histories that I was beginning to uncover. I was also beginning to explore the use of visual “contrast” and “comparison” as a tool to begin looking at some of the dichotic themes that continually resurface in my research.



Fig. 4.6 (top) *Family Vacation: Fishnets, Lace and Family Photos: Family Vacation* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. [Multimedia 24" x 36"]

Fig. 4.7 (bottom) *These are my Petals: Family Vacation: Fishnets, Lace and Family Photos* (2015) Eleanor Kipping. [Multimedia 24" x 36"]

Weave of Support, 2016

Fiber Sculpture: synthetic Kanekalon braiding hair, gold links, beads, elastic, thread, metal fasteners. Designed and assembled by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Todd Eastman.



Fig. 4.8 *Weave of Support* (2016) Eleanor Kipping. [Bra, synthetic Kanekalon braiding hair, gold links, beads, elastic, thread, metal fasteners] Documented by Todd Eastman

Weave of Support is a wearable bra constructed with synthetic Kanekalon braiding hair. Prior to undertaking the piece, I wore the braiding hair for eight weeks in a hairstyle known as Senegalese Twists.

After removing the fibers from my own hair, the hair strands had formed into thick twists which would serve as the fibers used to braid and form the structure and shape of the bra. Using my own measurements, I braided long strips of hair and began to shape them into a winding pattern, not unlike cornrows, a hairstyle in which small rows of braids are pleated close to the scalp. The style is popular among Black men and women for its ability to protect the

wearer's natural hair in between more elaborate or damaging hairstyles and is also worn beneath wigs, weaves, or just for fun and fashion.



Fig. 4.9 Me wearing Senegalese Twists in front of a Lorna Simpson photograph at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA (2018)

Much like braiding an individual's hair, the bra's construction required planning, measuring and rationing of limited amounts of space and hair. It required an understanding of how much "space" certain sized braids and shapes would take, and how they would fit together in certain ways. After shaping the bra onto a seamstress bodice, I sewed the braids together, referencing the process of installing a weave. The installation of a sew-in weave is an expensive and repetitive process that requires one to sit for hours after having her hair tightly cornrowed, while tracks of hair extensions are sewn along the braided rows of her natural hair. It is often painful and is always time-consuming yet results in a hairstyle that can be worn for months.

Employing the bra as a symbolic metaphor, *Weave of Support* draws a visual parallel between the well-known bra and the mysterious weave in an attempt to draw attention to what

the weave represents to black females, their identity, bodies, sexuality and social standing. Historically, synthetic hairstyles have been worn by black women in an attempt to assimilate and meet corporate dress codes, and in response to media forms that do not represent Black females, their bodies, or sexuality in a positive and/or accurate light. The bra has long time been used to change the shape of a woman's body to a desired standard, objectifying, and sexualizing women, while serving the male gaze. In addition, women have been criticized for not wearing them. For these reasons the bra is historically and symbolically linked to feminist activism and social critique. Public and private rejection of the bra has stood in for rejection of the patriarchal and sexist expectations placed upon women in the form of gender roles in the household, sexual obligations, and duties as women and wives, as well as roles in the workplace. The Miss America Protest in 1968 took the form of the *Freedom Trash Can* in which women threw feminine items into a container dubbed the Freedom Trash Can. Most of these items were bras. The act was a literal, and metaphorical public disrobing of expectations of femininity.



Fig. 4.10 *Freedom Trash Can* (1968) Miss America Protest. Retrieved from www.library.duke.edu

40 years later, the #freethenipple movement has stormed social media sites, largely dominating Instagram, a photo publishing social media network. Instagram's user policy states that women are required to censor any published photos of nipples, while men are not. This points out the continued sexualization of the female body and the preservation of such by men, through regulations and policies that make it difficult to challenge and redefine female sexuality.



Fig. 4.11 An Instagram post exemplifies one user censored her post to avoid it being taken down or account suspension (2018) Posted by @sophiedalmulder. Retrieved from www.instagram.com

Felicia with the Good Hair, 2015

Photographic Self-Portrait: 16" x 24", digital photograph. Authored by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Todd Eastman.



Fig. 4.12 *Felicia with the Good Hair* (2016) Eleanor Kipping. [Performative photograph: digital photograph. 16"x 24"] Documented by Todd Eastman

Felicia with the Good Hair is a performative documentation of *Weave of Support* (2016). As the artist, I sit wearing only the bra, large hoop earrings, with my hair in a hairstyle known as Bantu Knots. The image is dark and velvety in appearance. I stare straight ahead,

gazing directly at and through the audience: stoic and penetrating, yet seemingly unconcerned with either its absence or presence. The position of my body blatantly mimics the pop-artist Beyoncé who in 2015 released the full-length visual album *Lemonade*. One of the album's most controversial pieces is *Sorry*, in which the artist accused her partner of having an affair with a white woman. The singer refers to the mistress as “Becky with the good hair” and in her music video, sits as pictured below. The lyrics sent audiences and fans into a stir about where the artist stood in real life with her husband, R&B tycoon Jay-Z, as the entire album blatantly referenced, and starred Jay-Z, their daughter, and home.



Fig. 4.13 *Sorry* (2016) Beyoncé. [Screenshot of music video] Retrieved from www.youtube.com

The term “good hair” is colloquially used in the Black community to refer to hair that lays straight and smooth, and is easily managed in contrast to kinky, curly, thick, and often unruly or “nappy” hair of those of African descent. Good hair is obtained through the use of weaves, wigs, and chemical treatments. The name Felicia is also used humorously in the Black community to refer to a needy, unwanted Black woman with the phrase “Bye, Felisha,” first coined in the film by rapper Ice Cube in the comedy, *Friday* (1995). In this context, Felisha is

read as a Black name. Its respelling reflects the tradition of spelling and ending Black names with the suffix -isha, -ish, or -ique, or -icia (Behind the Name, n.d.).

Felicia with the Good Hair challenges negative connotations of Black femininity and sexuality through language and body. Bantu Knots, the hairstyle worn by me in the image, is a style that originated in the South African Zulu tribe of Bantu origin (Horne, para. 6, 2018). My own middle name, Felicia as referenced in the title, also challenges the assumption of Blackness being unwanted or undesirable by proudly wearing “bad hair” and existing boldly as a “Felisha.”

Brown Paper Bag Test, 2017

Installation: seven 24 in x 36 in, digital photographs, 6-channel audio, brown paper.
Designed and assembled by Eleanor Kipping. Project participants: Tayler Alexis, Janasia Body, Francine Chin, Magdaline Davis, Samantha Douglas, Noa Hines, Bianca Lominy, Andrianna Mackey, Ju Monae, Azusa Okada, Sydney Taylor. Audio Engineer: Duane Shimmel. Exhibited at the University of Maine Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center, 2017.



Fig. 4.14 *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Installation: digital portraits, 6-channel audio, brown paper] Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

This piece is primarily made up of portraits of six women who identify as Black. The images hang from monofilament in the exhibition space. Portrait backs are exposed and covered in brown paper bag material. In close proximity to each portrait, hangs a raw speaker housed in a small parabolic dome. Heard in the exhibition space are first-person retellings on topics of

hair, colorism, and sexuality as experienced by the photographed women. They are recounted by the artist and play asynchronously, one from each speaker. Their voices are all one, my own, yet reveal themselves as individual in the recount of each subject's truth. I interviewed participants in individual and group settings in New York City and transcripts were used to construct the spoken narratives. The first iteration of the piece took place in a single room exhibition space. The second and more recent iteration was increased to include 15 portraits and is discussed in the following chapter.

Paper bags were once used as a point of comparison to determine which slaves would work as field slaves and which as house slaves. Favor was given to the fair-skinned and these were often women that were forced to serve as mistresses, raise children, and keep the home (Russell, K. Wilson Ph.D., Midge, Hall Ph.D., Ronald, 1992, p. 27). This practice continued in various forms within black communities long after slavery was abolished. As discussed in previous chapters, these standards of beauty are still perpetuated both intra-racially and interracially through media, popular culture, and in educational and professional settings, and define contemporary forms of colorism.



Fig. 4.15 (top) *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Installation: digital portraits, 6-channel audio, brown paper] Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

Fig. 4.16 (bottom) *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Installation: digital portraits, 6-channel audio, brown paper] Photographed: Magdaline Davis. Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Violent...Not I, 2016

Spoken Word Performance: duration approximately 12 minutes. Performed by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Jim Winters and Amy Olivia Pierce. Performed at the University of Maine Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center, 2016.



Fig. 4.17 *Violent...Not I* (2016) Eleanor Kipping. Performance at *Four Aspects of Contemporary Performance*. Photograph by Jim Winters

On working with Beckett, actress Billie Whitelaw states that “Plenty of writers can write a play about a state of mind, but he [Samuel Beckett] actually put that state of mind on the stage, in front of your eyes (Weber, 2014, para. 8).” The structure of *Violent...Not I* is adopted from Beckett’s *Not I*, a play in which a solo female actress, once played by Whitelaw, recites a monologue in great distress as she recounts past memories and traumas. Her only visible likeness is her dismembered rapidly speaking bright red mouth surrounded by a massive cloak

of black. The material I performed was pulled and reconstructed directly from Malcolm X's speech *Confronting White Oppression*. Malcolm delivered this text on Valentine's Day in 1965, one week before he was murdered. Over 50 years later and through the lens of a black female, Malcolm's message still rings just as unsettling and accurate. This piece was the beginning of a formal investigation of the intersection of theatre and performance as a means of exploring Black body politics and violent race relations through spoken word.



