

# AM I ENOUGH

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Spring 2018







UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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*Author's Note: This paper contains racial slurs.*

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## Abstract

*AM I ENOUGH* is an exhibition that challenges the psychological decisions we make as we construct our identities by pulling from dominant media, the judgement of our communities, and self-affirming family values or lack thereof. The installation critiques skin color discrimination and its relationship to self-esteem. By exploiting the language and assumptions of advertising in public spaces, as well as illustrating the unconscious decisions made in private spaces, Brown reflects on her own journey to understanding how brown skin became inferior.

## Keywords

Colorism, skin color, color, Dr. Frances Cress Welsing color theory, melanin, melanated, discrimination, influence, identity, race, racial identity, construction of race, self, self-esteem, enough, affirmation, resistance, doubling.



# PART ONE: CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

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## Introduction

“Don’t be like the stupid Black Americans!” This is a common line heard among the adults in my family who were all Jamaicans who immigrated to the United States. I grew up understanding I was not and should not aspire to be what they called a Black<sup>1</sup> American (African American). This was a conflict when my school forms didn’t have a “Jamaican descendent” box to check. It was a conflict when I told my ‘Black American’

friends I was Jamaican and they said, “No you’re not cause you was born in Florida.” This was a conflict when on my frequent visits to Jamaica my accent was not “authentic” enough to pass so they deemed me a ‘yardie’. Being the last of five children and a first generation American, my upbringing was drastically different from my Jamaican cousins and eldest sister born in our homeland. I floated in this space between Florida, Jamaica, and later Africa. I had no knowledge of great-grandparents on plantations, and my baby-boomer parents never experienced segregation and the civil rights era while in the cradling arms of Jamaica. I didn’t know what it meant to be an African-American in the full sense of the word, but public school, church, and television taught me.

Public school taught me that Europeans explored new lands civilizing indigenous people, Africans started in chains and slavery was “real bad”, Lincoln freed slaves, Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks helped African Americans get civil rights, and integration of public schools balanced the educational gap between whites and blacks. Church taught me about white Adam and Eve, white Jesus, white God and all their white followers and descendants were the beginning of our white civilization. Television growing up in the 90s taught me that brown skin people were only criminals or the help. But after my family got a cable box I learned black families could actually be on TV and have their own shows!

I pause to ask the same questions I had then as I do now: Who am I and where do I fit? Where did non-whites (black, brown, red, and yellow) come from? What caused our identities to be marginalized? How does the media shape a Black person’s understanding of their own identity? What does it mean to not see yourself in the world? What taught me how to be an African American?

My conflicted identity and unsettled curiosity has led me to research a path, long and twisted, repaved again and again. Generations of history, Black history, stolen and tainted with lies and false narratives all to serve one purpose — the destruction of me (black people) mentally and

physically. In 1971, *The United Independent Compensatory Code/System/Concept* author Neely Fuller Jr. pronounced that race is a social construct and if you do not understand racism — “how it works, and as it has existed then and now — then my friend I am afraid everything else in this world will only confuse you.”<sup>2</sup> This destruction has been diluted within the term of racism, but scholars like Dr. Frances Cress Welsing, whose work often references Fuller, explicitly make clear that this so-called racism is in fact white supremacy, a term that has finally returned to the forefront of America’s racial issues today:

Racism (White Supremacy) is the local and global power system and dynamic, structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white ... for the ultimate purpose of white genetic survival and to prevent white genetic annihilation on planet earth — a planet upon which the vast and overwhelming majority of people are classified as nonwhite (black, brown, red and yellow)...

— Dr. Frances Cress Welsing (the Isis Papers)

I draw from Welsing’s definition of racism to draw attention to colorism — “a “system” that grants privileges and opportunities to those who possess lighter complexions within the African-American community.”<sup>3</sup> Colorism is a direct product of racism and a function of skin color stratification, along with the function of intra-racial discrimination.<sup>4</sup> This intra-racial discrimination termed colorism was coined by author Alice Walker in 1982. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* is a collection of womanist prose pieces by Alice Walker in which she is quoted saying, “Colorism — in my definition, prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color — is addressed in our communities and definitely in our black ‘sisterhoods’ we cannot, as a people, progress.”<sup>5</sup> I am motivated to solve an unsolvable problem — the inherent global inferiority of dark skin, birthed from the social construction of race and fear tactics associated with dark skin complexions. This problem, the inferiority of dark skin, is layered and society views it

as explicit, but my installation work aims to expose the implicit aspects that run deep within it.

The global inferiority of dark skin has been well researched and well documented within movements such as the 1930s Négritude cultural movement initiated by French Black scholars from various French speaking colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. Literary texts from these movements are not taught in American public schools and often seen as alternative in comparison to the dominant Eurocentric texts. However the creation of these text are examples of people of color attempting to fill the gaps of Eurocentric texts that tend to disregard or eliminate aspects Black identity and representation in history. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture had an exhibition titled, *Africana Age*, which sums up the movement as:

The Négritude movement signaled an awakening of race consciousness for blacks in Africa and the African Diaspora. This new race consciousness, rooted in a (re)discovery of the authentic self, sparked a collective condemnation of Western domination, anti-black racism, enslavement, and colonization of black people. It sought to dispel denigrating myths and stereotypes linked to black people, by acknowledging their culture, history, and achievements, as well as reclaiming their contributions to the world and restoring their rightful place within the global community.<sup>6</sup>

I was called a nigger in the 3rd grade by a little white boy I had never met before. Without even fully knowing what the word meant I knew why he said it. This child's desire to belittle me and his attempt to claim power over me was an explicit demonstration of racism. Micro-aggressions<sup>7</sup>, on the other hand, are examples of implicit forms of racism. Racial micro-aggression - a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. "You speak really well..." on the surface would be a kind compliment in



many situations but more times than I'd like to admit I am given that compliment, "You speak really well..." followed by a silent "for a Black girl." To be shocked or in awe of my speech, dress, or mannerisms implies I am an anomaly within the range of Black people that speaker has chosen to encounter which further concludes he or she may hold implicit racial discrimination. Chester Pierce, M.D. first coined the term "microaggression" in the 1970s. Within the epilogue of his academic paper, *Unity in Diversity: Thirty-Three Years of Stress*, Pierce states, "Microaggressions simultaneously sustained defensive deferential thinking and eroded self-confidence in Blacks. Further, by monopolizing our perception and action through regularly irregular disruptions, they contributed to relative paralysis of action, planning, and self-esteem. They seem to be the principal foundation for the verification of Black inferiority for both Whites and Blacks."<sup>8</sup>

You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger, I tell you this because I love you and don't you ever forget it.

— James Baldwin

In *The Fire Next Time* (1963) James Baldwin addresses issues that I find myself engaging with today in 2018. In a letter to his nephew he urges him not to let white people define his identity and not to run from reality but to chase after it with love. He makes declarative statements like "The white world is destroying hundreds of lives and don't know it and don't want to know it."<sup>9</sup> The two letters in this book repeatedly assert that the liberation of the Negro is fully dependent on the liberation of the white man. Baldwin wants readers to understand that until the white man loves himself and admits to his fears and inhumanity, the Black man can never fully be free.

My work investigates **the roots of colorism and its influence on American society**. My objective is to put viewers in experiential situations that engage with racial discrimination, skin color bias, and recreate

the perspective of your so-called “average” person of color. In my work I unpack the exploitation of brown skin. By exploitation I mean the excessive separation of people based on skin color stratification. I find religion, the media, and beauty standards guilty of this exploitation and colorism.

My approach is to highlight the cyclical nature of racism. From explicit to implicit, my art installations disrupt everyday images and replace them with conversational provocations. These works reveal lost black historic facts and begin to challenge all that we think we understand to be true. The fact that I can relate to arguments presented by W.E.B. DuBois and James Baldwin back in the 60s and to have contemporary writers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Ta Nehisi Coates remind 21st century populations of the present state of racial discrimination today only echoes the cyclical nature of racism I am examining.

Caleb Rosado from Eastern University Pennsylvania explains, racism “is more than just prejudice and discrimination combined. Racism is a socially constructed reality at the heart of society’s structures. Racism is the deliberate structuring of privilege by means of an objective, differential and unequal treatment of people, for the purpose of social advantage over scarce resources, resulting in an ideology of supremacy which justifies power of position by placing a negative meaning on perceived or actual biological/cultural differences.”<sup>10</sup> Racism is centered on prejudice plus power, where-as colorism is centered on prejudice alone. Colorism, this spawn of racism, is just one of many tools used to oppress Black people psychologically and to condone the discriminatory beliefs of racist white people. In Jamaica we say: *If you don’t know where you come from, then you don’t know where you are going.* I believe we, as people of color, don’t know enough about our own roots due to false narratives and an attempt to conceal our potential by a construct controlled by white oppressors. Ignorance has blinded society, and I want to know what my audience does when given the facts and an alternative perspective on the world. Like a light turned on in a

dark room, I intend for my work to take viewers from empathy to civic action. By embracing moments of discomfort, I confront the hard questions in order to present them to my viewers and spark a discourse that can reach broader communities, while encouraging all black and brown people to be nothing but themselves.

## **WTF is Race: Unveiling history**

In America, enslaving stolen Africans was the earliest method of creating a racial hierarchy that put black individuals at the bottom. It is important to understand that many societies practiced slavery going all the way back to the Roman Empire. Before 1400, slavery was a method of indenture and considered a societal norm. Even Africans kidnapped other Africans between various kingdoms and sold each other to Europeans. Historians refer to 'Chattel Slavery', in which slaves are commodities to be bought and sold, rather than domestic servants or agricultural workers.<sup>11</sup> Chattel slavery allowed no means to freedom.

Between 1525 and 1866, according to Emory University's Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World. Nearly eleven million survived the dreaded Middle Passage, disembarking in North America, the Caribbean and South America.<sup>12</sup> African slaves were inferior by law. They were forbidden to read and write. They were trained to follow orders by their white masters, living a life ruled and regulated by another man. We understand the treatment of Black slaves during these times thanks to written accounts and depictions of mutilated bodies.<sup>13</sup>

Slavery was abolished in the U.S. 1865 thanks to the 13th Amendment. The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments left blacks free yet not free, providing them legal protections equal to whites (on paper), yet blacks were still treated as inferior. Jim Crow laws and Jim Crow etiquette segregated the nation. Transportation, restaurants, schools,



Figure 01. 1900 William H. West minstrel show poster, originally published by the Stobridge Litho Co., shows the transformation from white to “black”.

public bathrooms, and even residential communities were separate and never equal as promised. A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman, because he risked being accused of rape.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of Jim Crow laws would influence Americans as second class “citizens” meanwhile Minstrel entertainment plays and the use of the Minstrel image would govern the minds of people around the world shaping perceptions of all Black people. Well into the 1900s the dominant use of minstrel characters would normalize the perception of African Americans in America as unintelligent, sub-human, and only fit for labor roles.

Science has also been a tool used to try and promote the inferiority of Black people. That science in particular was called eugenics which is

defined as the science of improving a human population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics developed largely by Francis Galton as a method of improving the human race. Skull sizes, shapes, and physical features have been scrutinized yet all results point to equality. As a counter argument, Dr. Nina Jablonski, Paleoanthropologist at California Academy of the Sciences explains that, "Race is an unfortunate social construct." Bill Nye the Science Guy TV show teaches us that we are 99.9 percent exactly the same, it's in our DNA.<sup>15</sup> Dr. Nina Jablonski, who was featured on Bill Nye's TV show, further explains that all humans are of African descent, which is why people in Africa have the greatest number of genetic variants.<sup>16</sup> In 1997, the American Anthropological Association recommended that the U.S. government abandon the term "RACE" on official forms because it holds, "...no scientific justification in human biology."<sup>17</sup> The recommendation was disregarded.

