

SELF

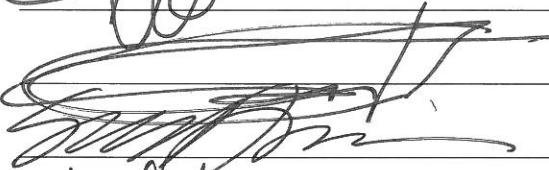
by

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A Thesis
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of
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of
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New Media Art

Committee



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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Self

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts
George Mason University, 2005

Director: Edgar Endress, Associate Professor
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my “self”. For always putting others before you.

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ABSTRACT

SELF

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George Mason University, 2014

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From the day we are born, we are taught to conform, to believe, to fear, to love, to want, to need. And as a result of all of those teachings we find our selves lost and confused within this conformity. We are looking for answers, seeking our own identity, searching for “self”.

INTRODUCTION

I am not black.

I am not an image.

I am beyond what you want me to be.

I am an interruption.

I am an unwritten narrative.

You do not know me.

I am not your sister.

I am not your friend.

I am not like them.

I do not fit the mold.

I am abstract.

I am...an Escape

NOT BLACK

I am beyond the black experience.

I do not make black art.

I am not a black artist.

I am beyond the predetermined expectations of my culture and society. My skin does not determine my design. I am not my hair. I am not loud. I am not angry. I do not eat watermelon. I am not oppressed. I am not a mascot for my race or “the struggle”. I am not an activist. I am not substandard. I do not want any handouts. I am not pro-black. I do not blame the white man.

We are living in an era of perpetual discrimination where race continues to be defined as more than a physical trait and remains a social and mental construct by which we judge one another. It is truly a primitive way of thinking in such a sophisticated time.

Black is not a condition like hunger or high-blood pressure, yet society has managed to transform a beautiful race of people into an affliction like bird flu or the bubonic plaque. Throughout much of society, *black* has come to represent negativity, oppression, and ignorance, and is used to justify the lack of success and disorderly behavior.

Furthermore, skin color has always been the source of painful divisions within the community of those identified as black by themselves and others. These contemporary divisions devolve from harsh distinctions made among blacks and between blacks during slavery and Reconstruction. Skin color remains a very harmful divide.

I am on a journey to discover what exists behind the “veil”, behind my veil.

Bound by Blackness
Oppressed by Hope
Convicted by Confusion
Self.

NOT AN IMAGE

“Flowers are like people. Even though they can be quite different and are scattered all over the planet in different conditions and climates, they are all flowers. Everyone sees them that way. They bring pleasure to us when we see them, simply because they are flowers.” (Williams, 2000: 38) Some have a unique beauty whereas others have a sweet, clinging scent; however we do not decide that others are not worth looking at simply because of these distinctions. We see them first and foremost as flowers and appreciate them for being what they are.

As black people, we learn that our skin color is not right, our hair is too kinky, our lips too full, and our presence too strong. (Williams, 2000: 14) For decades, we have been robbed of equal opportunities, in addition to executive positions, because our image is inconsistent with a corporate brand. So much so, that for decades they have developed hair care and skin products to make our skin lighter and hair straighter. Some people even go as far as having cosmetic surgery, all to make them look less black so that we may be accepted and viewed as equals rather than an image of inadequacy.

“The knowledge of self ends all delusion.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 36)

I am not what you see. I am a delusion; my appearance is only a veil. I do not represent blackness. Do not refer to me as the black chick, or the black student. I am not a

leper, nor am I a sex symbol. I am not Harriet Tubman. I am not Beyoncé. I am not Michelle Obama. I am not a token or a puppet. I am vibrant. I am impermanent. I am a tulip.

BEYOND WHAT YOU WANT ME TO BE

Barriers are platforms for discovery. “It is not the way of the white folks we need to get a grasp on, it is the way of life.” (Williams, 2000: 6)

Since the early days of colonization, many races have been wired to honor and praise the “white man”, and because of this many black people harbor anger and doubt, and sadly live in a continuous state of discontentment, having accepted the inability to ever have equal footing with the “white man”, as an imaginary standard, an illusory truth which has been woven into the fabric of our being.

I am not a minority; I am in the minority.

I find it amusing, yet debilitating, how “being black” comes with a set of guidelines, as if it were an occupation. In many instances, academic achievement is substandard, and there is a lack financial security. It is as if *blackness* is a handicap or illness, rather than a set of physical attributes. The divide is beyond skin color; it is about culture and history.