Fig. 4.18 *Violent...Not I* (2016) Eleanor Kipping. Performance at *Four Aspects of Contemporary Performance*. Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

I Hate It Here, 2017

Performative Self-portrait Series: digital self-portraits, digital video, blond wig, mirror.

Authored and documented by Eleanor Kipping.



Fig. 4.19 *I Hate it Here* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performative self-portrait]

Wearing a long blond wig, a floral bikini while holding a mirror, I strut around my mother's home and land in rural Alton, Maine. The performance is documented with a cell phone that is sticking out from the bandeau of my bathing suit top. As I move through the hallways of her house, I repeat the words, "I hate it here. I hate it here." The cell phone records the strange perspective of my face in the mirror as I move about the space. In another video, I smear my face against the glass top of the vanity as the blonde locks fall around my face. The video plays in slow motion referencing Pipilotti Rist's series of performative videos called

Flatten in which she smears her face against glass. Ana Mendieta's *Glass on Body* is a series of photographs that do the same.



Fig. 4.20 *I Hate it Here* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Screenshot from video]



Fig. 4.21 (left) Untitled (6 works, from the Glass on Body Imprints) (1972) Ana Mendieta. [Color photographs] Retrieved from www.artnet.com

Fig. 4.22 (right) Still from Open My Glade (Flatten) screenshots from film (2017) Pipilotti Rist. [Screenshots from Performative film installation] Retrieved from www.cafka.org

The portraits capture me surrounded in a frame of green grass and trees with my legs wrapped around a mirror. Reflected in the mirror are the sky and more greenery. This piece is a performative series exploring the alienation felt by the Black body in a rural environment. Attempts at assimilation in the form of blonde hair, pink nails, jewelry which do not situate her body as familiar or safe in her own home are what separate her. The angst is expressed in repetitive confessions of hate and gross discomfort of her own body and surroundings.

Trump Cards, 2017

Digital Collage: four 4 in x7 in mixed-media postcards. Designed by Eleanor Kipping.



Fig. 4.23 (top) *Trump Cards* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Digital collage]

Fig. 4.24 (bottom) *Trump Cards* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Digital collage]

This work was an expression of collective the grief, anger, and disappointment that followed the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. The large white letters with red backgrounds are blatant appropriations of the iconic work of collage artist Barbara Kruger. This work and the other work I did in 2017 were efforts to situate my voice within those of my contemporaries. I was experimenting with tools, methods, and approaches that might serve my own work as it began to grow and develop its own tone, and approach to the topics of my interest.



Fig. 4.25 (untitled) *Your Body is a Battleground* (1989) Barbara Kruger. [Photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 112" x 112"] Retrieved from www.daily.jstor.org

I Will Not Say Nigger, 2017

Performance: duration approximately 2 hours. Authored and performed by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Amy Olivia Pierce. Performed at the University of Maine Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center, 2017.

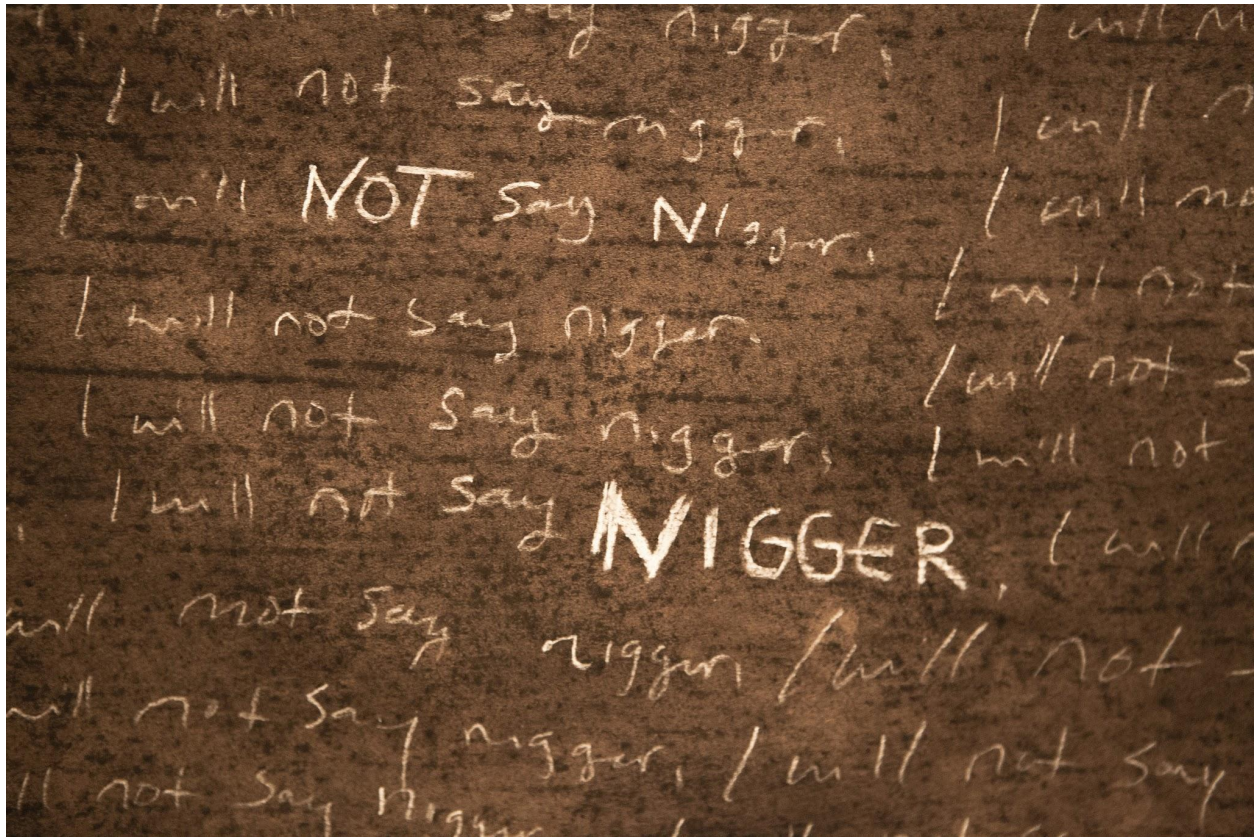


Fig. 4.26 *I Will Not Say Nigger* (detail of nigger banner) (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance]

Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

I began this performance before audiences enter the space by writing the words “i will not say nigger” onto a large sheet of brown paper that has been nailed to a wall and is covered in charcoal, referencing a chalkboard. I am conservatively dressed. As I continue to write, audiences file into the space, mingle, engage with other works, and seat themselves. I continue

to write even as other performances take place. When my time to perform arrives, I begin to speak.

I begin the monologue by asking the audience and myself who the word “nigger” belongs to, and who has the right to use it. I wonders who exactly a nigger is and conclude that I am a nigger and begin to remove my Eurocentric makeup, jewelry, and dress. I stand in my bra and panties before the audience, revealing my natural braided hair and skin color, and speak in open confession on the reasons that my “light skin is not right skin”. I redress into an outfit stereotypical of a Black female while repacking my white identity into a suitcase and return to writing lines until the chalkboard is filled.

I Will Not Say Nigger explores the language and exchanges that take place between dominant and minority cultures/races, but often go unaddressed. The unspoken is present in relationships, the workplace, and other social encounters. They are subtle, difficult to define, and are often brushed under the rug, yet reveal that we are far from the post-racial society that so many insist exists. The character that you in see this piece explores the spectrum of these experiences through her Mixed-race identity and shares them in through a spoken and physical confession.

The Black female experience is heavily dominated by the need to navigate the spaces within and between dominant cultures. Many Black and Brown females are too familiar with others monitoring their behavior, language, and appearance, and have to choose where and how they will relate to dominant standards. Despite their double-consciousness, they are still situated as “other” within society. These experiences define their identities and sense of self.



Fig. 4.27 *I Will Not Say Nigger* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance] Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce



Fig. 4.28 (left) *I Will Not Say Nigger* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance] Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

Fig. 4.29 (right) *I Will Not Say Nigger* (2017) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance] Photograph by Amy Olivia Pierce

Flag Sewing Ceremony, 2018

Performance: duration approximately 1.5 hours. Authored and performed by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Jim Winters.



Fig. 4.30 *Flag Sewing Ceremony* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance] Photograph by Jim Winters

I enter a public space unannounced carrying a suitcase, the same used in the performance *I Will Not Say Nigger*. Opening it I retrieve a banana, a flag, an old lace petticoat, and a small canvas bag on which the word NEGRA is written. I lay the flag out flat on the floor in the middle of the space and sit on it. While watching the 1965 Super Bowl, a game when “21 African-American players refused to play in the American Football League’s all-star game if it was held in New Orleans” (Waxman, 2017, para. 3). I begin to sew braided synthetic hair into

the seams of the petticoat and continue until the game is finished, after which I repack my belongings and exit the space.