The lack of biological races does not imply that racism cannot and does not exist. In American society we deal with race as a social construction. American Behavioral scientist J.L. Graves writes that racism is the practice of treating people differently in a society based on their membership in a racial group, however defined.<sup>18</sup> Now that it is commonly understood that race is a construct and not biological, neo-racists use this as an excuse to claim that racism no longer exist in America. There is no such thing as a post-racial America—a term that implies a theoretical environment in which the United States is free from racial preference, discrimination and prejudice. The construction of race is so deeply rooted in the psychological and ethical make up of Americans that most white European Americans are not even aware of their own often implicit racial biases, and surely hate to be called out on them. As Graves perfectly articulated, "race is still the elephant sitting in the living room of all American social/cultural discourse."<sup>19</sup>

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the late 1980s, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw. She is a UCLA professor and scholar on Civil Rights

and constitutional law. An intellectual movement leader, Crenshaw also coined the term intersectionality. In short, the foundation of Critical Race Theory supports the notion that “race and racism are endemic to the American normative order and a pillar of American institutional and community life.”<sup>20</sup> Her studies go on to support how law does not only reflect racialized conflicts but is complicit in furthering racial constructs in America.

Patricia Hill Collins connects CRT to science’s role in racial relations in her 2015 article titled *Science, critical race theory and colour-blindness*. In this article she provides critical analysis on Troy Duster’s 1990 monograph *Backdoor to Eugenics* which questions whether Western science’s abandonment of eugenics was enough to eradicate racism from the field’s center. Duster acknowledges the resilience of racism and how it has continued to play out in science, law, and medicine.<sup>21</sup>

## What is Colorism?

Colorism communicates to American society that dark skin is inferior to other skin complexions. Colorism acts as an agitator within black communities privileging those with lighter skin. It can cause internal as well as external segregation between black people. It is a personal and institutional problem. Lastly it suggests that dark skin is shameful and nothing to aspire to. As described by sociologist Tyler Matthew, *Skin Color Stratification* distinguishes persons by the lightness or darkness of skin tone. “This phenomenon operates because of racism and historical ideologies that favor those with light complexions (whites) over those with dark complexions (people of color).”<sup>22</sup> Matthews explains that color hierarchies both form and cause the negative evaluations of dark complexions. As a nation, America has always depended on a system which uses race or ethnic groupings as economic stepping stones to maintain a lower class. While the associations of skin com-

plexions affect both men and women of African descent, it has been thoroughly suggested that these biases lead to greater harm toward African-American women. Research specifies that skin complexion affects women in the sectors of beauty ideals, partner selection, and social and socioeconomic status.<sup>23</sup>

In *ISIS Papers* (1991), Dr. Cress Welsing shares Color-Confrontation, a theory that explains the psychological response and actions taken by whites or what she calls color-deficient Europeans toward people who possess color-producing capacity, i.e. melanin. It's understood that these white individuals grew envious of the overwhelming majority of people around the world they encountered with varying degrees of melanin. A sense of hostility and aggression from whites formed and was followed by what Dr. Welsing calls a set of defense mechanisms, in an attempt to separate themselves from melanin efficient peoples. The first defense mechanism was repression of their envy and anger. The second was reaction formation, a physiological effort to denounce something desired but wholly unattainable. These mechanisms have been followed by generations of attributing negative connotations to skin color, especially blackness. Therefore, pale is beautiful, pale means purity, and anything with the color whites cannot obtain is inferior. Dr. Cress Wesley argues in her book that this narrative is going to change and that the defense mechanisms will get lost in future generations. I believe it has not been lost. Racism still exists but in a new form. This new form is manifested through contemporary beauty standards, the fetishizing of brown skin, and advertising campaigns. These new forms validate Dr. Welsing's point and act against the forgotten defense mechanisms once used by color-deficient Europeans.

In *Racialized Politics, The Debate About Racism in America*, David O. Sears, et al. defines a new form of racism against Black people present in American society. In one of his propositions Sears states, "the beliefs that discrimination no longer poses a major barrier to the advancement of blacks, that blacks should try harder to make it on their own, that

they are demanding too much, and that they are too often given special treatment by government and other elites.”<sup>24</sup> Such beliefs inspire modern day movements like Black Lives Matter and Black Girls Rock as counter arguments to generations of inferior treatment. The increase in forms of resistance informs our understanding of Black identity in two ways: (1) Black people are still oppressed through new methods, media and terminology; therefore not much has changed since segregation. (2) Many Black people are far more comfortable and have better resources at hand today to counter societal oppression and though we are “equal” in the eyes of the law, the battle will never stop until equality reaches societal norms, not just impacting our way of life, but our state of mind.

One may argue that today being different or yourself is embraced and fashionable. Popular TV shows such as *Chewing Gum* and *Insecure* showcase a new protagonist, a black female that is “real” and “relatable” exposing all her quirky attributes that don’t conform to American beauty standards and expected Black stereotypes. I acknowledge that melanated<sup>25</sup> youth today have far better forms of representation to look up to from *Doc McStuffins*<sup>26</sup> to Disney/Pixar’s *Moana*<sup>27</sup> to *Black Panther*<sup>28</sup>, the world’s 10th highest grossing film of all time. However, even with these uplifting movements and examples which have been widely advertised and supported by melanated communities we find Black individuals stuck or choosing to still believe the narrative that dark skin is inferior to white. What will it take for Blacks to find pride in themselves?

## What is the Impact of Colorism?

Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? To such extent you bleach, to get like the white man. Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to



hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to so much so that you don't want to be around each other? No... Before you come asking Mr. Muhammad does he teach hate, you should ask yourself who taught you to hate being what God made you.

— Malcolm X

In this section I unpack the impact that colorism has made in the context of the United States. Colorism has impacted individuals' psychologically, through various forms of bias found in the media and in the community, and conclusively reflects W.E.B. DuBois's claim toward the Black American's continuous state of double consciousness. I will explore each of these impacts and provide examples as to how they have manifested historically and in modern day.

## Psychological

Colorism has severely invaded the minds of the black community. This concept responsible for internal segregation within the community has shaped our understanding of ourselves and fellow community members. After generations of enslavement and segregation, black communities perpetuate this behavior in their everyday practices.

In the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark designed and conducted a series of experiments known colloquially as "the doll tests" to study the psychological effects of segregation on African-American children. Dr. Clark used four dolls, identical except for color, to test children's racial perceptions.<sup>29</sup> In Kenneth and Mamie Clark's report, *Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children*, eight questions were used during the experiment: (1) Give me a doll you'd like to play with- like best. (2) Give me the doll that is the nice doll. (3) Give me the doll that looks bad. (4) Give me the doll that is a nice color. (5) Give me the doll that looks like a white child. (6) Give me the doll that looks like a colored child. (7) Give me the doll that looks like a Negro child.

(8) Give me the doll that looks like you.<sup>30</sup> Black children identified the black doll as less attractive, bad, and not who they would choose to play with. Although the results of this test when completed in contemporary times are not the same, the results remain quite similar.<sup>31</sup> The results summarize the extent of psychological damage that racism, and subsequently colorism, has imposed on the mind-sets of youth who will grow to pass on the same negative impressions. Worst of all, this is an expression of self-hate and recognition of the black child's internalized, conditioned inferiority. *Journal of Black Psychology* highlights that "Black children have learned to reject their ethnic group as a consequence of pervasive negative stereotypes promoted by the media, teachers, parents, and the broader society."<sup>32</sup>

The results of the Clark Doll tests were used to advocate for the integration of schools in the Brown vs. Board of Education case that ended in 1954. However, after Brown vs. Board of Education the integration of schools did not immediately integrate social aspects of schools such as athletic teams, bands, and academic clubs. In all Black schools the leadership and administration of the school reflected its student body, but in integrated schools Black students became a minority no longer seeing themselves represented in any leadership or administrative roles. No representation leads to misrepresentation. If Black students don't see themselves represented in leadership roles than it becomes harder for them to believe they can aspire to achieve such roles which diminishes upward mobility.

A similar issue is echoed within the film industry. When acting roles are written by a white majority, their perspective causes their racial bias to be reflected in the construction of stereotypes for minority actors. It is only in recent decades that we see examples of Black male and female actors on television and film that are awarded roles that do not perpetuate stereotypical roles such as: criminal, gangster, mammy/care-taker, slave, or vixen.

In a psychology paper titled, *Race-related Stress*, Dr. Speight explains the internalization of racism as a form of race-related stress. Race-related stressors are ways in which simply being a minority or even passing for a particular minority ethnic group can cause added stress to your day-to-day activity. This realization of racism is so deep you don't even know to question it and therefore accept it as normal behavior. This echoes the foundations of the critical race theory that claims racism is normalized behavior in America. People of color have the capacity to take on community stresses, national stresses, as well as generational stress to name a few. For example, the continuous television and social media coverage of hundreds of unarmed Black bodies being murdered by police across the Nation can cause any person of color who identifies with the victims to carry an added stress on their everyday commutes.

Another psychological impact of colorism is low self-esteem and/or self-loathing. Everyone's personality is different and how you may deal with a sense of inferiority will not be the same as someone else. For many, being Black is reason enough to have low self-esteem. In my family I am the darkest and at school there were only so many other Black girls like me, leaving me feeling marginalized and always surrounded. As soon as I was a pre-teen, I cried looking at family portraits because I was the ugly duckling. I grew envious of my siblings' lighter complexions and fairer facial features and bodies. I convinced myself I wasn't beautiful and if I was lucky I might marry a white man or light skin man so that my children may have a better future not being dark like me.

## **Explicit & Implicit Bias**

Harvard University's Project Implicit defines explicit and implicit bias for the base of their research. "An explicit stereotype is the kind that you deliberately think about and report. An implicit stereotype is one that is relatively inaccessible to conscious awareness and/or control."<sup>33</sup>

Project Implicit is a non-profit Harvard led project that studies implicit social cognition — thoughts and feelings outside of conscious awareness and control.<sup>34</sup> This 1998 project has continued to evolve, providing a large variety of implicit bias tests that people can take online. The implicit bias test is based on the speed of the test. There's no right or wrong answers but instead will tell you if you have a preference for one variable over the other. I participated in an implicit bias test titled "Skin Tone" to see if I had an automatic preference toward dark skin or light-skin.<sup>35</sup> My results state that I have a slight automatic preference for dark skinned people over light skinned people. People carry more bias than they would like to admit and I am using my work as a tool to exploit that. Race and skin color discrimination is so normalized in American culture that I do not believe one can walk through the world and not acknowledge either one. Critical race theory supports the normalization of this racism in American culture and these tests acknowledge the unconscious bias people may have.

Unfortunately, many Black people desire to have what white people have because of a constructed bias that what white people have is better or preferred. Historically, Tulsa, Oklahoma had what we now regard as the Black Wall Street. This community of thriving Black businesses came to be out of necessity. The Black people in Tulsa worked for the white owners on one side of town but could not shop there, eat there, nor live there. Therefore, the community made their own pharmacy, shoe makers, seamstresses and more. Unfortunately after Tulsa was burned down to the ground by angry oppressors during a riot, the community never rebuilt the thriving Black Wall Street. The rebuild never happened partly because soon after the ashes settled economic desegregation began allowing Blacks to shop in the previously "white only" stores. Instead of coveting their money to only *buy Black* they shopped at the white stores. Shopping at white stores was an opportunity to exercise a right that was taken away from Blacks. Also, the connotation that anything the white people made and sold was better was well ingrained into the minds of Black people. Richmond, Virginia,

once called “the birthplace of Black capitalism” was a city who also got hurt by integration. *The Atlantic* magazine writer Alexia Campbell reported from an interview, “‘We started to lose a lot of our businesses and support for our businesses,’ says Michael Grant, president of the National Bankers Association, a trade group representing nearly 200 minority and women-owned banks across the United States. ‘That was the toxic side of integration.’” When white banks buy or take over smaller Black community banks the money that once supported Black businesses became harder to obtain or disappeared altogether. Blacks read success as “whiteness” and not “Blackness”.

The strain on Black upward mobility would continue to be echoed in the formation of residential communities and red-lining with a layered context of class involved as well. This inherent belief that upward mobility is only represented in white examples would later allow my own home to be misread. I knew that my family was not rich, yet kids at my birthday parties associated a big house — my house, with a white neighborhood. I was confused because I had two Black neighbors on either side of the house I grew up in, so how could I live in a white neighborhood. I later understood that stereotypically only white neighborhoods could have nice homes and Black neighborhoods had to be near train tracks, contain small homes, and of course, contain crime. Who told us that black people could only reside in poverty? Who taught us that nice homes and neighborhoods only equate to “whiteness”? The government? Mass media?