“It is our light, not our darkness that frightens us...It is not in just some of us, it is in all of us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fears, our presence automatically liberates others.” – Marianne Williamson

AN INTERRUPTION

I believe God is using me.

I am too black to be white, and too white to be black.

I do not seek your approval.

I am the *pink elephant*, assertive yet aloof.

The *self* cannot be quantified. It is beyond measure and the satisfaction of others. It develops at its own pace and does not adhere to an imposed schedule or generalized timeline of revelation.

According to the Indian Vedic tradition, the word *Guru* can be understood by examining its two syllables; Gu—means The Invisible (God), Ru—means the visible. “The Invisible uses the visible as its instrument.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 47)

In life, sometimes we become puppets and get caught in the tangles of the world, trying to fit in and please all whom we encounter. In many instances, we lose our selves in these outside diversions. Though invisible, the *self* is the “pink elephant”. It will interrupt these distractions, as they do not define us. They only hinder us from recognizing and becoming our true *self*.

UNWRITTEN NARRATIVE

“To the ignorant person, the body is self; whereas to the learned, the ego appears to be self. Needless to say, both are deluded.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 43)

My story is not a sequel or a prelude. It is not a remix or a rewrite. My story, my *self* is unresolved and in constant transformation. I am becoming. I am in a continuous state of development and learning, the continuous state of discovering *self*.

One of my peers asked me in a class interview, “If you had to commit your *self* as a physical object what would it be? Why?”

I was a bit taken aback by the question, but at the same time intrigued. The question made me analyze myself deeply and genuinely question my own identity. I later responded:

If I had to commit my *self* as a physical object, it would be a “ball of clay”, but if you asked me this question three years ago, or even one year ago, the answer would have been “a sponge”. For most of my life I have viewed myself as a sponge, absorbent, becoming full with the knowledge and lessons of my experience. However, in being this sponge, I would also absorb and harbor my own emotions and concerns, until I felt

swollen. This journey has helped me to recognize that as a sponge I had no control over what I absorbed or released, so I had just become swollen from that fear.

It is this recognition throughout this current journey that has caused me to realize a change was long overdue, that instead of soaking up everything in my path, I need only allow those instances to act as a small pinch or contour, that overtime work together to shape me into the woman and artist I am evolving towards. I have taken on various shapes to conform to the demands of life, all of which have led me closer to the truth. It is this malleability that is not only necessary for growth and maturity, but also essential in discovering the true state of *self*.

And although the *self* is non-conforming, in many cases, a provisional conformity allows one to realize that as a mirror reflects a multitude of objects but never retains or conforms to any of its images, the *self* is ultimately a reflection of the entire universe. (Hariharananda, 2004: 36) The true *self* is a vivid reflection of all life, the result and means of achieving divine wisdom.

YOU DO NOT KNOW ME

To *know* is to understand as fact or truth, to apprehend clearly and with certainty.

To *know* is not to assume, guess or estimate.

From within and outside the citadel of *blackness*, there is an assumption of common knowledge based simply on group-inclusion. What a foolish way of thinking. In my experience, many have become frustrated or have begun to pass judgment when a person of color does not conform to assumptions of style of speech and clothing, or share the same hardships, education level, or even listen to the same genre of music. As a result, these atypical individuals are labeled *sell-outs*, *bourgeoisie*, *not black*, etc.

Due to stereotypes (predetermined cultural expectations) society has placed upon minorities and people of color, many feel it is necessary to uphold these “truths” when in fact, *black* is only a pigment, and therefore, cannot have broad behavioral mandates. Though we may all share similar skin tones, that does not mean we all grew up in the ghetto or in poverty. It does not mean we all have bad credit or speak improper English. Nor does it mean we all eat watermelon, listen to R&B music and rap, or that we naturally excel at sports. Black is not a personality trait or a condition and therefore does

not warrant the assumption that you “know me” because you have had prior interactions with a limited statistical sample from within my racial group.

NOT YOUR SISTER

My full name is Mahogany Marie Murray. I was born September 13, 1981 in Richmond, Virginia to James and Jacqueline Murray. I always wanted a sibling(s), however, a few years after I was born, my mother became unable to have any more children. I am an only child.

Having the same skin color does not make me your “sister”. Do not assume, I will defend you, protect you, or “have your back”, nor shall I be judged and held accountable for another’s actions simply because we share the same racial designation.