Fig. 4.31 *Flag Sewing Ceremony* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. [Performance] Photograph by Jim Winters

This performance took place shortly after NFL players Eric Reid (2017) and Colin Kaepernick knelt during the National Anthem at a game on August 26th, 2016 (para. 2) to protest police brutality, mass incarceration, and oppression of People of Color. Due to media coverage and social media, the gesture started a national conversation on protest and free speech as the NFL proceeded to change its Anthem Policy which now requires players to remain in the locker room should they refuse to stand during the singing/playing of the National Anthem (Seifert, K. Graziano, D. para. 1).

This piece references much of the research and work mentioned thus far. Every element of the composition is in contrast to another element of the piece. The bright blond wig, for example, is an attempt to assimilate or pass. However, the red *Lion King* t-shirt, the banana, which is snacked on mid-performance, and the braiding hair point out the performer's "otherness". Also, to be noted, is the literal adhesion of past and present, culture onto culture,

and history onto history. The braiding hair is inherently Black, and the petticoat is not. Which is being applied to which and what will take dominance over the other. The “culture-clash” is intentional and remains unresolved as the performance comes to a close when the game finishes.

#safetywork manual, 2018

Spoken Word Performance and Video. Performance duration approximately 2 hours. Video duration approximately 3 minutes. Authored by Eleanor Kipping in collaboration with Kirsten Daily, Noelle Leon-Palmer, Priscilla Moncrieffe. Performed by Reed Gordon, Steve Norton, Wil Young. Documented by Eleanor Kipping. Performed at the University of Maine. Performed by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Jim Winters and Amy Olivia Pierce. Performed at the University of Maine Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center. #safetywork Group Exhibition, 2018.



Fig. 4.32 *#safetywork manual* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. [Screenshot from video performance]

#safetywork manual is a collaborative durational spoken word performance and digital video. Several male identifying performers stand in the exhibition space wearing nude tights and high heels for the duration of the piece with their bodies, their fatigue, and discomfort on display. Throughout the performance, they recite from a small paper pamphlet entitled

#safetywork manual, a poetic instruction of the work that women do to protect themselves from sexual harassment and assault.

The content of the manual was curated by a group of Black female-identifying women that live, work, and study in the Orono community. Together they discussed and created the 15-foot banner that hangs in the exhibition space, accompanies the performance, and instructs women how to protect themselves against harassment, assault or abuse based on the work that they do to protect themselves in the workplace, their homes, and localities. The aesthetic, orientation, and language were solely determined by the female collaborators; they decided how best to articulate their safety work. The performance was then documented as a short film in which male performers are standing in a small clump in a black limbo.

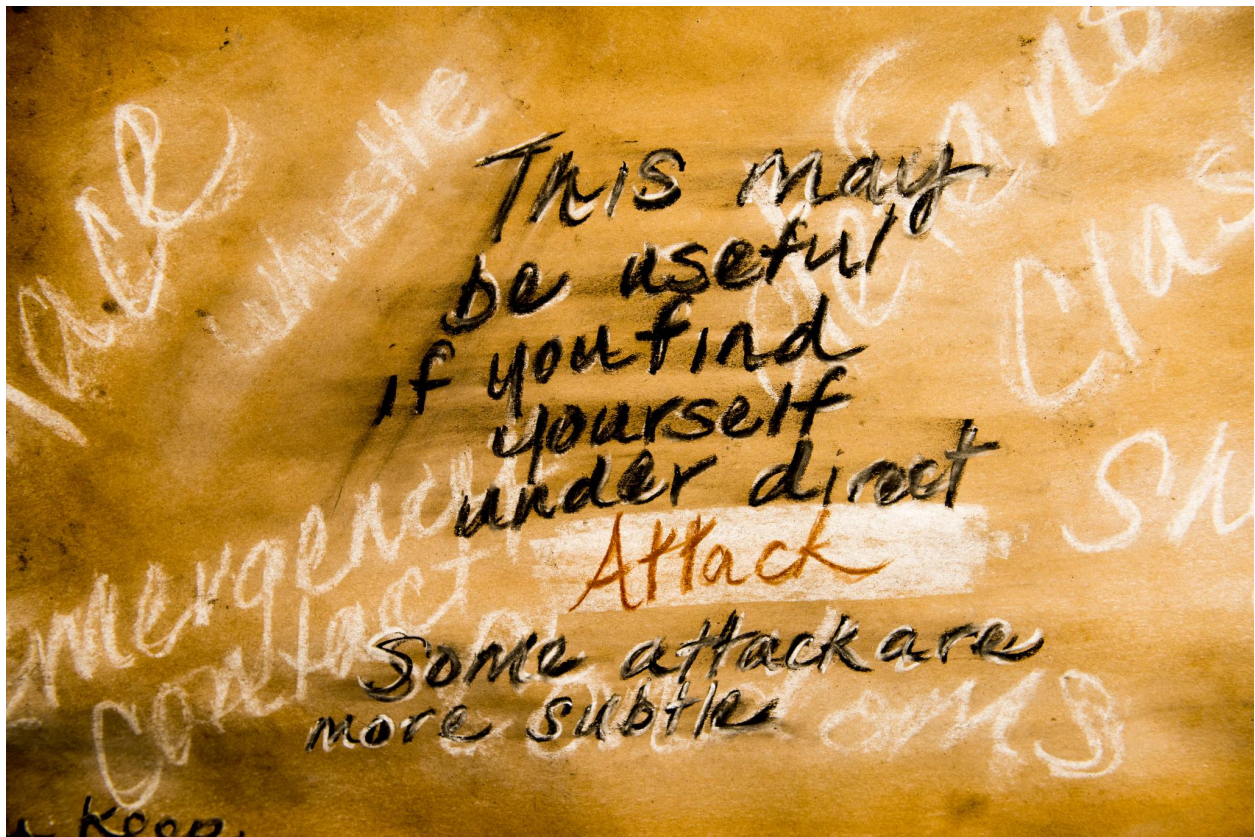


Fig. 4.33 *#safetywork manual* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Banner detail. [Performance, film]

This particular collaborative approach could be adapted to any community. It is entirely reflective of the space in which it is created, and by the individuals who collaborate to bring it to fruition.

To begin this piece, I reached out to the university community and after explaining the premise of the project, invited interested parties to participate. With those who were available, we met and discussed the notion of #safetwork, a term coined by Professor Elizabeth Kelly. We discussed the specific work that we do as Black women and the role that race plays in the efforts that we make to protect ourselves. Then, working in small groups, we created the #safetywork banner, pictured above (Fig. 4.38) and below (Fig. 4.39). After several workshops, I sewed the brown paper banners together with synthetic braiding hair. From there I used the content developed during the discussion to produce the poem that was used in performance. An excerpt can be seen here. Each line represents a single speaker, and bold text indicates the text is to be spoken in unison.

Carry keys between your fingers.

Be “**ready to go**” at all times.

Keep your phone within reach.

Know where your keys are

whenever...

wherever

you are in your house. **Don’t** go jogging in the forest.

Don’t go jogging in the streets.

Don’t go jogging at night.

Don’t go jogging at all.

Working with male performers was a very careful decision that I made in consideration of the vulnerability of the women involved. Rape, sexual assault, and harassment are too often referred to as “women’s issues” in national dialogue. With the rise of the recent #MeToo movement, I felt it important to have a masculine presence in this conversation. I wanted to provide opportunities for men to participate in a conversation that was just as much about them as it was about women. Lastly, I felt that it would be significant that gender roles were switched, both physically and verbally. Often women, especially women of color, go unseen and unheard until their narratives are shared by white women or white males. To have Black women on display, “preaching” to one another, and the audience would have merely objectified them. Through using symbols of power, white cisgender male bodies, I was able to comment on the topics by making vulnerable those whom typically are given power while protecting and giving a voice those who are not.

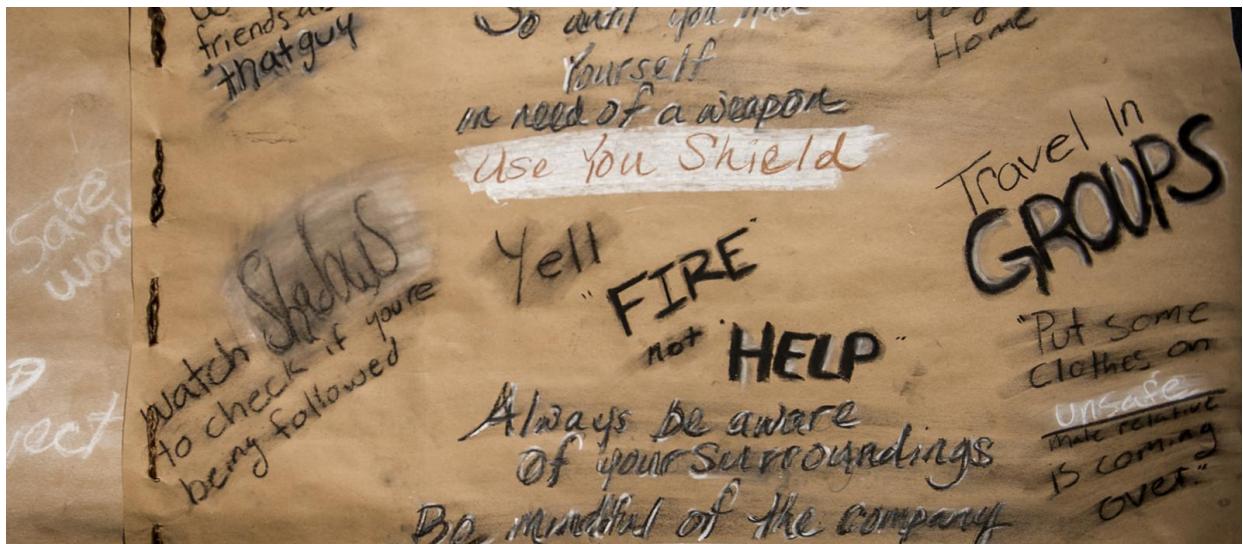


Fig. 4.34 #safetywork manual (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Banner detail. [Performance, film]

CHAPTER 5: CREATIVE WORK AND EXHIBITION – STAY WOKE!