## **Bias in Media**

I can't even go to the store to buy a comb without remembering I am black and marginalized.

— Black Girl Diary

Young girls' notions of beauty are often formed from the media. If you don't see yourself or if you don't have a voice in your life encouraging your natural hair, body shape, and skin color, then you are left feeling

inadequate and in search of “solutions” to satisfy the white-washed expectations surrounding black women in the movies, TV-commercials, and shopping malls.

As a young black female, I hyper-analyzed any and all black women that crossed my TV screen or a magazine cover. Nearly all of those young and old black ladies had long straight hair and if they *dare* have curls they were loosely tangled and wavy. I grew up looking for my kinky coily hair that I had on my head. I often compared myself to Rudy Huxtable, because all her sisters had what appeared to be “good” hair because it behaved like a white woman’s hair and Rudy was left with her kinky coily hair like mine. Hair like Rudy and I have people loved to call nappy. We break combs, we form bouncy afros, and it doesn’t blow in a light wind. For reasons unbeknownst to me, I was the only female in my family who did not get a relaxer. My mom and two older sisters routinely applied the creamy toxic chemical into their hair, being careful not to burn their scalps. The creamy material was rinsed out and like magic their hair was long and falling down straight and even blowing in the wind. The only way I could earn such an achievement was to hot comb my hair at a high temperature just short of burning level to get my hair straight. In this state, I looked in the mirror stroking my hair in awe. Finally I achieved a level of “whiteness” a level of “passing” to my white classmates. To maintain my straight locks of love, I just had to avoid sweating, rain, and swimming pools.

Artist Endia Beal’s photographic series *Am I what you’re looking for* questions what it means to be a young minority woman in the work place. Her accessory video compilation piece to this work tells the story of multiple Black women in the work place being discriminated against because of their race and gender. Women shared stories about assimilating their style of dress, hair, and even voice to appease the white corporate world. Beal beautifully cuts and trims the interviews of all the women whose testimonies are strikingly similar and collages them into one video piece that unites their voices and stories as one. Having



Figure O2. *Kyandra and Shakiya, Pigment print, 30" X 40", 2016 by Endia Beal.*

worked in a corporate setting before Beal's photographs embrace the diversity in a Black woman against a corporate office backdrop questioning if they can be accepted with their curls and curves into a white dominated office space.

Laundry detergents, soaps, and other cleaning products related cleanliness with whiteness and dirt with blackness. We see evidence of this in early 20th century advertising up until tanning became popular in the 1960s. Tanning lotions along with sun tan lotions marketed to white audiences fetishized an "amazon" or "savage" tan. This trend has cycled into the 21st century, along with more subtle branding and an extra dose of appropriation. Modern temporary (key word) tanning products have the ability of giving fair skinned individuals medium, dark, and very dark tans by simply rubbing the tinted mousse product onto your skin via a bi-racial foam mitt. I call the mitt bi-racial because it is designed and sold with light side (white) and a darker side (black). Just two years ago in 2015, tanning company Emmatan was accused of selling blackface in a bottle. Products such as Emmatan, Minetan, and B.tan all offer variations of this blackface in a bottle and are doing



Figure 03. Tropical Blend advertisement from the 1960s

well with sales. While tanning may seem like a harmless cosmetic decision, it carries implicit racial strife. These products provide users a "chocolate" or "mocha latte" complexion without the subjectification of really being Black. This is the opposite of the narrative of color confrontation theory, in which here we have non-whites aspiring to be darker. The concept of sunless tanning also alludes to the concept of class and tanner skin being equated to having the



leisure time or money to vacation or layout in the sun. However the new “tan” or “dark” complexion achieved can be viewed as an appropriation of Blackness. What is considered “too dark” is subjective to the consumer which is why these products allow the consumer to select the darkness of their tan based on how long they leave the product on their skin. These white consumers don’t want to be pale but also don’t want to be Black, instead “bronzing” becomes the fetishized in-between that is the aspirational tone. This is satirized in my recreation of the tanning product, Mulatto.

## **Bias in Community**

In the black community skin color acceptance is a hurdle once you reach the age of understanding just what your skin color implies to judging eyes. Dark skin people may carry prejudices against light skin people because they are envious of their skin is deeply rooted in the color divisions of the slavery era. House slaves were light skin and brought into the house to serve the plantation owner and his family. Often times these light skin slaves were products of rape. The field slaves were darker in complexion and kept outside to work in the fields. This separation favored the plantation owners by encouraging distrust, envy, and hate between slaves because of the perceived “better” treatment of the house slave. Slave owners used this strategy to divide people, which meant they were less likely to revolt. This separation and color hierarchy still exists subconsciously in the minds of many Black people.

If you’re white, you’re alright. If you’re brown, stick around.  
If you’re black, get back.”

— Anonymous

“Relative to their lighter-skinned counterparts, dark-skinned Blacks have lower levels of education, income, and job status; they are less likely to own homes or to marry; and dark-skinned blacks’ prison

sentences are longer... most Americans prefer lighter to darker skin aesthetically, normatively, and culturally. Film-makers, novelists, advertisers, modeling agencies, matchmaking websites — all demonstrate the power of a fair complexion, along with straight hair and Eurocentric facial features, to appeal to Americans.”<sup>36</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison writes testimonies to the ridicule little dark girls would face because of their skin and the entitled nature any mulatto, bi-racial, child who felt superior because of the whiteness in their DNA. Lead female roles in movies often neglected women of darker shades. Academy award winning Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong’o has used her fame to acknowledge her skin color insecurities growing up with dark skin in comparison to her sister who has a lighter shade and was often called “brown and pretty” by people in their community. “I remember a time when I too felt unbeautiful. I put on the TV and only saw pale skin, I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin,” she said in a powerful speech at the at the 2014 Essence “Black Women in Hollywood” Luncheon. “And my one prayer to God, the miracle worker, was that I would wake up lighter skinned.”<sup>37</sup> Seeing Alek Wek, a dark skinned international model, on TV get praise for her beauty inspired her to rethink her insecurities. Today Lupita hopes her presence on screen will help dark skin girls find validation in their own beauty. In 2019, her children’s book titled, *Tilted Sulwe* will be released and serve to teach skin color acceptance for young readers.

In business and the media, the preference leans toward actors, actresses, and business men with lighter skin. Data from the *National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA)* study on a theory of gendered colorism among African Americans show how skin color affects level of attractiveness. Author Mark E. Hill states, “As predicted, results indicate that skin tone influences the attractiveness ratings assigned to black women in a compelling, monotonic manner. The association is significantly weaker for men. The gender-by-skin-tone interaction is consistent with the hypothesis that African Americans perceive fair skin tone as a particularly feminine characteristic. Findings suggest the pervasive-

ness of Eurocentric standards of beauty among African Americans.”<sup>38</sup> Among African Americans, women described as “very light brown” were determined as most attractive, were as men described as “dark brown” were determined most attractive. As a result, “persons perceived as attractive enjoy numerous social benefits including better job opportunities and higher incomes (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994; Umberson and Hughes 1987).”<sup>39</sup> However studies outside of the Black community alone, determine somewhat of a contradicting result. A 2011 study by sociology professor Pamela Bennett reports “that mixed-race people are socially placed below whites, but ahead of blacks.”<sup>40</sup> Additionally, “a 2006 University of Georgia study showed that employers prefer light-skinned black men to dark-skinned men, regardless of their qualifications.”<sup>41</sup> Books like *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyaasi reference a post-slavery New York City where a young Black woman aspiring to sing on stage from the South was told her dark skin would never sing on a stage. In contrast her husband, who was a light skin Black male could pass for white and would do so to gain friends and work opportunities until his African ancestry was found out. As implied in the African American colloquialism for passing ... to pass is to transgress the social boundary of race, to “cross” or thwart the “line” of racial distinction that has been a basis of racial oppression and exploitation.<sup>42</sup>

## Double Consciousness

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this 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. One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

—W.E.B. Dubois, *Souls of Black Folk* 1929

In my own research and art practice I explore various dichotomies evident in the lives of Black people using terms I repurposed to reference the dichotomies I explore: woke and un-woke, the Proud and the Pretenders, and enough and not enough. Revealing constructions of race, social injustices, and past and present forms of oppression toward Black bodies one may intellectually evolve into a “woke” individual. In my installations I explore how being “woke” can alter one’s perception of themselves and lead to higher self-esteem. However, the concept of being “woke” can also become synonymous with being angry or vigilant.

The Pretenders are what we may call the “un-woke” individual. The Pretender accepts the state of a Black person happy to live in an oppressed state of mind and inferiority. They believe in their inferiority and perhaps even aim to live a life assimilating into “white culture” or attempting to pass in the white community physically or socially. This individual finds happiness and success only when they have what the white world has. Malcolm X described these individuals as the “house niggers we still have running around today.”<sup>43</sup> They are aware of their present situation and choose to stay, they are content living and serving under their white oppressors and couldn’t imagine a better life. In contrast, the Proud are what we may call the “woke” individual. The Proud aim to liberate themselves and others by returning empowerment to the Black population.

The Urban Dictionary defines the slang term “woke” as being aware... knowing what’s going on in the community. However the word symbolizes much more than being aware in the community. The concept of being woke can change in meaning depending on who is using the term, but most often refers to staying conscious of the apparatus of white supremacy, and alertness to injustice to stay safe — resist. In 2016 Splinter News writer, Charles Pulliam-Moore, reflects on a chronological history of the term “woke”. Pulliam-Moore writes, “the idea of being “woke” was a hallmark of socially-minded, black social media, but it’s recently crossed over onto the broader, whiter internet.” The word is

now used more loosely and even used mockingly toward white people who have an overnight change of heart on race like in this example, “You talked to Brad recently? He read some Ta-Nehesi Coates and now he thinks he’s woke.”<sup>44</sup>

I freed a thousand slaves. I could have freed a thousand more if only they knew they were slaves.”

— Anonymous/Unknown

Bi-racial, Los Angeles artist, Genevieve Gaignard, exposes stereotypes of Black and white identities via installation, prop, and photography. She creates self-portraits in curated sets to support the stereotype personality of a white woman and contrasts it with self-portraits that support a stereotype personality to reflect her Blackness. Genevieve explores a dichotomy here that speaks to the concept of passing but also highlights the two varied worlds DuBois describes in the *Souls of Black Folk*. In her case her bi-racial identity creates an identity con-



Figure 04. *Supreme*, 2015  
Chromogenic print  
Genevieve Gaignard [artsy.net](http://artsy.net)



Figure 05. *The Line Up (White)*, 2017  
Chromogenic print  
Genevieve Gaignard [artsy.net](http://artsy.net)

flict that imposes racial expectations on her when engaging in varying racial communities.

Another work that explores internal racial identity is *The Colored Museum*. *The Colored Museum* is a 1980 play by author George C. Wolfe that demonstrates the common stereotypical misconceptions of the African American experience. Wolfe examines the portrayal of African Americans over time through 11 “exhibits” (sketches). Each explores and satires prominent themes and identities of African-American culture. Exhibit #11 in particular named “Hairpiece” inspired my vanity installation, *Looking Glass*. In “Hairpiece” an African American woman tries to decide which wig she should wear to confront her boyfriend she is going to break-up with. One wig is straight and the other is a dense kinky-curly afro. The animated wigs argue their perspectives as to why they should be chosen and the benefits that each of their very different looks can provide. Similar iterations of this scene in the play have been performed with a blonde straight wig and an afro which suggests another dichotomy that implies an identity to mimic a white woman vs. the afro which embraces a Black woman’s natural state.

In my work I recognize the act of Doubling, a term I use to describe the acknowledgment and use of a topic, idea, or object for both of its implicit and explicit meanings/symbolism. Inspired by works that explore these “this or that” or “implicit and explicit” dichotomies, Doubling has allowed me explore the blurring and overlapping of dichotomies evident in Black people which reference DuBois’s claim to our double consciousness. To better understand colorism and its influence on American society, I recognize the implications of doubling by way of tanning, branding, vanity, and the American folklore of double-sided dolls. The engagement I seek from viewers in my own work ultimately helps me and the viewer consider the implicit sense of doubling that is present in society to aid in their understanding of bias, that still exists, and identity construction.