Culturally, “sistah” is a term of endearment, however, similar to the term “nigger”, it comes with a set of strict cultural and social expectations, which I have moved beyond and overcome. You see, socially, both terms are interchangeable, and for the same reasons I would rather not rush to stand under the *n-word*; I can live without the arbitrary social “adoption” of sisters simply on the basis of skin color alone.

We must free ourselves from the confines of community and the human condition in order to find happiness and truly discover *self*.

NOT YOUR FRIEND

“The self is the source of all joy. It is the dearest thing to humanity. One loves another person/thing, because he identifies his own self with that person/thing.”

(Hariharananda, 2004: 61)

I am infected with the poisonous venom of our being—greed, anger, and ignorance. I am a victim of humanity. I cannot be trusted. I am weak from the strongholds of society. I am tired of trying to “fit in”. I am sick from all of the pretending. I am not your *friend*. I am not my friend.

I am branching away from living a life where I was groomed to *only* exceed the expectations place upon me, a life of constantly fitting into a desired mold, becoming the ideal mentor/model to be esteemed and admired, a life that often involved the sacrifice of my true *self*. My innate desires, interests, behaviors, and personality were all repressed in fear that they might not be celebrated or revered in the estimation of the status quo. As a result, I found myself *lost* in everyone’s image of me, wearing a permanent veil and leaving me with the question, “Is it a veil or is it really me?”

I am now exploring the unexplored— the parts of myself that have been tucked away due to a fear of becoming vulnerable and exposing my weaknesses, my uncertainties, my hurts, my disappointments, those things that I bear, so that I can be strong for others, so that I can be, a *friend*.

NOT LIKE THEM

I am an orchid in a sea of wildflowers. I am not like them; I am them.

Them. “Them” are those who came before me and those who exist within me. By definition, *them* refers to people, animals and/or things of known or unknown sex/identity, already spoken about or being spoken about. In other words, “Them” is a reference to both the past and the present. As such, I am the past and the present, and am a reflection of what is to come. I have evolved and continue to do so. I am in constant transformation. I am continuous. I am undefined.

“We are divided into groups that separate us and classify us like cans in a grocery store, all stacked in neat little rows, divided according to the labels we wear around our outsides” (Williams, 2000: 37). The *self* is not about being black or white, Latino or Asian. It is not about gay, lesbian, or transgender. The *self* is based on how we define ourselves, our “self”. Race, class, sex, etc. are all labels designed to separate us, not bring us together. These demographic labels, like marketing brands, represent capitalism at its best. Instead of using labels solely as a means of identification, we use them as means of discrimination and segregation.

We have been brainwashed by our social system to believe that these labels can define us, when in fact, they can only diminish us to just that, a label. In countless

instances we find ourselves seeking labels and rejecting others only to live up to or be apart of another “label”.

Conversely, “the true *self* makes a person aware of his individuality and of the plurality of the world.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 36). External characteristics do not make us alike or define who I am, nor do they alter my ability to “become”. The color of my skin does not determine my design. It is by no coincidence, a banana and a lemon are both fruit of the same color; nonetheless, they do not share commonalities of taste, smell, flavor, or nutrition.

DO NOT FIT THE MOLD

I do not want to *be black*; I am black.

It amazes me how much other races are fascinated by the *black experience*, and yet remain ignorant of black culture. Many rely on stereotypes and assumptions to feed this hunger, and then become confused when the actual black persons they encounter do not live up to these false expectations.

I was not raised in a black community. Every school I attended had a black population of less than ten percent. I was one of two black students, and in many cases, the only black student in an educational setting of predominately white classrooms. We were the only black family in my neighborhood, and most of my friends were white. And although I am sure it existed, I have no recollection of any racism being directed against me. For this reason, I never saw color. In a strange way I “forgot” I was black. In other words, I was never taught “how to be black”, and I did not know what it meant to “be black”. That *was* my black experience.

So, then am I less black because I grew up outside of the black community? Many would argue this to be so, but then I ask, how do you measure culture?

I am shaped by my *own* experiences; I do not allow another's experience or imposed truths to revolutionize my being. "All of us must learn to honor our whole selves just as we come, just as we are." (Williams, 2000: 9) This is the only way we can genuinely define *self*.