This final chapter is a description of the work that culminated from the research and practice as I have previously described. *Brown Paper Bag Test* and WOKEshop are two projects that I developed during Black History Month in February 2018 at the University of Maine. *Strange Fruit* is a performative installation that was exhibited in *Without Borders XV: Between You and Me* thesis exhibition at Lord Gallery in May and June 2018 at Lord Hall Gallery, also at the University of Maine.

Installation and Community

Brown Paper Bag Test, February 2018

Installation: thirteen 24 in x36 in foam-mounted digital photographs, brown paper, audio recordings. Exhibited at the University of Maine in collaboration with the UMaine Black Student and UMaine Office of Multicultural Student Life in observation of Black History Month. Authored by Eleanor Kipping. Project participants: Tayler Alexis, Janasia Body, Francine Chin, Magdaline Davis, Samantha Douglas, Noa Hines, Bianca Lominy, Andrianna Mackey, Ju Monae, Azusa Okada, Sydney Taylor. Audio Engineer: Duane Shimmel.

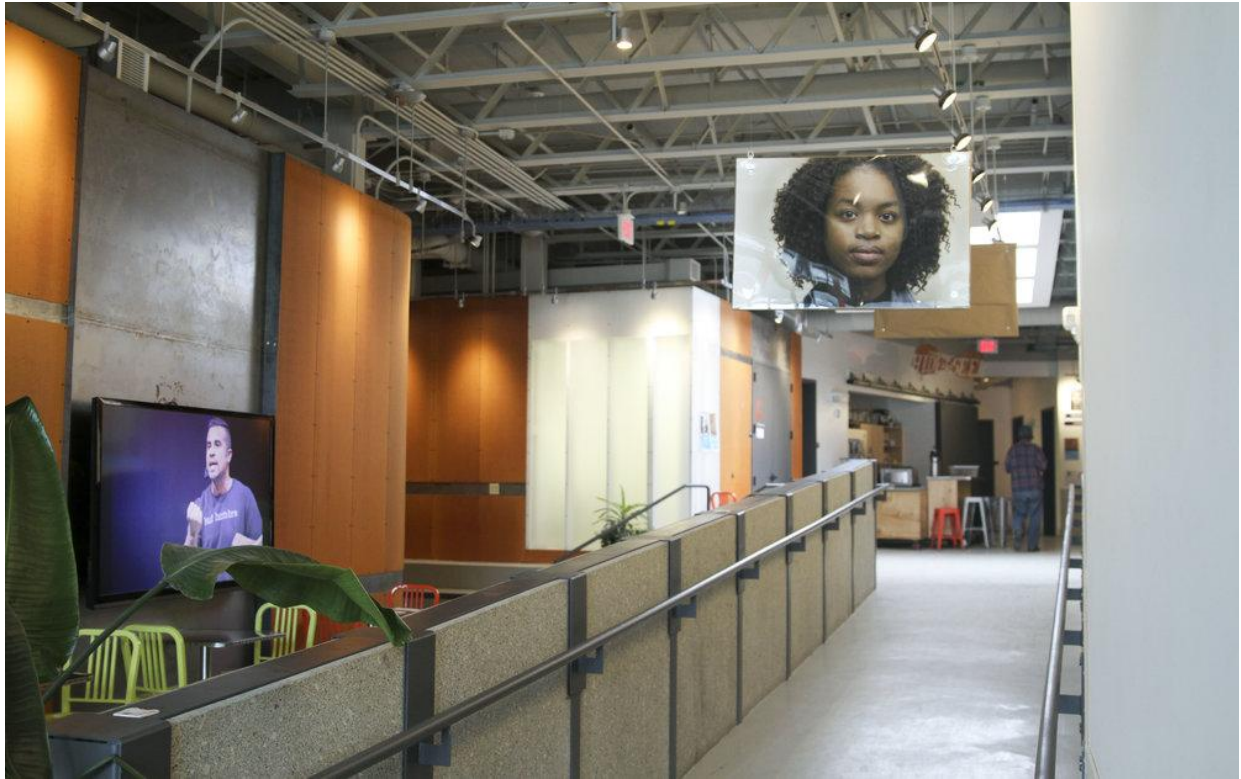


Figure 5.1 *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Innovative Media Research and Commercialization Center. [Installation] Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

This iteration of *Brown Paper Bag Test* was developed in observation of Black History Month at the University of Maine and was included in a robust calendar of lectures, workshops, film screenings, and other events. The installation consisted of thirteen digital photographs displayed in seven locations across the University of Maine campus in Orono. The photographs were mounted on foam and backed with brown paper. Each portrait hung from ceilings with microfilament or was freestanding on tables or pedestals rather than walls so that viewers could engage with the work from all sides. Works were placed in relation to one another so that when viewers were engaging with the front of one piece, the back of another was in their peripheral line of sight and vice versa. Accompanying each portrait was an audio recording of me retelling first-person accounts and thoughts on colorism, hair politics, and sexuality in Black

communities, workplaces, and communities. Each location had a respective webpage in which images and audio narratives respective to each location were available. Audio narratives were layered over one another and played in their own time. That audio was spanned so that one track was played by each speaker. Viewers could access each webpage with a custom Quick Response code and/or URL address that was made available at each installation location. Web users would arrive on a landing page in which they could choose their location and access the work.



Figure 5.2 (left) *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Fogler Library. [Installation]

Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Figure 5.3 (right) *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Fogler Library. [Installation]

Photograph by Eleanor Kipping



Figure 5.4 *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Estabrooke Hall. [Installation] Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Methodology

To gather materials for this work I traveled to New York City where I interviewed and photographed a group of Black women on their experiences. Discussions took place one-on-one as well as in small groups of five or fewer. Topics focused on personal experiences and thoughts on colorism in the workplace, educational settings, and in families. The range of focus also expanded to communities, society and the role of popular culture. Discussions were candid and lasted roughly an hour each, totaling to about twelve hours' worth of interview material. The following day, those who were available met me at a studio at The Cooper Union School of Art to be photographed.

Upon returning to Maine, I transcribed each interview. From the material, I pieced the text together into what would serve as a script. I pulled quotes that specifically reflected and iterated the topics that I was exploring, as well as anything particularly pertinent to each woman's experience. Regardless of personal views, each woman's perspective was represented. The audio narratives were recorded in a professional audio studio and edited, each woman to their own track. While the pieces were spoken in my voice, I did not alter the original orator's speech patterns, language, or grammatical structure.

In its original form, *Brown Paper Bag Test* was exhibited in a small gallery setting, and all portraits and audio components were housed in the same space, making for an encompassed experience of the piece (See Chapter 4, *Brown Paper Bag Test*, 2017). The audio component was experienced live in the exhibition space. When approached about the potential of installing the work on campus again, but this time for a 30-day exhibition period, I knew that there were few to zero locations on campus that could safely and properly house the exhibition for that period of time. I began to consider ways that the piece could be expanded and reach different audiences, were it exhibited campus-wide. Committed to maintaining the integrity of the piece, yet aware of the physical and financial limitations of installing a complex audio installation in seven locations, I began to consider ways the piece could support an online component and decided to host it on my own website.

In selecting each location, I scouted campus taking photographs and making digital sketches. I considered the architecture of the space and the way in which the work would occupy each location, as well as the way viewers could and would engage with it. For example, Nutting Hall did not provide ways in which to hang the pieces, however, its atrium serves as a meeting place for study and socialization. To exhibit the work here, I installed the portraits into

display stands that would allow the portraits to stand safely on large tables in the space. Viewers could sit and engage with the work, and even move them if they saw fit. In other spaces such as the Recreation Center, viewers encountered the work immediately upon entering the building, while in others, such as Fogler Library and the Memorial Union, viewers were left to “discover” the work as they navigated the building going about their regular routines.

Takeaway Considerations

In addition to the obvious element of Black women in this piece, the orchestration of this work was quite interesting. While the University of Maine is a single institution and I worked closely with the Facilities Department, it took a great deal of careful negotiation with each respective building manager to each location. I found it interesting how each department’s ideas on how to proceed were different and reflective of each department’s culture and political climate. For example, one department was extremely engaged and even went so far as to help me troubleshoot and construct materials in their office space. In another, I only met the department head once throughout the entire process. In yet another, I received a speech as to how this work was appropriate because it did not deal with rape and explicit imagery, as one student’s work apparently had in the past. I was familiar with the work this person was telling me about. It was created in an art class and was exhibited in an art space and it was a janitor who supposedly reported it as offensive. Ironically, the individual telling me this had no say as to where and if my work was to be exhibited. I mention this because I find it to be extremely valuable and reflective of my work as a whole. The detail-oriented, strenuous, and time-consuming process of working with each department's needs is critical to the work’s success. As I carefully approached each department, I also had to anticipate their needs, histories, and fears. I also had to consider the ways in which I might be considered as Black female and as an artist.