## A Closer Look at Visual Art Influences

In my art practice, I have drawn from and been inspired by various artists who consider the nature and implications of bias and double consciousness in their visual art practice. In some cases, these artists explicitly respond to the notion of colorism, but due to the infancy of the broad use and understanding of the term colorism, most 20th century artists have indirectly made full use of the term. Consequently, colorism in visual art is best understood and visually represented in explorations of bias, Blackness, the Black experience, identity construction, and historical representations of Black people in the media, especially Black women. Colorism has become somewhat of a buzzword in contemporary times and my research on the topic has been rooted in historical accounts, advertising, TV, Film, radio, and an abundance of creative literature. This section will highlight 20th and 21st century works of visual art that have been influential in my thesis work and final exhibition, *AM I ENOUGH*. While the themes addressed by these artists greatly overlap, for the purpose of this section, I have organized each artist under a category in which I feel the art piece or style of the artist has reflected my personal exploration of the topics of colorism, bias, double consciousness, my materiality/aesthetic style, and intervention art installations.

### Colorism

Colorism does not prescribe to any particular historical canon of art however we see its concept represented implicitly in Carrie Mae Weems' 1989-1990 piece *Colored People*. In this work, Weems takes snap shot style portraits of African-American youth and tints the prints with monochromatic dyes turning them blue, magenta, yellow, and other colors. Matched with titles such as *Blue Black Boy* or *Golden Yella Girl*, Weems showcases the vastness of tones encompassed in the word "Black" while clearly recognizing the history of privilege given to lighter complexions vs. dark complexions in the African American community.



*Figure 06. Golden Yella Girl, 1989  
Carrie Mae Weems*

Similar to Weems' work, I seek to honor all skin tones of people of color while strategically elevating those with deeper tones.

More contemporarily, recent graduate student of University of Maine, Eleanor Kipping, created her version of the historical Brown Paper Bag Test by photographing women of color and recording their testimonies on colorism in their life experiences. Kipping's

2018 work was a campus wide multi-site installation of individual photographs, and the audio recordings were made available on her website to hear. To broaden the audience and impact of the work she also centered her work around events for Black History Month in her community to have dialogue on the topic of colorism and other supporting themes. Her work serves as a great example of how art can be used as



*Figure 07. Brown Paper Bag Test, 2018, Eleanor Kipping*



a catalyst to dive into hard conversations within social settings. I situate myself in line with those ideals of Kipping, because of my strong interest in artworks that engage viewers to participate with a call to action and offer an opportunity for dialogue.



Andre Woolery's recent exhibition, *Deeper than Melanin* explicitly speaks to the impact of skin color

Figure 08. *Civil War With All Confederate Flags* (2018), Andre Woolery

discrimination in America and pronounces the role of colorism in that discrimination. His works are large oil canvases which use altered lights to reveal varied messages within the text on the canvas. In one piece titled, *Civil War With All Confederate Flags* it reads: "Dark skin vs. Light skin," and the light alters the read to "Black skin vs. Black skin." Andre's work uses his self-created online platform, *BlckPrism*, to showcase the controversial dichotomies in a digital exhibition format and then uses Vimeo videos to present and promote dialogue on the role of skin color discrimination in or to? American society.

## Bias

Artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Sanford Biggers, and Hank Willis Thomas have also been influential to my practice in regards to racial bias. For me the power of bias is found in provocation and the disruption of "common" images or symbols. Provocative artworks have a unique ability to challenge preconceived notions, stereotypes, and surface implicit and explicit biases within oneself. Kehinde Wiley does this for me in his massive paintings. Wiley reassesses representation by painting Black men and women in regal poses of power that directly reference early masters and traditions in painting where we would normally find white figures. Wiley's Black regal figures force a double read—disrupting tropes of traditional portrait painting while uplifting everyday folk as powerful and heroic.



Figure 09. *Untitled*, 2014, Sanford Biggers

Sanford Biggers' deep, sly, and observant character inspires the ambiguity or layered reads in my work. In a *New Yorker* magazine article by Vinson Cunningham titled, "The Playful and Political Art of Sanford Biggers," I am reminded of the quiet yet powerful artist I had the pleasure of meeting when he visited the University of Michigan as a Stamps Lecture Series speaker in my first year. In the interview, Cunningham writes, "His [Biggers'] desire not to be pinned down appears to spring from a kind of moral impulse: he wants the audience to do its share of the work." In the piece, *Untitled* (2014), a blonde white woman poses a bit flirtatiously for a portrait in a Morehouse T-shirt. Morehouse is a historically Black all male college and Biggers' alma mater. This hyper-provocative image could easily anger, excite, and make plenty others laugh. Biggers' offers no explanation or title to the piece and leaves it to the viewer to make sense of the visual. This relinquish of control I find brave and daring but wise. For me it causes the viewer's bias to be exposed either to themselves or the public if they so choose to share their opinions openly. The image is neither right nor wrong, and in this respect, Biggers' gives the viewer their share of the "work" on their conscience.

When hosting Hank Willis Thomas' visit as a Stamps Lecture Series speaker, we discussed the power in discomfort. As he roamed around my studio he pointed out a few things that made him uncomfortable and how that intrigued his attention. At the time he described my work as wanting to push boundaries but not quite there yet and he encouraged me to go all the way and speak to things that pertain to me specifically. Hank Willis Thomas' framed text piece *Black Imitates White* (2012) speaks to the notion of doubling that I recognize in my own work. The work recognizes the Black and white dichotomy and complicates it by showing explicit statements that read: "Black imitates White" and "White imitates Black". With no punctuation and balanced lettering, the words on the page are left to be read in the viewers tone for the viewer to take what they chose from the work. A similar tactic can be seen in the title of my thesis exhibition, *AM I ENOUGH*, which is neither a question nor a statement. More notably is Hank Willis Thomas' *B@anded* series. One of the featured images in this series is *Branded Head* (2003) which shows a scar-like keloid of a Nike Swoosh on the scalp of a presumed Black man. The *B@anded* series makes relationships between slavery, bondage, and the Atlantic slave trade



Figure 10. *Black Imitates White*, 2012, Hank Williams Thomas

to contemporary sports, alcohol, and credit card advertisements. I situate my work as a conversation about Black representation that uses the language of advertising, where in this body of work by Thomas he creates his own ads, often times with no text or



Figure 11. *In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth)*, 2011, Hank Williams Thomas

by repurposing older ads by removing their text to open up the context in which they may fall in when interpreted by a viewer. In this way, the power of the advertised image holds the weight of the contextual meaning. In another work, *In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth)* (2011), Thomas provides a stage, a giant inflatable speech bubble, in which the viewer is permitted to record and share their hopes, dreams, or fears. Their recorded “truths” are true to them as an individual and inspire me as an artist to relinquish control. In my own practice I sought to find a way to allow viewers to not only record their own feelings reflected from seeing my work but interject themselves becoming co-creators in the process.



Figure 12. *The Skin I'm In*, Laurie Cooper

## Double Consciousness

Laurie Cooper is a painter from Philadelphia known for her rich paintings of African Americans. She has a number of paintings like, *The Skin I'm In*, in which an African American female with a deep brown skin tone has a light skinned mask on her face that appears to be broken and being removed. This painting speaks directly to W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness for the Negro in America. For me Laurie Cooper's paintings are an explicit and literal example

of being Black but succumbing to American society pressures and European beauty standards to oppress one's own Blackness in order to be "successful". The breaking down of these masks in the painting gives a sense of freedom that I desire to give my melaninated viewers in my own work, however I prefer more poetic approaches.

## **My Materiality/Aesthetics**

Often times my new ideas can stem from materials and aesthetics observed in other artists. For the work in my thesis exhibition *AM I ENOUGH*, my materiality, use of collage, and visual aesthetics were influenced by works from Yinka Shonibare, Eva Hesse, Byron Kim, and Angelica Dass.

Yinka Shonibare is a poetic artist who questions the meaning of cultural and national definitions. Combining his British and Nigerian roots he examines the construction of identity and tangled interrelationship between Africa and Europe. His signature use of Batik "African" fabrics calls attention to the adoption of a product that is not even originally African. I make a subtle yet direct reference to this in my piece, *Looking Glass* by choosing to upholster one chair with "authentic" Ghanaian wax print and the other with a Chinese imported variation which I purchased in Ghana and "imported" into the United States. Shonibare is quoted saying, "They [the Batik] prove to have a crossbred cultural background quite of their own. And it's the fallacy of that signification that I like. It's the way I view culture — it's an artificial construct."

From Eva Hesse, I draw from her strong use of materials such as latex and plastics and forms that suggest representations of the body and various psychological states of being. These inspired my exploration of silicone in *The Shades We Wear*. Her pieces are expletory of how a simple material can be transformed to evoke strong bodily sensations the look tangible and feel real.

Byron Kim is a Korean-American painter. His piece, *Synecdoche* (1991), was a modern take on portraiture, mixing paints to match the skin

tones of himself, friends, strangers, and fellow artists. Over time he's added to the 400+ eight by ten rectangles and now since Trump's election he has come to find the piece representative of inclusivity. "The title comes from the figure of speech in which a part stands for a whole, and vice versa." For me, Byron Kim's grid display of the varying skin tones inspired the organization of my soap pieces in the work *Lauder*. Similar to the thoughts of Kim, for *Lauder*, I prioritized inclusivity with a desire to give all people an opportunity to find themselves on the varied scale of 40 flesh toned soaps. Just as Kim's skin tone shapes blend harmoniously on the wall, I wanted to create a work that also showcased the harmony and similarity between united skin tones.

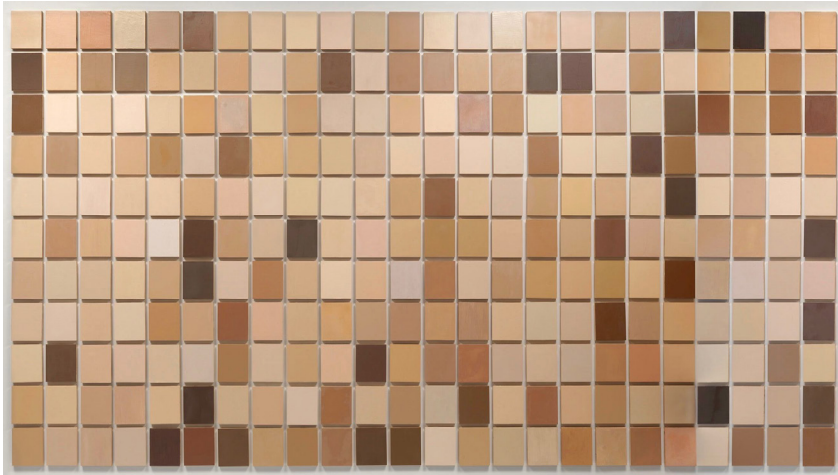


Figure 13. *Synecdoche (detail)*, 1991, Byron Kim

Artist Angelica Dass's project *Humanæ* (2013) takes Byron Kim's *Synecdoche* to a whole new level. Dass tasked herself with discovering what a human rainbow would look like by photographing people all across the world in search of every shade on the planet. Her ongoing portrait series is challenging the breadth of the Pantone directory which is internationally used. Her project prioritizes people as one race,



Figure 14. *Humanæ*, 2013, Angelica Dass

the human race, rather than highlighting our physical differences. It is comforting to connect with other faces in portrait photography, the eye contact acts as an invitation to stare and attempt to understand one another. Dass's portrait project and the ways in which it has been exhibiting has been influential to my work when exploring how to represent the varied shades of people who identify as people of color in my *Do Not Bleach* work. Crossing international borders with her work, Dass has set a precedent for me and encourages me to push my *Do Not Bleach* work across borders. Where Dass looks to unite all people regardless of skin tone, my work aims to elevate a suffering self-esteem of people of color by putting them on a platform and giving them a "call to action" by way of the *Do Not Bleach* shirt and their chosen expressions in my photographs.