I AM ABSTRACT

“Like a mirror reflects thousands of objects, yet never retains or conforms to any of the images; the “self” is a reflection of the entire universe.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 36)

“Self is not seen by the eye, not recognized by the mind, nor by the other senses. It cannot be realized by penance or good work, nor is it revealed by intellect or learning – Self is invisible and impersonal.” (Hariharananda, 2004: 37) It is the personal impersonal. *Self* is who I am, not what I appear to be. It does not exist in the flesh, but instead dwells within the soul. *Self* is the resolved state of Being.

In short, Life is an art form. And like any art form, we must take risks in order to develop our skills and achieve mastery– to discover *self*.

I wish I painted pretty pictures

Then you would appreciate my craft

Every stroke

Every shape

Every shade

Then you would call me an artist

Then you would see my pain.

...AN ESCAPE

“We need to rise up and peek out from under the smothering blankets and stigma of racism, classicism, and out-of-control individualism.” (Williams, 2000: 6)

To truly discover one’s own identity and reach true self-satisfaction (happiness), one must free themselves from the bondages; those “sense pleasures” and repeated blows of this world. Discovering *self* is “escaping” the many conflicts of the “sense world”.

Paramahansa Hariharananda theorizes on enlightenment in *Kriya Yoga*, and retells teachings from the *Mundaka Upanishad* (3: I: I), which draw parallels of self-discovery through a beautiful depiction of two birds in a short parable, the “Story of Two Birds”.

Story of Two Birds

“Two beautiful birds live on the same tree – one on a branch near the top, the other on a lower branch. The bird on the lower branch busies itself with tasting the fruits of the tree whereas the one on the top merely looks on, remaining calm and majestic, absorbed in its own glory. As the first bird occasionally tastes bitter fruits, it hops to a higher branch and notes the detachment of the other bird, who cares neither for the sweet nor the bitter fruits. It is satisfied in itself, seeking nothing beyond.”

The first bird seeks to get near the second, but as it hops onto a higher branch, it again starts tasting the fruits on that branch out of habit. Again it tastes a bitter fruit and looks up, observing the self-satisfaction of the other. It again hops to a higher branch and due to force of habit, again starts tasting the fruit on that branch. In this way, it hops higher and higher until it comes close to the second bird. The light from its own plumage is reflected on the first bird and the latter's own plumage starts melting away.

When the first bird finally reaches the branch on which the second is sitting, the whole vision changes. It finds that all along it had been the second bird. The apparent duality existed only because it had deserted its true Self for the fruits of the tree. Its former Self was only a distorted reflection of its true Self. Such is the nature of man.”

(Hariharananda, 2004: 36-37)

Self is starting over, focusing on character, integrity, and intellect, the core of human existence, instead of these superficial constructs, designed to either oppress our conscious or satisfy our egos. The *self* focuses on life, not living.

I am not black.

I am a reflection of my *self*.

SELF: THE VESSEL AND THE VEIL, MFA EXHIBITION

I do not write to make art. My art is an extension of my writings.

Writing is spiritual energy.

It is an intellectual escape.

It is meditation.

Writing is how I interpret life.



Figure 1: Self-Exhibition Photo 1

My *voice* is loudest in my writings, though no one can *hear* the words. When I write, I am uninhibited. I do not have to conform. I do not have to pretend. I am introspective. I am vulnerable. In my writings, definition can exist within delusion. My *self* is alive in my writings.



Figure 2: Self-Exhibition Photo 2



Figure 3: Self-Exhibition Photo 3

The exhibition of *Self* taught me a lot about my artistry and myself. For many years I have kept notebooks of personal writings, and although I do not consider them to be diaries, I have never shared them with anyone. These writings are *reflections* of my life experiences, thoughts, and frustrations. And though very hesitant, I felt it was time to unveil some of my writings. *Self* revealed all that was hidden and kept private. *Self* revealed my writings. And though I felt naked and fully exposed, my writings ignited my creative process. I found strength within my vulnerability. The work gave my words life and in turn my work came to life. I found my *self*.



Figure 4: Self-Exhibition Photo 4

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BIOGRAPHY

Mahogany M. Murray (b. 1981 Richmond, Virginia) is an artist and professional design consultant working in Northern Virginia. She received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Digital Art in 2005 from George Mason University's School of Art. She is also the owner and CEO of M3 Creative Consulting, LLC, a graphic design, consulting firm servicing private industry and government clients in the VA/MD/DC metropolitan area. Aside from growing her consulting business, Mahogany's ultimate goal is to become an artistic leader and professor so that she can share her passionate engagement with the arts with other growing artists.