Even more, that I was essentially asking for permission from a group of white males to exhibit the work in predominantly white spaces, from a group of white males. I also had to consider the ways in which I would represent the project's participants, supports, and collaborators. This seemingly unimportant, and potentially frustrating political process is just as much a part of the work as the photographs themselves.



Fig. 5.5 (left) Installation of *Brown Paper Bag Test* (2018) in Fogler Library. Photograph by Catherine Frederick

Fig. 5.6 (right) *Brown Paper Bag Test* (detail in Fogler Library) (2018) Eleanor Kipping, 2018.
Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Finally, is the physical construction of the work, another time-consuming but significant component. Almost performative in its repetitive nature, the assembly of each portrait resulted in a “handmade” but polished and industrial aesthetic. Much like New York City, the home of most of the project's participants, the work is hard and soft at the same time. It is makeshift, yet durable, and hand-assembled with commercial and industrial-grade materials.

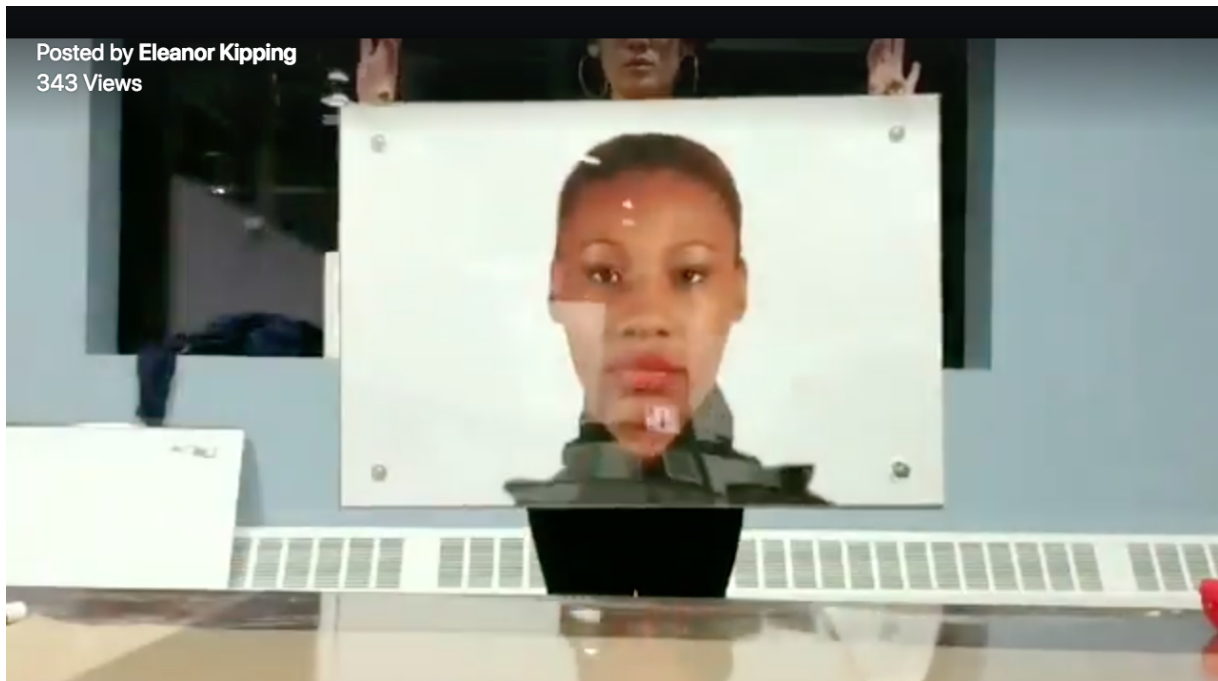
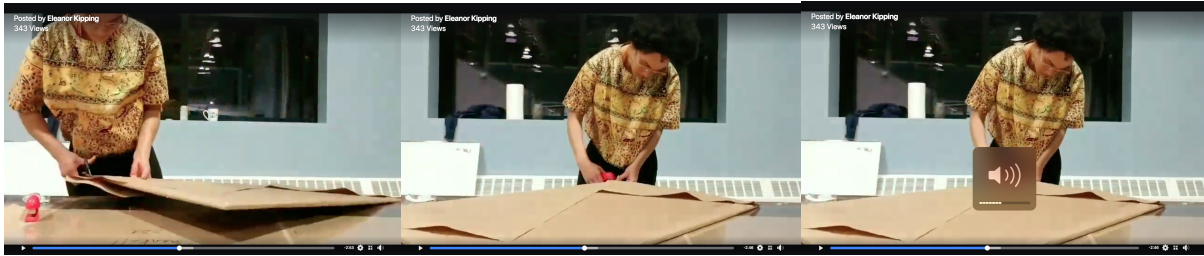


Fig. 5.7 (top) Screenshots of a video documenting portrait assembly for *Brown Paper Bag Test*, Eleanor Kipping, 2018

Fig. 5.8 (bottom) Screenshots of a video documenting portrait assembly for *Brown Paper Bag Test*, Eleanor Kipping, 2018

Education and Engagement

WOKEshop: The Hard Conversations, February 2018

Workshops. Authored and facilitated by Eleanor Kipping in collaboration with the University of Maine Black Student Union and UMaine Multicultural Office of Student Life, 2018.



Fig. 5.9 Table arrangement of WOKEshop in University of Maine Memorial Union (2018) Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Published on Merriam-Webster's *Words We're Watching* (2017), woke is a colloquial term originally used within Black communities to refer to an increased social consciousness and awareness of the self as Black in relation to large societal structures. Its use increased with the shooting of unarmed Black male, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mississippi in 2014 and the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement (para. 2).

This WOKEshop was designed to facilitate conversation between white and individuals of color specifically around topics of racism, implicit bias, Whiteness, intersectionality, and

how these concepts relate to and influence one another. They were designed with Black History Month in mind and intended to complement the calendar of events which took place at the University of Maine, as well as my installation *Brown Paper Bag Test*. In whole, the efforts were made to provide audiences with a space to explore topics in ways that challenge them to think about others as well as themselves as related to the topics. While the materials were fact-based and informational, these WOKEshops are intended to engage people from all backgrounds as they provide a space for participants to not only engage but reflect on their own roles in the country's race relations.

WOKEshop Structure

This WOKEshop was interactive and discussion based, and my role as facilitator was merely to guide the discussion, offer feedback, provide structure and instruct participants in activities. Throughout the experience, participants were asked to participate and engage with one another and themselves on specific topics with instructed prompts, videos, and activities. Accompanying the WORKshop was a slideshow that provided written instruction, supplementary videos, and text. After facilitating the WOKEshop once, I was asked and agreed to do another, but for a longer duration. Below is a description of Silent Essay, an activity that was used in both WORKshops. Following is a description of each iterative outcome.

Silent Essay

Audiences enter a room. Tables are arranged in a horseshoe. Chairs are on three sides and participants are blocked off from the fourth, which houses a projector and the facilitator. There is a narrow space left in the table arrangement to enter the center of the U-shape. It is not impossible to access but is awkward and potentially strenuous. Participants are invited to sit wherever they would like.

One 6-foot long sheet of smooth brown butcher paper spans one of the tables perpendicular to the projector station. Written in large capital black letters are the words WOKE, RACISM and BIAS, centered and about 1.5 feet apart. Next to the paper, sits a box of colored markers and sharpies. The table opposite this station is empty. In the center of the room and U-shaped table arrangement, is a crumpled ball of paper, measuring about 6 feet in length, nothing is written on it and next to it is a small box of old pastels and charcoal.

After introductions are made, participants are asked to stand and arrange themselves around the perimeter of the table from left to right, dark-skinned to light-skinned. Once this began, I did not interject any part of this activity. Participants were then told that they would have 5 minutes to write a Silent Essay on the on the topics written on the brown paper (WOKE, RACISM, BIAS). The instructions were explained as follows:

- 6 - 10 minutes
- no talking allowed
- participants respond to each other via thoughts, challenges, questions, marks, ideas by writing on the brown paper
- arrows and other marks are drawn to make connections between ideas
- participants may look to the slideshow if they get stuck for questions/thoughts
 - *What do these words mean? Whom do they apply to? Are you woke, racist, or biased? How does one become woke, racist, and/or biased? What questions do you have about these words? What do you like/dislike about these words?*

Under the impression that they will do this together, participants they are divided into two groups before they begin: dark-skinned and light-skinned. Those on the light-skinned side are delegated to the side of the room where materials have been laid out. Those on the dark-skinned

side of the room must prepare their own materials, after the time starts, which can found in the center of the room, as previously described, and are instructed to prepare their materials on the tables opposite to the light-skinned. Finally, they are informed that those in the middle of the dark-to-light skinned line (typically Brown and Mixed-race individuals) are told that they may choose which side they wish to be on and that they may also navigate between spaces throughout the duration of the activity. This activity is derivative of what is sometimes called a Graffiti Wall. A description of a Graffiti Wall can be found at Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit organization which provides educational and professional development materials.