## Intervention Installations

I categorize artists who disrupt the status quo with public art statements as intervention artists. Their installations can inspire a call to action and/or speak to art as activism, or protest all while intervening in daily life, bringing a viewer's attention to a new idea or visual. In its somewhat discomfort I find the work of Alexandra Bell, damali ayo, William Pope L., Adrian Piper, and Zenele Muholi revolutionary, breaking boundaries in fearless acts of reveal and honest portrayals of race, social justice, and politics.

It is common knowledge that negative stereotypes for minorities reign in the media especially the news. *Counternarratives*, a series by Alexandra Bell not only highlights demeaning stereotypical racial tropes in the news but also redacts information from *New York Times* newspaper articles so that they may report the heart of the matter especially in her piece on Michael Brown, *A Teenager With Promise* (2017) which started her project. In the Michael Brown piece, she changed the title of the article from "A Teenager Grappling with Problems and Promise" to "A Teenager with Promise." She then printed these articles poster size



Figure 15. *A Teenager With Promise*, 2017, Alexandra Bell



and puts them up in subways and around her Brooklyn community in New York. Bell's efforts are echoed on her Instagram feed and I look up to her self-starter initiative. The benefit of public street art is you begin to collect your own following and the community in which you publicly share your work becomes your gallery in an organic way where other people and the environment all take a toll on the work.

When formulating my satirical piece *Mulatto*, many people brought artist William Pope L. to my attention. However, before Pope L., I was inspired by damila ayo, an African American visual artist and performance artist who prefers her name in all lowercase. Her work was representative of the daring lengths I wanted to be able to go to get a point across but also involve others. One of her most iconic pieces is *How to Rent a Negro* (2003) which was a website and later a book that gave step-by-step instructions and encouragement to a white audience to rent negroes and to Black audience to be rented as a form of income and repayment for slavery. Her reasoning is echoed in other works like *living flag: panhandling for reparations* (2003) where she took to the streets and performed as a beggar accepting reparations for slavery from white people, she even gave receipts and instructed them to turn it into the IRS. She then took the money collected and gave it to various Black people. I look to work like ayo's when I grapple with whether to sell my *Mulatto* tanning product. Her website and later book tour influence the branding and marketing strategies I have been formulating for the future of the *Mulatto* piece post thesis exhibition. Additionally,

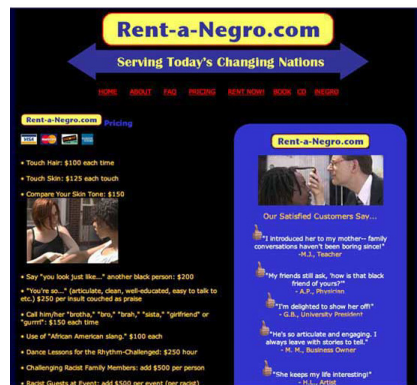


Figure 16. *How to Rent a Negro*, 2003, damila ayo

I have great respect and admiration for how damila ayo speaks to her audience, targeting both a white and Black audience, yet still making it clear who she is prioritizing in her crafted cause.

In a similar tone, William Pope L. raised money through crowdfunding to package Flint, MI water and sell it. In galleries and pop-up shops he presented boxes of the packaged water and sold the bottled water as *The Flint Water Project* (2017).

The idea of paying for water you can't drink, and paying for water you don't even know is legitimately from Flint is hilarious but causes a tension. It brings attention to the very real ongoing Flint, MI water crisis and puts the dangerous water in the homes of people who buy it. What



Figure 17. *The Flint Water Project*, 2017, Pope L.

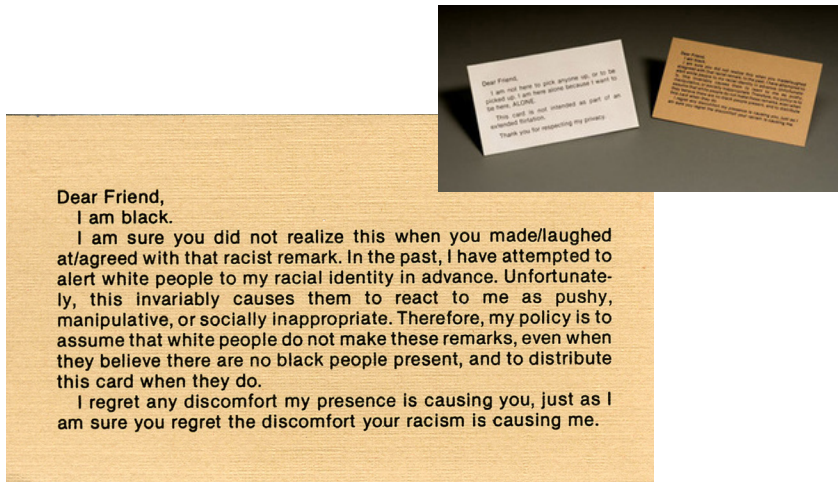
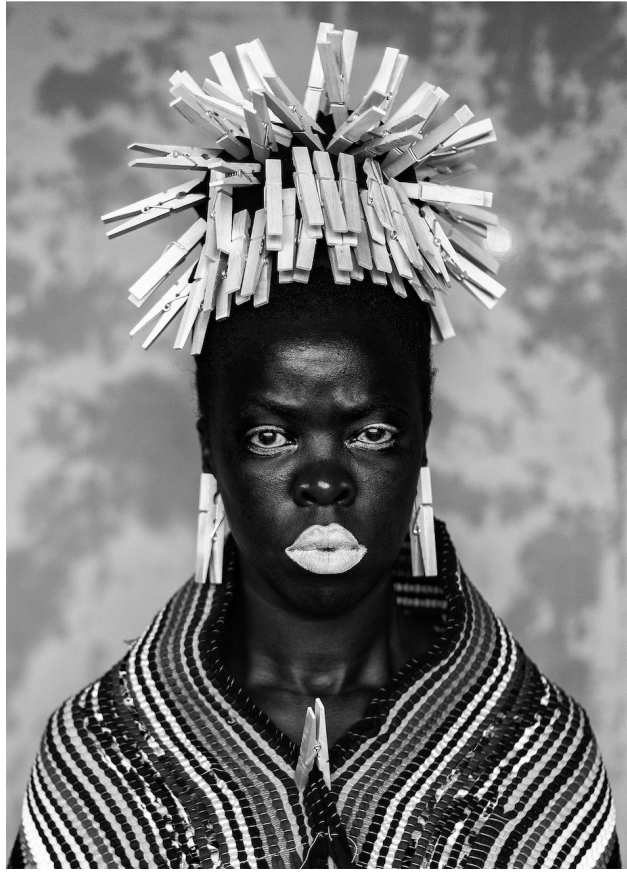


Figure 18. *Calling Card*, 1986–1990, Adrian Piper

if I open it, what if I drink it? The what-ifs are endless and create a conversation even if just to oneself. For the thesis exhibition, Pope L.’s work influenced me to create a tempting environment in which people could “test” out the *Mulatto Tanning Lotion* in the gallery space. Like Pope L., I aimed to have an installation that used the power of advertising and store display aesthetics to allow my bottles to “pass” as just another tanning lotion. With humor and candor both artists, damila ayo and Pope L. put their participants in awkward scenarios that challenges them to participate or not.

Adrian Piper, an African-American artist who easily passes for white, has dedicated a generous portion of her work to racial identity and the concept of passing. In a long-term multi-site project, *Calling Card* (1986-1990), Piper handed cards to people who said something racist in front of her. The card lets the person know that she is African-American and that the person probably did not realize due to her fair complexion. Publicly and consistently bringing attention to her racial identity is a reminder of the varied characteristics any person of color can have. Anyone who received her card could have easily equated it



*Figure 19. Somnyama Ngonyama, 2017, Zenele Muzi*

to being called out or a slap on the wrist. Just as the calling card was her identity badge if you will, my *Do Not Bleach* shirt becomes an announcement and signifier for people of color when they wear the shirt, especially for those who don't subscribe to minority stereotypes.

Zenele Muholi is a South African photographer and filmmaker that calls herself a "visual activist." In her most recent work, *Somnyama Ngonyama* (2017) translated to "Hail, the Dark Lioness" she creates 60 plus self-portraits which masterfully manipulate the language of contemporary fashion photography, classical painting, and European beauty tropes by implementing ethnic objects that perpetuate stereotypes in an effort to reclaim them as her own. The concept of Blackness and what is "Black" is far too complex and diverse to hold one definition, and by resisting a familiar definition she pushes the boundary to craft intimate and highly contextual self-portraits that are layered with symbols related to Black identity, while sometimes exaggerating her "African-features." In a similar way, I attempt to include a variety of contextual objects in the *Looking Glass* work in an effort to showcase varied symbols of a Black woman's identity that may be discovered within the vanity installation. In comparison, my work takes the symbols in another direction with a tangible experience in which viewers can inject themselves in and leave their mark with a journal entry.

I'm reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being black; it is my skin, and the experience of being black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.

— Zanele Muholi

# Notes for Part One

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- 20 Solomos, John, and Patricia Hill Collins. *The Sage handbook of race and ethnic studies*. SAGE Publications, pp. 275, 2010.
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- 24 Sears, David O., Jim Sidanius, and Lawrence Bobo, eds. *Racialized politics: The debate about racism in America*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- 25 Melanated—Individuals who are melanin efficient in skin color.
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Then the test formally begins noting your answers based on speed alone and makes you complete each section twice. The first section puts dark skin and bad together as one choice—"E" and light skin and good together as the only other choice—"I". In the following sections these key options are reversed, dark skin is "I" and now light skin is "E". Also now dark skin and good is together and light skin and bad are together. The test ends with a 6 question questionnaire on how warm or cold you feel toward dark skin or light skin, as well as questions on your preference and how you identify within your own racial group.

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**PART TWO:  
METHODOLOGY &  
CREATIVE WORKS**



## Overview

My methodologies are rooted in cultural practices and observational research. I record the things I encounter through photographs, video and audio recordings, and hand-written notes. My observations lead to the creation of prototypes. I put my prototypes into action by seeking feedback and observing how others interact with the pieces. Observations from my early iterations lead to further iterations; through this

back and forth approach the work evolves. Audience interaction with the work generates for me further investigation.

I often approach new work inquiring how it can be engaged with to determine which medium to work with. I take note especially of the non-verbal language shared by people of color which I find to be both fascinating and powerful. I sit and wonder how I can harness that non-verbal language in my work, affirming our melanated experiences as real and worth sharing. The iterations and imbedded dialogue around my work has created for me a new notion of Doubling in my work; where materiality or context present a “this” or “that” scenario or evoke an inherent duality. I have found Doubling to be a major theme not only in my making but also a foundation in my conceptual inquiry.

In this section, I walk through each of my created works in chronological order. Within each creative work, I provide insight on my methodologies and end in a description of the final work that was present in my thesis exhibition titled, *AM I ENOUGH*.



## Revolution

*My best friend in High School was a tall beautiful  
light skin Jamaican girl.*

*I wanted her skin, but I came to learn she wanted mine.*

*[ Teenage Identity Crisis]*

*— Black Girl Diary*

Topsy-turvy dolls were introduced to me in Savannah, GA. Because of those dolls I watched *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to better understand where it got its name. When I decided to make my own topsy-turvy doll I reflected on films of the early 1900s which featured blackface on white actors to depict aggressive, unintellectual, and often times androgynous Black people as instruments of propaganda.

I wanted to make a black and white doll and I thought about how it would be understood outside of America. Here in the United States our largest racial conflict is Black vs. white. However, in places like Jamaica where the majority population is overwhelmingly Black, their bias and discrimination is better described as a dark skin vs. light skin. That's how I knew I needed three different skin tones when choosing the fabric for the dolls. The cotton fabric represents these dichotomies, as well as more subtly presents how dark skin vs light skin discrimination only exists because of its source argument of Black vs. White. This decision would later start a trend in the works to follow, to use skin tonalities as a method of showcasing the complicit nature of skin color discrimination from both black and white communities, as well as the mixed tonalities that they consequently create through history.

Even though class and status is tied into skin color perceptions for this work I focused on skin color perceptions alone. I created double-sided dolls as young girls where both her heads were more alike than different. The first major decision I made was to create five dolls. I made this decision based on my lived experiences of meeting melanated people from different regions during my international travels. Having a series of dolls allowed me to point out the global nature of colorism. Each doll could relate to any person who had the opportunity to experience the work. It was important for me to speak to multiple global audiences and pay respect to the black communities in countries outside of the United States.

Topsy-Turvy dolls made in the early 1900s often showed the black side of the doll deteriorated. She had no lipstick, no blush, no eyelashes,

and certainly no smile compared to her “dolled-up” white counterpart. As previously mentioned, beauty standards in America were formed by and for white audiences which led Black audiences to be perceived as inferior. Imagine the psychological impact of only a few black dolls that were not as beautiful as the white dolls. This would also lead to feeling inferior, just as the school children who participated in the 1940 doll test identified the Black doll as bad and the white doll as good. These foolish standards led me to design gowns for each doll that would be reminiscent of my brief stint in the beauty pageant world.

The materials for the doll were based on the fabric of their era. Topsy-Turvy dolls originate from the antebellum period when cotton was the most accessible fabric and therefore had limited color options. This is why the white doll was paper white which would reflect what dolls looked like at the time. In reference to nationalities of each doll, I was concerned with authenticity because I did not want to feed into stereotypes of any particular region.

I conducted ethnographic research, conscious of staying authentic I referenced people of that culture. I brought Indian, Latin, and Japanese women into my studio and learned from their childhood stories. I asked questions like: Did you have a ceremonial or special occasion dress? What did your hair look like at the age of six? What is fashionable for children in that country? Are there any symbolic colors your parents would dress you in? In Jamaica, I knew firsthand from my parents, that for special occasions young girls would love to dress up in long gowns with ruffles if they could afford the material to make them. I learned in India, the hair you are born with is considered impure and shaved off at a young age, so for the age of my doll, she must have a short hair style to represent her recent new growth of hair.

I worked with a local doll maker<sup>45</sup> and collector to craft the bodies of the dolls. With her help, I learned about doll eye shapes, painted vs. embroidery, and even the symbolism and history of a doll’s nostrils and how they have moved further away from the eyes through the decades.



Figure 20. *Revolution* (2016).

I took on the task of making each gown for my doll, adapting the patterns to fit her body, and selecting the color materials that would best suit her cotton skin. For the hair, I shopped for wool and yarn, and other polyester blends and taught myself how to make wigs referencing photographs I took of black hairstyles and watching YouTube videos.

I chose to display the dolls as a manual spinning doll display to break away from our Behavioristic<sup>46</sup> norms in gallery settings as well as to give the viewer some authority. I presented them as double-headed dolls, on a wall, and it was up to viewers to “play” or watch others play. The idea of having to make a choice encourages a viewer to look at their options and I was interested to see how viewers would behave. How would I inform the viewer that this work was interactive and how would this interaction be interpreted?





The title of the work, *Revolution*, was inspired by the dual purpose the term serves. The word revolution is defined as a forcible overthrow of a government or social order in favor of a new system, and/or instance of revolving. This duality helped encourage engagement with the work as well as pointing to it as a catalyst for resistance.

The first iteration of the dolls was intended to showcase them attached to a wheel-like piece of plywood with a handle that visitors could use to rotate. When the wheels did not work out and for the sake of time, I drilled a screw through the elastic belt of the doll into the wall. All five dolls were shown in this iteration in a line, and the start of the line was marked by a written nursery rhyme on a traditional card placard. I also set up a digital camera and recorded people interacting with the dolls.

**Revolution** by *Stephanie Brown*

Turn me up and turn me back, first I'm white and  
then I'm black

What is black?

For a matter of fact we're shades of brown all  
around.

Stand me tall to face them all or hide me down like  
they do now

From sea to sea my brown is black; no matter where  
I lay my hat.

I am no more, I am no less

Stolen potential like the rest.

Just as beautiful

Just as bold

Turn me round to see what shows

My writing practice has always allowed me to suggest direction and thought about my creative work. My writing often fills in blanks I feel are best served in creative writing to break up the visual and encourage more digestible concepts. The poem written for *Revolution* was inspired by children's nursery rhymes to point to the playful nature of the work as well as the original purpose the doll served as a child's toy.

When piecing together my final exhibition, I understood the strength of exhibiting five of my international dolls together, but I had to ask whether they would all be needed in this iteration of my work and how I could I situate myself in the context of the show. I ultimately chose



Figure 21. *Revolution Thesis Edition (Jamaican Doll – Victoria Black)*, 2018

to use only one doll, the Caribbean doll from Jamaica, named Victoria Black because she mirrored my identity. For an exhibition crafted to ignite conversation about not only colorism but also identity construction, it became important for me to insert myself, and this doll became my first example of my self-inclusion.

In the *AM I ENOUGH* exhibition the 36-inch Jamaican doll is seen mounted to a white wall with Lazy Susan hardware and a hidden cop-

per belt under her dress. The nursery rhyme written for the work is displayed arched above and below the doll in brown-colored vinyl. These arches of text form a circle around the doll that is read in two different directions, reiterating the words “turn me” in the nursery rhyme to suggest to viewers that the doll can rotate when engaged with. The use of the text in the shape of the circle also pairs well with the title of the work *Revolution* which also references the silhouette of my first iteration of a wheel. Viewers are permitted to manually rotate the doll from the waist turning her left and right, deciding how to leave her for the next passer-by.



Figure 22. Masimba Hwati rotates doll at AM I ENOUGH exhibition opening.

Without the other dolls next to her, viewers have no contextual information about how to assign her a racial category. This poses a problem to the viewer who may assume that she is white on one side and Black on the other, when this Jamaican doll in fact was intended to represent a dark-skin and light-skin brown comparison and not Black and white. Whether the viewer reads the dichotomy as black/white or light/dark, the doll still suggests skin color bias. Depending on the dolls bodily position, viewers engage with her differently. If she is found horizontal, revealing both sides, viewers are less likely to rotate her yet pause as if trying to comprehend her mechanics. If she is found vertical, viewers often peek under her skirt by lifting it with a delicate hand or ducking to peer under her. The hair that dangles from beneath the dress when in this position can induce a curious, unsettling sensation that provokes one to participate or not.

The engagement with the doll puts the viewer in a situation of a false dichotomy. *Revolution* leaves the responsibility on the viewer as to whether they will rotate her and “choose” who goes on top, as if there are only two options. The more difficult discovery is that the doll can be settled in a horizontal fashion, equating the dolls, revealing both of their faces. However, did observing it in a horizontal state tell a viewer that this was a third option, or did the viewer come to that conclusion on their own from the vertical presentation?

Whether a viewer chooses to engage or not, to turn the doll one way or another, their behavior reflects a conscious choice they had to make the moment they encountered the work. And any engagement made with the doll, especially in a public space, in a short or long period of time, makes explicit the implicit considerations that churned in their minds the moment they saw *Revolution*.



## The Shades We Wear

*...we're done watching and waiting while this invention called whiteness uses and abuses us, burying black people out of sight and out of mind while extracting our culture, our dollars, our entertainment like oil — black gold, ghettoizing and demeaning our creations then stealing them, gentrifying our genius and then trying us on like costumes before discarding our bodies like rinds of strange fruit.*

— Jesse Williams, BET Humanitarian Award Speech

Missing the award show the night before, I woke up to notifications about Jesse Williams's incredible speech all over my Facebook timeline. I went to YouTube, easily found the video clip of his speech and was captivated by his words. The last few lines of his speech sparked a montage of events, collaged and strung together in my mind. I thought of lynching, bodies hanging from trees—strange fruit; Nina Simone's documentary fresh in my mind. The recent headlines of college students "dressing up Black" for Halloween, appropriating Blackness as voluntary and fetishized. I thought of Code switching within the Black community and how that implicated my construction of identity. I thought about how black bodies are being represented in media, taking one step forward and then two back. I wondered what it would look like if I could go into a closet and pick out a new skin for a day or event or job interview.

Aspirations of living and existing in a skin different than the one you were born with is not a foreign idea, and far too familiar for any person of color. But people of color are not the only ones dreaming of skin color changes. When developing the work, *The Shades We Wear*, Jesse Williams' speech opened a new dialogue in my brain, one that wanted to explore the mental choices we attempt to make for supposed happiness, attention/popularity, or even safety. When I was a child I could not attain white skin so I tried to change other things about me instead like my hair or clothes. The first time I showed the project to my psychology class, Psychology of the Black Experience, they talked about skin color as safety and protection. After all the terrifying reports of police brutality on unarmed black men and women, I could resonate with that interpretation of the work. I even have a speech prepared in the event that I am pulled over and over-policed because of the color of my skin, in hopes that I can make it out alive. I too would want to magically switch skins.

Having lived the experiences of code switching and desiring other skins, I used my own body to create a silicone mold which I would cast to make my favorite clothing item—jumpsuits—out of skin like material.

I hired a professional to mix the silicone and direct the mold making of my body. The process was nearly six hours long, standing in place while a high grade blue silicone was smeared on top of my naked skin by a team of three women. The silicone product used, Dragon Skin FX Pro, was a high enough grade that it captured every pore, bump, wrinkle,



*Figure 23. Artist Leslie Rodgers begins to cut away silicone mold off Stephanie Brown's body.*



and hair follicle on my body. The process became performative because I enacted the discomfort of being hyper aware of my skin. After I was fully covered in blue silicone that was dry to the touch, a white bandage cast was applied to my body to support the mold. Plaster piece by plaster piece, my body was being covered by a bright white covering that weighed me down as quickly as it dried, making this artificial skin hot and heavy. Fully covered, I could feel the steam trying to escape from the only openings at my neck, ankles, and wrists. I had to endure the temperature and pressure of this white cast for several minutes until it dried. Next it was pulled away from my body. This discomfort would later come to symbolize the same discomfort I try to put forth to my viewers in my work. Soon after, I directed one of my team members to cut the silicone off my body in direct reference to garment seams — around the shoulder, inside of my legs, and down the side of the body. These cuts were essential so that when the mold was casted the pieces would stitch together like a jumpsuit.

The title of the work, *The Shades We Wear*, came from the title of a poem I wrote when reflecting on the procedures I endured in creating this work. The poem (next page) reflects on a time when I wished I was white and how I transitioned from that desire. In the first iteration of the work at the First Year Cohort MFA Exhibition, this poem accompanied this piece on a giveaway postcard only.

Casting the mold was a two-day process. Hand sewing one suit took eight hours from start to finish. Each suit weighs about 10 lbs. When finishing the first iteration of these suits, I had two completed and created care tags sewn on the back neck of the suit. The completed suits hung from a wooden hanger presents an imagined desire as realistic as if it were attainable. The suits were placed in a custom constructed Birch wardrobe, with an internal light source illuminating the work.

The tags read: 99.9 percent silicone and .01 percent pigment to reflect the fact that a humans' genetic makeup is 99.9 percent the same.

## **Transcendental Shame**

I used to wish I was white.

I'm ashamed I rejected myself  
I'm ashamed I thought I was right.  
I'm ashamed I thought I could pass  
I am a shame.

Skin bleaching causes cancer.  
Cutting myself heals black.  
I didn't want those blue eyes.  
I didn't want that pale skin.  
I wanted something I could not even find.

I used to wish my hair could fall flat.

I'm ashamed I ran from the rain.  
I'm ashamed I burned my hair straight.  
I'm ashamed I wasn't enough  
I'm ashamed I didn't like me.

One day my puff didn't puff.

I had finally had enough  
I loved the rain and wanted to play and to do so I sacrificed  
myself  
Drenched every curl on my head  
Saturated the life back into them.  
Resurrected from the hands of death  
My crown floats in the wind  
Has the strength of silk  
Smells like the greatest Egyptian perfume you could have  
dreamed up yourself  
My hair is my pride

Samson I feel you brother  
Short, medium, or long; I rock them all with no help of  
scissors  
Volume is the greatest gift and shrinkage is my friend.  
You should be mesmerized  
I'm stunned myself.