Following the Silent Essay, participants were invited to take a few moments to view each side's essays and begin chatting and asking one another questions about things that may have stood out to them. At this time, the facilitator may take note of what is causing tension, and/or discourse, and begin the post-discussion there. During the post-activity discussion, I made a point to touch on the following topics while working through each of the words beginning with WOKE, then RACISM, then BIAS.

- General reactions/responses to the activity?
- How did it feel having different resources?
- Did anyone have any interest in switching sides? What did you do?
- If you “broke” the rules, how did that feel?
- How are the findings different? The same?
 - in language, aesthetic, tone, mode, ideas towards certain words



Fig. 5.10 (left) WOKEshop in University of Maine Memorial Union. 2018. Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Fig. 5.11 (right) WOKEshop in University of Maine Memorial Union. 2018. Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

WOKEshop Iteration 1

In the first iteration, the participant “color divide” was two Black, two white and two brown/light-skinned individuals, making the groups perfectly even. Of those who were permitted to navigate between spaces, only one, a Mixed-race female chose to exercise that privilege. From the white side, one participant navigated between spaces during the activity and

later said that she thought that she was part of the “Mixed-race” group. During the activity, neither was confronted or policed by any other participants. From the Black side, no participants attempted to see the other side or switch spaces.

The discussion that followed the exercise was rich and all participants were engaged. Nearly everyone spoke at least once. There were moments of tension, but they were handled respectfully and stemmed mostly from a lack of familiarity with the kinds of topics and conversations. This was typically met with someone stepping in to explain, providing insight, or asking more questions. Overall the mood was comfortable and felt safe. Everyone stood in the center of the circle or sat on the edge of the tables facing the interior. While some participants were less vocal than others, everyone was arrested and if not verbally, physically engaged. Altogether, this activity and the discussion that followed took about an hour.

Discussion takeaways:

- Most white participants felt disappointed that they were not in “mixed company” for the activity and stated that they attended the WOKEshop expecting to exchange and converse interracially. They were surprised at the blatant segregation.
- Most white participants expressed feeling uncomfortable with having better resources and having to *see* the other side’s resources. One participant stated that they were “reminded that this [unequal access to resources] is still going on.”
- Most Black participants did not feel surprised or uncomfortable with the lack of resources. Some stated that it felt “familiar.”
- White participants were surprised to find that the word WOKE had somewhat of a negative or cynical association by Black participants. It was referred to as “a buzzword” in the dark-skinned essay.

- Black participants made note of the residue that the pastels and charcoal left on their hands long after the exercise was complete.
- Both sides noted the difference in language used in the essays. The dark-skinned side was noted to be “emotionally driven with descriptive words” while the light-skinned side wrote in “complete sentences and used wordy definitions”.

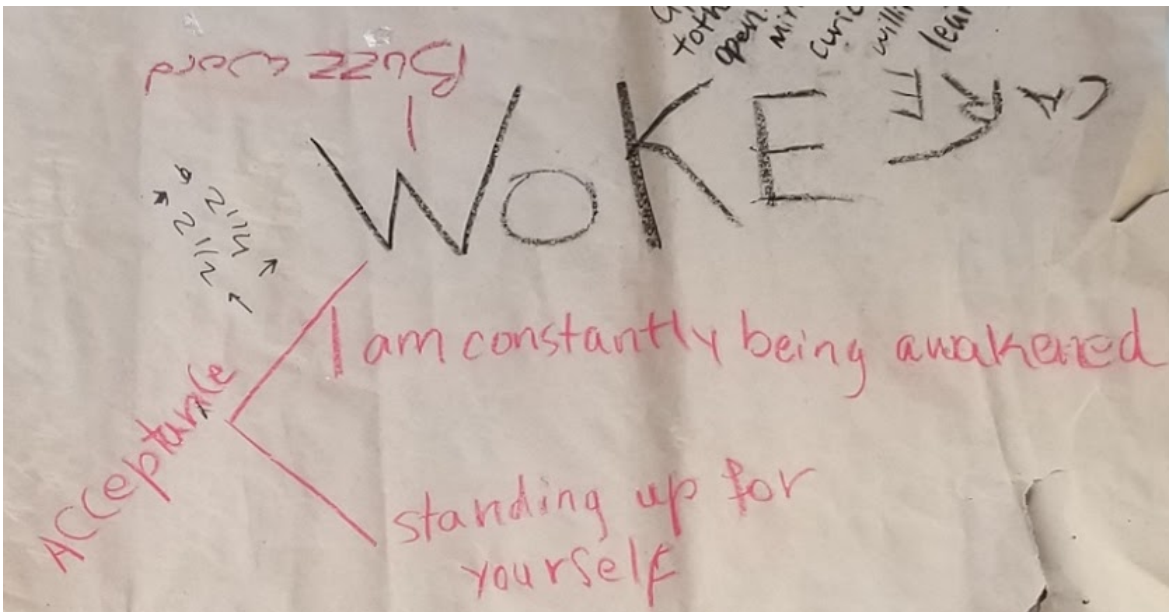
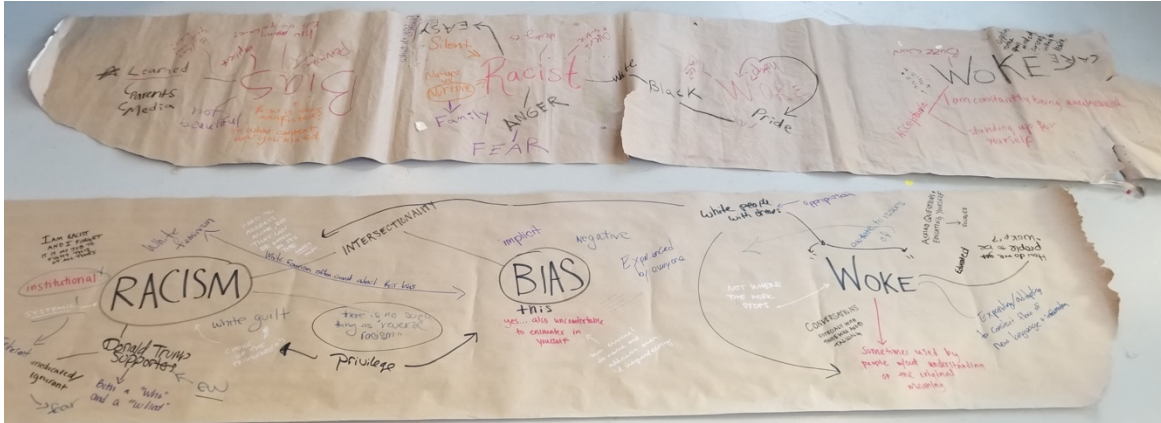


Fig. 5.12 Silent Essays (2018). Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

Fig. 5.13 Silent Essays detail of “dark-skinned side” (2018). Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

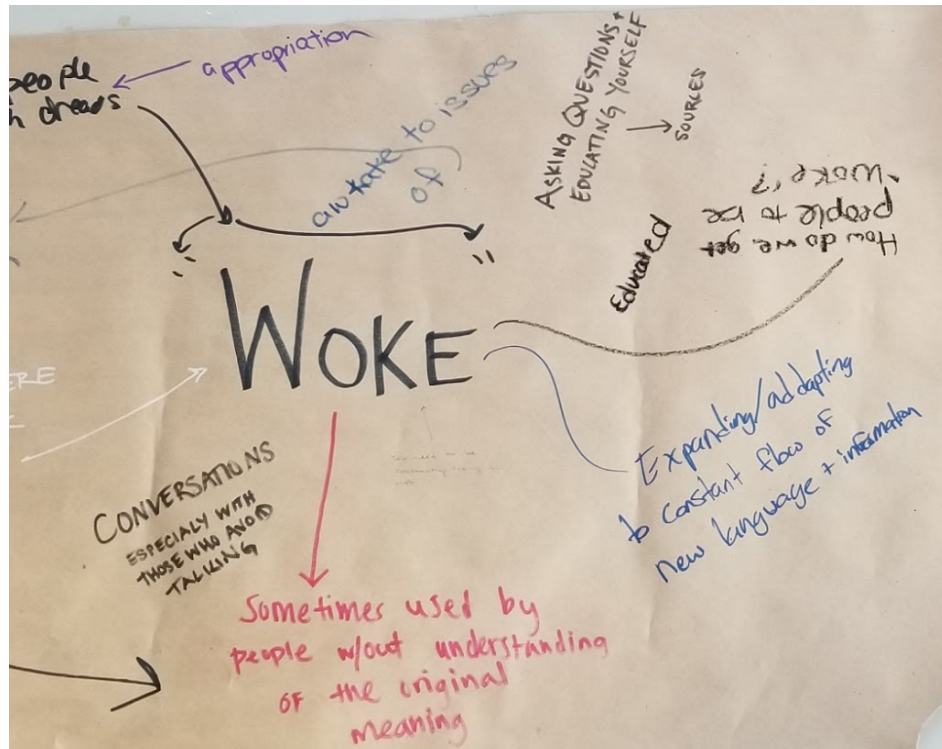


Fig. 5.14 Silent Essay detail of “light-skinned side” (2018). Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

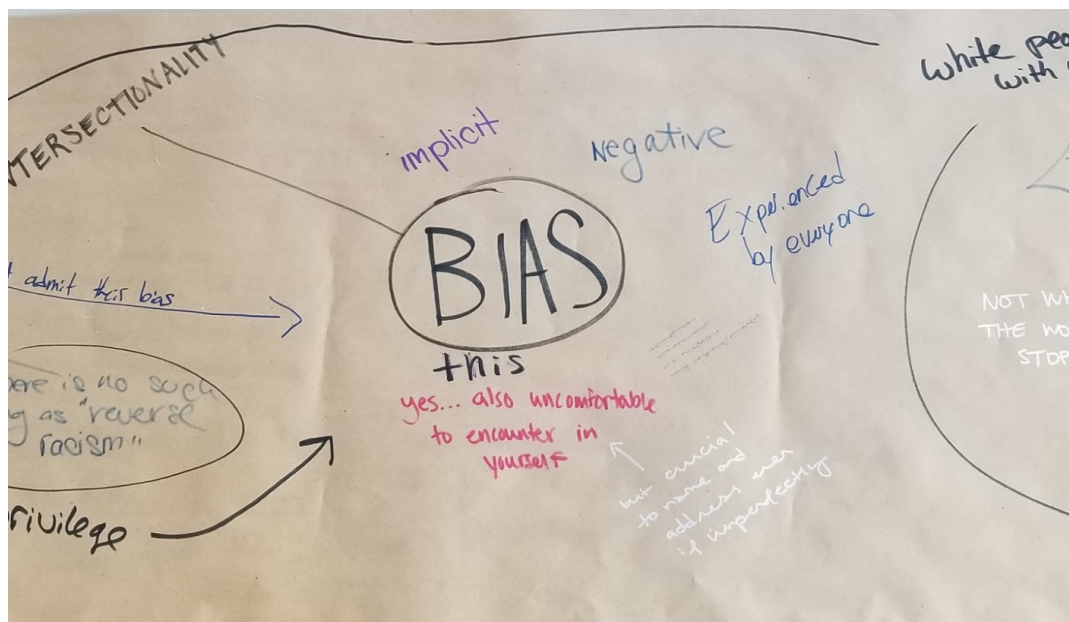


Fig. 5.15 Silent Essay detail of “light-skinned side” (2018). Photograph by Eleanor Kipping

WOKEshop Iteration 2

In this iteration, there was a total of twelve participants, four dark-skinned and eight light-skinned. It is difficult not to notice a difference between what felt like an energetic and eager approach of the first group to the overall tone and pace of the second group of WOKEshop participants. This group was dramatically reserved in comparison to the first. Very few individuals spoke without being addressed by the facilitator. It could be said that some felt tense and uncomfortable. While participants seemed to be listening and engaged, many of them provided little to no verbal or physical response to videos and questions. All participants of color spoke at least once, while some white participants did not speak for the duration of the session.

It should also be noticed that the Silent Essay only took about 10-15 minutes, discussion included. While I was hoping to get through more material in the second group than the first, I did not anticipate the Silent Essay concluding so quickly. After the Silent Essay was complete, participants reseated themselves in their segregated spectrum and returned to their seats on the outside of the table arrangement, maintaining a physical barrier between themselves and other participants.

Discussion Takeaways:

- There was surprise at an even stronger negative association to the word WOKE.
- Again, there was a white participant who “thought they were allowed to enter the dark-skinned side” and were not questioned or challenged when they did.
- There was again an expressed discomfort with a separation of resources.
- Again, there was also note of the difference in language between sides. One participant noted that the light-skinned side was “more textbook.”

Iteration Variations

While both WOKEshops consisted of the same materials and process, there are several notable differences in approach that may have affected the overall mood and influenced the dynamics of the room and discussion.

Before beginning the Silent Essay in Iteration 1, I showed a short video from the *Whiteness Project*, a series of video interviews that looks at whiteness and privilege through the eyes and experiences of white individuals living in Dallas, Texas, and Buffalo, New York. The video depicted a young woman explaining how she often feels that she cannot talk about race and sexuality because she feels as if she is “walking on eggshells”. While the video got some laughs, (the girl is wearing Coke cans in her hair as curlers), it was also provided an example as to how we did not want to proceed with the WOKEshop. I expressed that I wanted people to feel that it was okay to be wrong, not to feel one had to tiptoe around ideas. In Iteration 2, I forewent this film and instead proposed that “as this was a space to learn, and while it was great to take what was learned outside of this context and share it with our peers, it was still important to remember not to verbally slander someone who might say something wrong in the spirit of learning, or challenging their own ideas or notions on race and the surrounding topics.”

In Iteration 1, the WOKEshop was one hour and did not move past the first Silent Essay discussion. In Iteration 2, the WOKEshop was an hour and a half and went as far as my prepared discussions on slavery and its relationship to Capitalism. The discussion was also facilitated much more as to keep the experience moving forward.

As these sessions were limited in time, I was unable to workshop some of my prepared activities and materials and while I did my best to make the experience feel conclusive, it was incomplete as per its design.

Takeaway Considerations

In consideration of the original intentions of the work, I believe that it was successful. Both iterations successfully provided a space where participants were given the opportunity to engage with a variety of topics in a way that they may not otherwise be given. Regardless of their degree of verbal participation, all present were able to listen and observe a variety of perspectives and views. In addition, I was provided with several platforms in which I was able to educate small groups on the constructs of race in the United States, a topic that takes up only “8-9 percent of total class time...in [K-12] classrooms” (King, 2017, para. 5). Moving forward, I am interested in facilitating these sessions again. However, I do believe that for participants to truly engage with the materials and each other, the workshops need to be longer. Have 3-5 hours with this material would allow for breaks, questions, breakout sessions, and give the time necessary for discussion to develop.

Installation and Performance

Strange Fruit, 2018

Performative Installation: 1000 copper-based gold gilded black Afro picks, white rocking chair, brown notebook of handwritten poetry, Mason jar of red drink. Duration approximately 2 hours. Authored and performed by Eleanor Kipping. Documented by Jim Winters. Performed at *Without Out Borders Festival: IX* Thesis Exhibition at Lord Hall Gallery at the University of Maine, 2018.

Project statement

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
(Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,)
Black body swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
(The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,)
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,
(And the sudden smell of burning flesh.)
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.
– Abel Meeropol, 1937



Fig. 5.16 *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Lord Hall Gallery. [Performance installation]

Photograph by Jim Winters

Strange Fruit serves as both installation and performance and explores the relationship between historical and contemporary political race relations in the United States.

Approximately 1,000 Afro picks, purchased from a wholesale supply company that provides goods for institutions and organizations, have been gilded with copper-based gold leaf. The combs define the boundaries of the work and the space between the performer and the audience. The picks hang with no apparent pattern yet are uniform and sway gently until disturbed. Their origin, quantity, and uniformity comment on the regulation and institutional control of Black bodies, while referencing the Jim Crow south and the violent practice of lynching and abuse once exercised to maintain power and control over Black communities. The

picks are disposable and worthless, yet are undeniably iconic to Black culture, identity, and hair care.

Gold, prized for its value and beauty, is donned with the intent to see and be seen. It has a rich history in Black and African mythology, religion, and popular culture but also revels in a turbulent relationship with mining and slavery, mirroring the history of race relations in the United States. Repulsion/fascination, object/subject, animal/human, Other/White shape the ideas of Blackness in America. While “Blackness” as a brand is exploited for profit and readily consumed, thousands of Black Americans remain under state control and/or institutional marginalization.

The artist sits in a white rocking chair. She mourns, celebrates, and muses for several hours while humming, singing and reciting prose, lyrics, and notes from a small book. The book remains in the space for audiences to experience and/or recite after the performance. The space may serve as an altar, a mythological Ancestral plain, or even a shrine.

Methodology

To realize this work, I began to think about the relationship between mass incarceration in the United States, Capitalism and the role that Americans play in consuming goods, and ideas and the ways these affect one another. I wanted to develop a project that might take all of these complex relationships into consideration and allow those who encounter the work an opportunity to consider their own roles, as well consider the impact we have on others.

Unlike much of my other work, where poetry or content comes before performance, I wanted to first explore Afro picks as symbols of Black beauty, and gender, but also politics and regulation. As I looked into purchasing a box of them in bulk, I found it nearly impossible to find a large number of Afro picks. At one point during my research, I began the process of

applying to make a purchase on a prison supply company, whose name I cannot recall. I was shocked and disturbed to suddenly have access to a huge quantity of Afro picks. I decided to do a little more digging and came across DollarDays, a wholesale supply company. I made my first purchase and 1000 Afro picks later, here we are.

From that initial inquiry, I continued to play with the idea of countless Afro picks suspended in space and the ways they might reference lynched bodies. It seemed as if the visual and metaphorical dualism of America's violent past, and her distressing present, might be found in the picks and that their sheer number would speak for me.

I began to gild the picks in September of 2017 and began to pace myself at a rate of about 560 every 4-6 weeks. In January, I received an invitation to install some work at a small pop-up show, *Gross Domestic Product*. I used this as a chance to install about 100 of the picks in a small bathroom. While it was far from perfect, I was satisfied with the results and decided to proceed with the endeavor. The small iteration allowed me to consider the Afro picks and their gold finish in relation to beautification and domestic spaces. At that time, I was still unsure of how and/or if I would engage with the work performatively. I considered a video installation and experimented with projection and even illustration. However, as the work developed, it became clear that it needed to remain simple so as not to clutter the imagery or ideas.