Figure 26. *The Shades We Wear* (2017–2018)

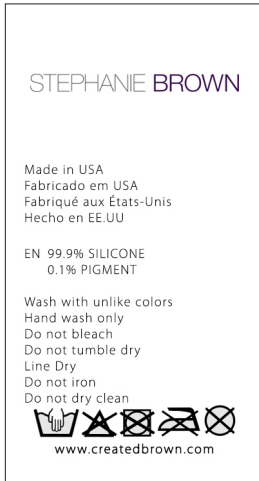



Figure 25. Garment tags sewn into the silicone suits in *The Shades We Wear* (2017–2018)

Only 0.01 percent makes up our phenotypic features, yet that very small ratio is used to divide us. The tag also shows laundry care symbols that I picked out based on how I want people to care for their skin. In a second iteration of the work, I showcased the two suits in the wardrobe along with regular garments from my own closet in a one woman show at The Trotter House in Ann Arbor, MI. Here the wardrobe was used as a visual to begin a roundtable discussion about people's first realizations that their skin color was problematic. The exploration of the laundry symbols and the discussion from the Trotter House roundtable would ultimately lead me to my next works in a series called *Launder*.

In the final exhibition, the wardrobe is seen to the right of the exhibition show title, *AM I ENOUGH*. The wardrobe stands alone at 6.5 feet tall. Inside warm LED lights illuminate four pigmented silicone skins, each carrying a different skin tone. Aesthetically, their presence in the wardrobe can be read as garment and yet appear to be skin as well. This dual reading may cause viewers to question what they see before them. The silicone skins open up the conversation of the works, *Looking Glass* and *Black Girl Diary*, which are adjacent to it. *The Shades We Wear*, acts as an access point to interpreting the scope of the entire exhibition by presenting a visual duality that can be found in the other works. I decided not to use buttons or zippers because the suits are not to be performed in nor worn in a literal sense because this is not an achievable choice, just like how I couldn't become white. These skins represent the desire to change rather than the ability to achieve transformation. Psychologically you can believe you are achieving this by "passing" but that doesn't mean that you are.



Spread affirmation  
with your chest.  
Encourage acceptance and  
embrace discourse from  
the blades on your back.  
Enjoy your melanin for what it is  
and don't you ever second guess it.

Stay Brown.

XOXO,  
CREATED BROWN

[www.createdbrown.com](http://www.createdbrown.com)

## Do Not Bleach

I found laundry symbols to be a subtle yet widely familiar visually. I intended to eventually work with all laundry care symbols but after my recent trip to Ghana where skin bleaching is a health concern, I knew that I would begin with the “Do Not Bleach” symbol. Coincidentally, while in Ghana a news article came out that officially banned the dangerous bleaching agent from being sold in the country. However, it will take several years to get them off the shelves of every store and outdoor market stand; additionally, there was no telling how long it will

take for the psychological support of lighter skin to fade. For this reason, I decided to use the “Do Not Bleach” symbol to first make shirts. The shirts had potential to be easily shared, distributed, and displayed. Advertising on t-shirts is equal to walking billboards. Those who wear the shirt carry the symbol with them on their chest and consequently advocate for the symbol. I wanted people to advocate for their melanin by wearing the shirt and in turn take a step toward resisting the inferiority of brown skin. In order to accomplish this, I marketed the item for use by those who identify as a person of color. Later in a critique, I would experiment by putting the shirt on my white advisor and one on my Black advisor, then get feedback on what it meant to see a non-person of color in the shirt. This experiment reiterated my original thought that these shirts were to be worn by people of color for the full impact I desired. When a non-person of color wears the shirt, they just become a “fan” or “movement supporter” similar to the effects of a White person wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt. This critique also solidifies my choice of having the text, “Do Not Bleach” screen printed across the back of shirt. This use of the front and back reinforces of my theme of doubling.

The process for the T-shirts needed to incorporate the conceptual concept behind the work. After an unsatisfactory take at screen printing with solid black ink on a white T-shirt, I decided to try again using a black shirt. I convinced myself that a black t-shirt would be a subtle nod to my work supporting Black people and all that is Black culture related. As the amazing Issa Rae said, “I’m rooting for everyone Black!” When I went to my lead advisor, she simply asked what would happen if I used bleach? This question took me to my Fibers professor Sherri who taught me everything I needed to know about discharge paste. I learned discharge Paste is a bleaching agent that is safe for fabrics, unlike its cheaper distant relative Clorox. Discharge Paste has a gel like consistency and when pushed through the screen appears to be clear against the black T-shirt. Next, I took the shirt over to an ironing board and began ironing over the semi-dry discharge paste. The heat

activates the chemical which begins to release the pigment from the shirt resulting in a warm sepia tone. In my early renditions of the shirt, the ironing step left a variety of textures and tones within the Do Not Bleach symbol which was caused by my hand lingering with the iron in some places more than others.

Now that I had my shirts, I used my artistic roots of photography and set a goal to photograph 50 different people wearing the shirts. In order to accomplish this I brought my shirts with me home to Florida and to New York for winter break. I even brought my shirts with me to Los Angeles and presented them at the College Arts Association's ArtXchange event. I set up shop in classrooms, homes, front yards, backyards, city centers, and even in a gallery telling any person of color that would stop about my T-shirt project and asking if they would pose for a photo. Those who did stop, put on shirts and stared into my camera unsure what to do with their faces. I asked people for a face that reflected how they feel about their skin.

For the final display of the shirts, I wanted to co-opt a classic department store aesthetic. I took note of Briarwood Mall displays and shopped official store fixtures from mass retail store providers. I decided on a folded shirt display, similar to that of Forever21. Next, I created a collage of all the photos of my T-shirt participants as an advertising wall of photos similar to a coming soon store advertising ad in the mall. The top of my T-shirt display would need to have mannequins. I opted for a male and female mannequin to ensure that my shirts marketed to both sexes. Echoing my claims of poor representation in the marketing world, shopping for "ethnic" mannequins resulted in literal black mannequins or dusty dark brown mannequins with European facial features. To avoid these irresponsible options, I chose mannequins with no heads that were a classic Caucasian skin tone and spray painted them — the female a medium brown like myself, and the male a latte brown in honor of my fiancé.



Figure 27. Close up of 3-tier display for Do Not Bleach (2017)

In the exhibition, viewers may encounter the *Do Not Bleach* shirt display first from outside through the window where the 3-tier display is visible. The female mannequin bust faces out toward the window with the symbol and the male mannequin bust showcases the back of the shirt that says “Do Not Bleach” which brings context to the shirt’s



front symbol and purpose. Inside, the shirts are neatly folded in rows of three on the shelf. Breaking typical garment display rules, I stack the shirts largest to smallest — from top tier to bottom tier — to empower those who wear larger shirt sizes. On the highest level in-between the mannequin busts is a chrome sign that lists: SALE \$25, and on opening night of the exhibition people were able to purchase a T-shirt.

To the right of display, is a nearly 10 feet by 9 feet high wall of photographs. The scale of the photographs varies just as the genders, ages, ethnic groups, and skin tones vary within the photographs. The quantity of the images in turn become a part of the content communicating the variety of melanin in the world, and the amount of people willing to advocate this message of “Do Not Bleach.” Interrupting the flow of photographs is a type of step-and-repeat backdrop created by found form cookie-cutter shapes in three different shades of brown arranged in an orderly fashion. These shapes lend to the work by contrasting with the diversity in the photographs. The shapes symbolize a presumed cookie-cutter shape in which people try to put people of color.



Figure 28. *Do Not Bleach Collage Wall / Step-and-Repeat (2018)*



Figure 29. Close up of *Do Not Bleach* (2017). T-shirts available to engage with on Collage Wall / *Step-and-Repeat*.

On the left-hand side of this photography collage, five *Do Not Bleach* shirts hang on a hook. Next to the cookie-cutter step-and-repeat, there are instructions to “Try on a shirt and take a selfie.” Willing participants engaged with this work by trying on a shirt from the hook and taking selfies or they had their photo taken by a partner against the cookie-cutter wall. This provided an opportunity for viewers to participate by sharing their selfies on social media or even with friends as a way of continuing the conversation with others. All together this display became one of the most moving pieces in the entire exhibition, pulling viewers to its space because of its scale and the opportunity to connect with human faces. The work holds a grand presence.



Launder

*Skin is, skin, is  
Skin black, my skin is black  
My, black, my skin is yellow  
Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga  
Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga  
Still nigga, still nigga*

— Jay-Z, *The Story of O.J.* (2017)

The problematic use of Blackface in the creation of minstrel entertainment shows led to imitations and re-use of the iconic imagery in the world of advertising in America.<sup>47</sup> From the late 1800s and well into the 1900s the dominant use of minstrel characters in commercial media speaks to the normalized perception of African Americans in America. These ads fueled the formation of the next body of work I made, *Launder*.

Continuing the use of subverting laundry care symbols, I settled my attention on the “delicate wash” symbol. This symbol is comprised of a washing machine icon and two straight lines beneath it for emphasis. In silhouette, the symbol immediately read to me as a crown. That easily read symbol of royalty was an opportunity to resist the disturbing soap ads that belittled black bodies as un-intelligent, dirty, and only useful for labor. When dealing with troubling imagery, such as these soap and washing detergent ads, my hardest question I ask myself is whether I should reference the problematic ads directly and reiterate the inappropriate behavior or if I choose to redirect the conversation. Even though redirecting the conversation is the uplifting option, it pro-



Figure 30. *Launder* (2017)

posed another challenge for me: how do I redirect and simultaneously bring about dialogue about the painful, racialized history of soap advertisements and its influence on America's perception of Black bodies?

Unfortunately, I had contemporary answers to my major questions readily available. In 2016, a Chinese laundry detergent company put out an offsetting commercial showing a fair Chinese woman washing a Black male in the washing machine with their product and at the end of the cycle he was revealed to be have become a fair skin Chinese man.<sup>48</sup> Just a year later, Dove would be added to the list with the poor, ill-considered use of a Black female actress depicted in their ad taking off her shirt to reveal a white body.<sup>49</sup>

In these ads, skin color, Blackness in particular, was presented as dirty and something that could be cleansed and should be regarded as shameful. Looking up the word laundry led me to its root word launder. Launder is defined as to wash, or wash and iron, (clothes or linens) or alter (information) to make it appear more acceptable. I decided to make soap that would incorporate the Delicate wash symbol.

Like a breath of fresh air, celebrity, entrepreneur, and philanthropist Rihanna from Barbados would revolutionize the makeup industry by launching her Fenty Beauty line in the same season as the Olay ad and my formalization of Launder. Her makeup line became a contextual stepping stone for the details found in the work. I choose to work with a family run soap business in Texas that I was already familiar with as a resource for my project. Their shop, The Humble Life<sup>50</sup>, makes everything by hand and with raw natural materials. I commissioned the husband and wife team to make forty soaps. Each color referenced the forty shades of foundation available under the Fenty Beauty line. Rihanna's line of products became the first to offer such complex variations for people of color. When stores sold out of her products in the deepest tones within 24 hours of its release, it sent shock waves throughout the makeup industry that people with deeper skin tones

not only buy makeup but are hungry for a product that realistically represents them.

While the soaps were still soft, they were embossed with a custom delicate wash symbol soap stamp that I had made and mailed to my soap makers. The journey from Texas to Ann Arbor, Michigan would have their own effect on the soaps by rubbing against one another in the warm box while in transit giving them an additional textual character of their own. Like Black bodies, no one is exactly the same. After unboxing the soaps, I arranged them in order of deep to light tones, attached mounting hardware to their backs and numbered them. Each delicate wash symbol was hand painted with a metallic gold acrylic paint to contrast from the soap body and shine.

Just as Rihanna's Fenty Beauty Line advertised the vast shades of their users, I arranged my shades through the soaps at eye-level height of four rows by ten columns in the final exhibition on a ten foot wall. All forty, three-inch diameter soaps spoke to a compact foundation palette which harmoniously presented itself as one body on the wall. In the exhibition this display provoked viewers to verify the three-inch diameter disks as soap by putting their nose to one or more as if to authenticate their soapy-ness. Instead of dividing Black and white, dark and light, the display of soaps unify them with a rigid grid like pattern that flow from deep to light. Rihanna's use of the term deep instead of dark when describing the shades of foundation is essential to my work as well as Rihanna's branding for her makeup. Shoppers seek their shade which holds a numerical value on a scale from "Deep to Light." Using the word "deep" is an important step to resisting the negative way the work "dark" can be perceived.