While I began working on a body of spoken word, I was not sure if and how it would make it into the piece. In February, I had the opportunity to perform several short, spoken word pieces at a casual experimental concert. Through this, I discovered that there were several characters or voices that were beginning to take shape and that they were all in dialogue with one another.

At this point, I had already acquired a white rocking chair. I was interested in the rocking chair as a reference to the Antebellum South, but also to domestic spaces, family, work and leisure. I began to see it as another element that might potentially draw audiences into the work from a personal point of entry. For this reason, I decided not to commit the work to memory as I typically do. I felt that the character who was reading this work was doing so in the comfort of her own home, or vision, or even resting place. There was no need for strain or recollection as she was already in mourning and celebration of her Black experience. Once complete, I hand wrote the poetry into a small brown notebook.

I began performing about an hour before the gallery doors opened and finished about an hour and a half after audiences entered the space. Upon finishing my performance, audiences were welcome to sit in the space or walk through the corridors of the Afro picks.

Takeaway Considerations

About an hour into performance, I was surprised to find myself crying. I experienced a great deal of sadness, pain, and anger, as well as joy while I perform. One experience that I had not anticipated was the feeling of separation that I had from my audience. The picks served as a barrier or a cage between us. It was a painful experience as I was on display and while I was vocal, I was not speaking with my audience. They did not always stop speaking when I did, nor did I for them. The exchange was not reciprocal in a traditional theatrical sense, which fed the sensation of being on display.

Post-performance, about half a dozen audience members sat in the chair amongst the picks. Some of them read aloud, and many of them were brought to tears. While I did hope and expect that the work would be moving for participants, I did not anticipate such a strong reaction. One woman stated that while the work was painful and beautiful to engage with, what

was most surprising was how painful it was to “hear those words in her [Eleanor’s] voice”. Someone else stated that they felt angry at the words, especially at the sight of white people reading them. Another promised themselves to read aloud whatever poem they randomly would open the book too. They read the piece *They and the Nigga*. Here is an excerpt:

they love the nigga

they hate the nigga

they spit on the nigga

they walk on the nigga

they talk at the nigga

they speak on the nigga

they write on the nigga

they read on the nigga

they hang the nigga

they chain the nigga

they whip the nigga

they lick the nigga

they call on the nigga

rely on the nigga

they hit on the nigga

they hit the nigga

they cross the street

to pass by the nigga

they side eye the nigga

they drive by the nigga

they take from the nigga

to give to the nigga

they run from the nigga

they blame the nigga

they imprison the nigga

to free the nigga

they ignore the nigga

they shoot the nigga

they run from the nigga

they enslave the nigga

they starve the nigga

to feed the nigga

they hurt the nigga

to heal the nigga

they laugh at the nigga

to laugh with the nigga

they cry at the nigga

they scream at the nigga

they pray for the nigga

they baptize the nigga

they fuck the nigga

they impregnate the nigga

they abort the nigga

they chastise the nigga

they punish the nigga

they praise the nigga

they rape the nigga

they worship the nigga

they preach to the nigga

they teach the nigga

they take truth from the nigga

to feed lies to the nigga

they lock like the nigga

they pop like the nigga

they dress like the nigga

they walk like the nigga

they wish they a nigga

they pay a nigga

they object the nigga

they subject the nigga

they reject the nigga

they kill the nigga

they birth the nigga

they adopt the nigga



Fig. 5.17 (top) *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Lord Hall Gallery. [Performance installation]

Photograph by Jim Winters



Fig. 5.18 *Strange Fruit* (detail) (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Lord Hall Gallery. [Performance installation]

Photograph by Jim Winters



Fig. 5.19 *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Lord Hall Gallery. [Performance installation]

Photograph by Jim Winters

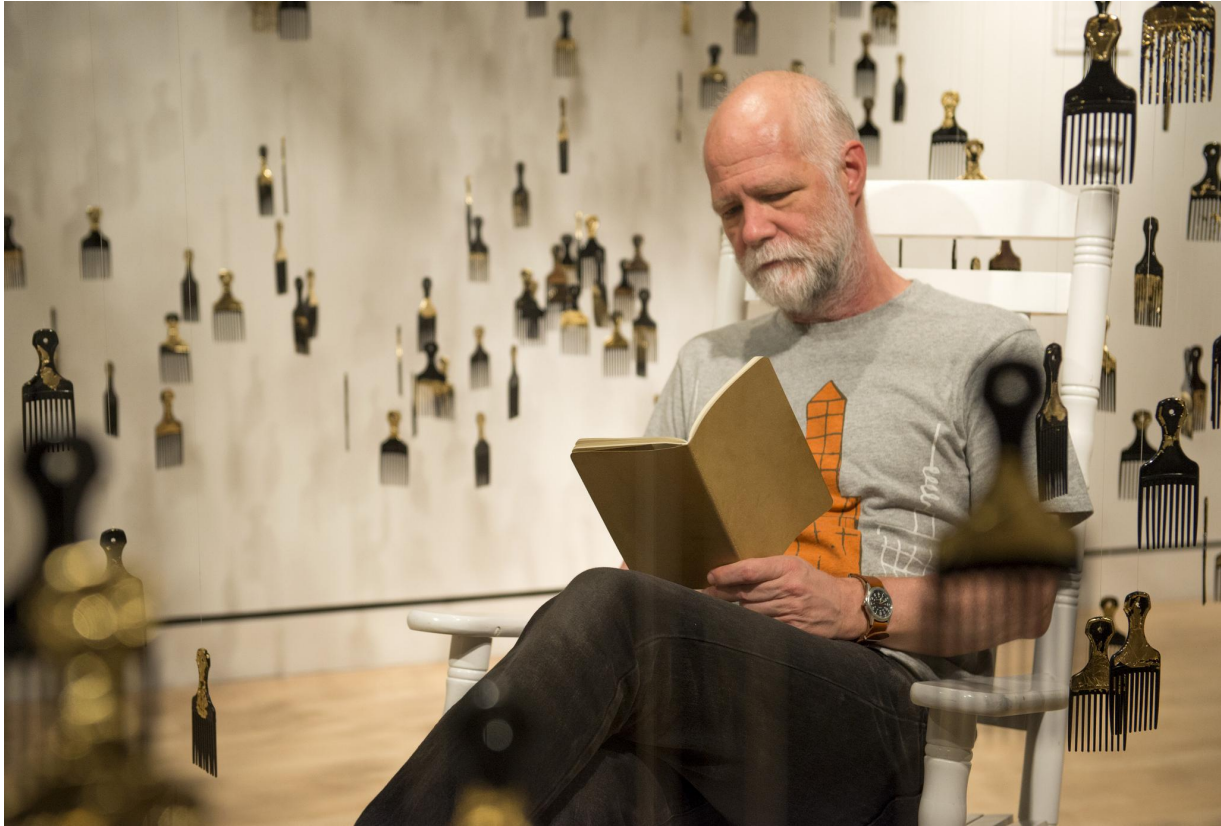


Fig. 5.20 *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Audience member sits in installation space at Lord Hall Gallery. Photograph by Jim Winters



Fig. 5.21 *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Audience member sits in installation space at Lord Hall Gallery. Photograph by Jim Winters

Conclusion

This body of work and research has brought about much pain and joy as I have come to discover the way in which United States race relations in the context of the Black female experience and United States history are inseparably linked. I am pleased to discover that a research-based creative practice has an unmeasurable database of information and resources from which to begin developing material. I believe that the intersections of installation, performance, and social practice as a means of exploring colorism, racial passing, and hair politics offer many tools and methods with which to work. It has become apparent that individuals and communities desire dialogue, and engagement with these topics, and that these disciplines provide an avenue to do so.

To conclude this document and consideration of my research and creative practice I would like to propose that the Black female experience has much to be understood. Regardless of race, ethnicity, or identity, Americans have a long path to tread when it comes to race. The United States is founded on a history and economy of violence and control of bodies that do not fit a dominant standard. This has been to the benefit of many and to the detriment of even more. For the United States to truly become post-racial, it must become uncomfortable with the shape of its past and insist on reshaping its future.

I love America more than any other country in this world, and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

– James A. Baldwin (1984), *Notes on a Native Son*



Fig. 5.22 *Strange Fruit* (2018) Eleanor Kipping. Lord Hall Gallery. [Performance installation]

Photograph by Jim Winters

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Eleanor has a B.S. in Video / Entertainment Production (2011) from the New England School of Communications where she was awarded *Outstanding Achievement in Video Production*. Kipping has worked as a video and graphic designer with Penobscot Theatre Company, the Bangor Symphony Orchestra, and the Gracie Theatre. Kipping has also worked as a social media manager and content designer with the University of Maine School of Performing Arts and the Intermedia MFA Program's Visiting Artist Series, Alison Chase/Performance the University of Maine Division of Lifelong Learning and others. Kipping also worked with Carnival Cruise Lines as an onboard Audio/Video technician.

Prior to beginning her graduate studies, Kipping began her formal teaching portfolio with the University of Maine Intensive English Institute as an ESL instructor. In summer of 2016 she traveled to Tokyo and Chiba, Japan as an experience designer for an experimental education project known as *Gakko Project*. During her studies, Eleanor has committed to engaging audiences and community through her research and creative practice.

She is a candidate for the Intermedia Master of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Maine in August 2018.