On opening night, I observed two young Black women "reading" each soap by its equivalent numerical value from Fenty Beauty line. After identify four or more, one of them said, "Look this one is my number, my shade, and this one over here is you I bet." With self-comparison



Figure 31. Visitor smells soaps from *Lauder* (2016)



Figure 32. Visitors discover which soap visually matches their skin tone.

and reflective representation, the work offers an opportunity for shared authority and ownership. For a person of color to see yourself in something in many ways grants you a type of unspoken permission to take ownership over the object and adopt it as your own. For me that moment of identifying yourself among the palette and finding that you are browner or perhaps warmer than you thought gives new meaning to melanin and our perceptions of brown skin and even fairer skin tones. No one is actually paper white, and finding yourself on the scale may be a subtle way of acknowledging the melanin in us all.



A close-up photograph of two hands, one lighter-skinned and one darker-skinned, shaking in a firm grip. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with the fingers interlocked. The background is a blurred white shirt. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the firmness of the handshake.

## MULATTO: Fast Tanning Lotion

*I realized my envy and insecurity was reflecting my environment: school, church, media, everything I absorbed directly and indirectly subconsciously taught me to hate myself.*

*—Black Girl Diary: An Auto Ethnography*



Figure 33. *The Coppertone Girl* (1950), The Coppertone Corporation, Miami FL

Just as Dr. Cress Welsing predicted, future generations of melanin deficient people (aka white people) would discard the preference of pale pasty beauty and return to their envy and desire for browner skin. In the 1950s, advertisements such as the one above from Coppertone began this conversation. Beauty ads targeted to white audiences would first push for sun tanning lotions that prevented sunburn. However today, there is a new category of sun tanning products — sunless tanning products. These pigmented lotions boast varied shades of brown that can be achieved in just an hour with none of the associated discrimination that comes with the skin color.

After shopping for these products online and in beauty supply stores, I decided to intervene in this industry by creating my own variation of these sunless tanning products. I compared bottle designs and created my own version that could pass on a shelf next to other sunless tanning products. I wanted to expose sunless tanning products as a

contemporary form of blackface. In order to achieve this, I used satire to craft the product description, directions, top tips, and list of ingredients to critique the problems with these products and what they mean to people of color. I decided that the tone of the text was that of an aggravated Black girl tired of seeing her skin appropriated. I chose my target audience to be a white audience and/or people who tan. It was important for my diction to be sharp and blunt.

**WARNING**

For internal use only.  
This product does not contain actual melanin and does not protect you from the sun nor aggravated side eye from people naturally created brown.

**CAUTION**

Do not use on damaged or closed minds. Avoid contact with children. *Prolonged use may cause:* loss of white privilege, arrests, increase of fear, association to black power movements, lower income wages, racial slurs.

**INGREDIENTS**

Dominant gene of melanin, Generations of untreated trauma, Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), Organic Biscuit oil, Water (Aqua), Watermelon extract, Fragrance (Parfum) Fresh Cotton Bale

**TRY MORE...**

Apply MULATTO Fast Tanning Lotion with our accessory tanning mitt for best results.

**WANT TO TALK TO US?**

*We'd love to hear from you!* MULATTO

**STRIKINGLY FAST  
60 MINUTE TAN**



**FAST  
TANNING  
LOTION**

1 HOUR
2 HOUR
3 HOUR

**STREAK FREE | ORGANIC | BLACK TESTED**

**MULATTO FAST TANNING LOTION**

Ideal for those seeking a quick fix tan. **MULATTO Fast Tanning Lotion** allows you to obtain an authentic variety of shades and hues that you dare to love. From the light, sunkissed glow of a house slave to the deep earthen brown of a field hand. You can control your shade.

**HOW TO APPLY**

You don't.  
You suck it up and accept the skin you've been dealt. Every day I look at my skin. I wake up to my brown, I go to town with my brown, I shower with my brown; I go to bed with my brown.  
I do not have the privilege of choosing how dark I get to be. No timetable to explain the levels of brown I can achieve. I came into the world like this. Sports in the sunshine state tanned me a little bit. Ya I know black people tan too! I wear SPF to protect this brown.  
After years of internal warfare I accept the environment's natural impact on my brown, but when will you?

**TOP TIPS**

Please refrain from:  
cultural appropriation,  
stepping out of usual character,  
calling yourself chocolate,  
referring to your fake tan as bronze,  
exotic, medium, or dark  
- it's blackface.  
xoxo  
*An aggravated black girl*



177ml  
6 US fl. oz

4 03072 17069 0

Figure 34. Mulatto Fast Tanning Lotion Bottle Label (2017)

The last major decision I made was to photograph models with portions of their body covered in the sunless tanning lotion. During my first shoot I photographed a female model nude with half of her entire body covered in the pigmented product to show the contrast in what the product can achieve. I found that my favorite images from the shoot had tight crops. In the second iteration of the shoot I worked with props and un-identifying poses and crops in the image. For proper advertising photos, the missing faces and white backdrop did not give the photos a proper context. The third and final photoshoot occurred in Florida. Here I experimented applying the product on a light skin Black woman and two young white passing women from Venezuela. For these shoots I used suggested facial expressions and body language to achieve beauty and as “fun in the sun” aesthetic against a natural palm setting. The palm trees would be reminiscent of the beach and play into the “fun in the sun” aesthetic in advertising.

Visible from across the street, two 45 x 55 inch double sided color posters are hung in the window from clear suction cups against the glass. In between the two window panels, a slender, wooden, three-tiered glass shelf holds white product bottles with labels that read Mulatto. I wanted the title of this product to carry the weight of a heavy name. Mulatto is a derogatory term once used to describe the offspring of a Black and white person. Sunless tanning products promote a sense of agency for users allowing them to determine their perfect shade of brown, one that is not too dark but just dark enough to be seen as exotic and glowing. This “perfect” shade is often seen as naturally occurring on biracial people and Latin Americans. The agency of picking your shade is echoed in the tonal bar incorporated on the logo as an extension of the letter T in the name Mulatto.

Once inside the gallery, viewers are given the opportunity to stand before the display topped with an arched visual of two fists interlocked, one “tanned” by the product and the other all natural. Like the images in the window, this image presents the stark possibilities a user can



Figure 36. Mulatto: Fast Tanning Lotion (2018) full store display.



Figure 35. Close up of Mulatto: Fast Tanning Lotion (2018) product bottles on shelf

achieve when using Mulatto Fast Tanning Lotion. However, the fist bump photo additionally suggests the kind of appropriated behavior that may be granted or assumed when using the product. The display has three levels. Level one, at the bottom of the display, and level three are filled with white plastic bottles wrapped in waterproof vinyl product labels. The second level, has two sample bottles with a sign separating them that says, "Test with Caution." The bottles are filled with water to give them weight, and the tester bottles are filled with actual tanning product which can leave those who "test" the product stained for several minutes. A closer look at the bottle provides a wholesome description of the product referencing the era from which its name stems. The "How to Apply" directions, reveal a change in tone calling out those who tan by demanding that they accept their skin for what it is the same way I have to live with mine. The warning label on the product speaks to the alarming yet very real consequences of having brown skin in America. The "Ingredients" of the product are listed as insider knowledge, a nod to the pain people of color endure, as well as humorous ingredients such as watermelon extract and organic biscuit oil that make light of stereotypes associated with Black bodies in America.

*Mulatto Fast Tanning Lotion* shines a light on sunless tanning products, as well as the contemporary appropriation of brown skin that is normalized, bottled, sold, and marketed as a harmless beauty decision. These products bank on soliciting brown skin as exotic, temporary, fashionable, and something to easily be attained. This work has the potential to ignite dialogue about what it means for a white person to desire browner skin for fun, while real people of color secretly desire whiter skin for safety and peace of mind.



## Looking Glass

*My too dark, my too small, my not enough stacked at the end of the photo tormented me.*

*— Black Girl Diary: An Auto-Ethnography*

Nearing the end of my term, I looked over the works I knew I would include in the *AM I ENOUGH* exhibition and I started to notice a doubling theme in the content and context of every piece. I also felt a crucial perspective was not being explicitly discussed. I wanted

to create a piece that spoke directly to this idea of doubling which I found as a common thread. The decisions I made in the other pieces were strategic to address skin color discrimination, bias, and appropriation, yet I needed to ensure that the crux of the work in regards to the complexity of identity construction was being presented. Similar to *The Shades We Wear*, I needed a piece that would examine the mental space of a person of color in particular their double consciousness. In his 1929 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois coined the term double consciousness. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this 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. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

*Looking Glass* honors the double consciousness of a person of color within the context of their own home with specific regard to the intersectionality of a Black female who is simultaneously an American, a Negro, and female. I decided the context would be a vanity table, a place where a woman primps, fixes, decorates, and adjusts their look before a mirror. In early drawings I designed two identical vanities and prescribed personalities to the two different Black women who would embody them. The dichotomies varied at first: one confident in her skin vs. one who lacked confidence, light skin vs. dark skin, woke vs. unwoke, and the final verdict — enough vs. not enough. I listed products and items that would belong on a vanity and coordinate with one of the two perspective personalities. Another major decision I had to make was what time period the vanity would reflect. The world of Black hair and beauty routines have evolved extensively even just over the past decade. Though tempted to reference my childhood pressing irons and rollers, I chose to accessorize the vanity with contemporary items which would address all age groups that would encounter the work.



In comparison to the creative works that co-opt commercial spaces, it was important for *Looking Glass* to have a sense that it was lived in and not a part of a store display. The accessories selected to go in the drawer and on the top of the vanity were used, second-hand items. A domestic home carpet was chosen to act as the flooring for this installation and the carpet set it apart from the rest of the adjacent pieces. Another important choice was determining how viewers would engage with this piece. I wanted to provide an opportunity for other people to share stories in an attempt to prove my point of the work. I bought two small diary-like journals and manually letter pressed the front cover of each book with one of two questions: “Who told you you are not enough?” and “Who told you you are enough?” I passed around the journal first to women then to men as well and allowed them to fill in either journal with their answer to the question the cover posed. I then created a virtual version of the journal and collected sixteen responses via email. The responses evolved the value of the work. This process of collecting responses occurred twice, first around the time of my first



Figure 37. *Looking Glass* (2018)

critique and again at the final exhibition. At the first critique, I used photographs of celebrities in frames and created a misread for the work that did not pair with the personal responses found in the journal.

In the final exhibition, *Looking Glass* is the first piece seen after you enter the gallery doors. The positioning of this piece emphasizes how the private looks out into the commercial within the context of the exhibition as well as in the real world. The piece consists of two white vanity tables divided by a 24 inch by 36 inch two-way acrylic mirror. The two-way mirror allows you to see yourself as well as the other side of the vanity which suggests that no matter what side you find yourself on you have to look at yourself as well as look through and out to others. The presence of the furniture isolates the experience you have with this work in comparison to the openness of other pieces like *Laundry* and the *Do Not Bleach* shirt photo display. *Looking Glass* provides an empty chair on either side in front of the vanity facing the open journal as an invitation to have participants sit and reflect.



Figure 38. Detail image of “Not Enough” side of *Looking Glass* (2018)

Facing the door was the “Not Enough” side. This side’s chair was upholstered in a Chinese imported faux African wax print. The symbol on the chair means the ladder of death, which in Ghana depicts the story of judgement time when everyone passes on. The colors of the material, red and black, are also customary funeral garb colors. On top of the vanity is the journal, and a few sticky notes are scattered about that have quotes from Uncle Ruckus and rapper Kendrick Lamar as extra Easter eggs for those who understand the reference. On the tabletop is a trendy Brazilian wavy lace front wig whose long hair cascades off the top of the vanity down the side of it. Next to the wig are bottles of neutralizing shampoo products, which would be used by women who chemically treat their hair to be straight.

The opposing side of the vanity has a chair upholstered in a Ghana Trademark Wax print in a blue color, which is a Ghanaian symbol for love. This side represents the “Enough” side and faces the exhibition didactic wall which when reversed in the mirror reads I AM instead of AM I ENOUGH. This “Enough” personality is knowledgeable of systems



Figure 39. Detail image of “Enough” side of *Looking Glass* (2018)

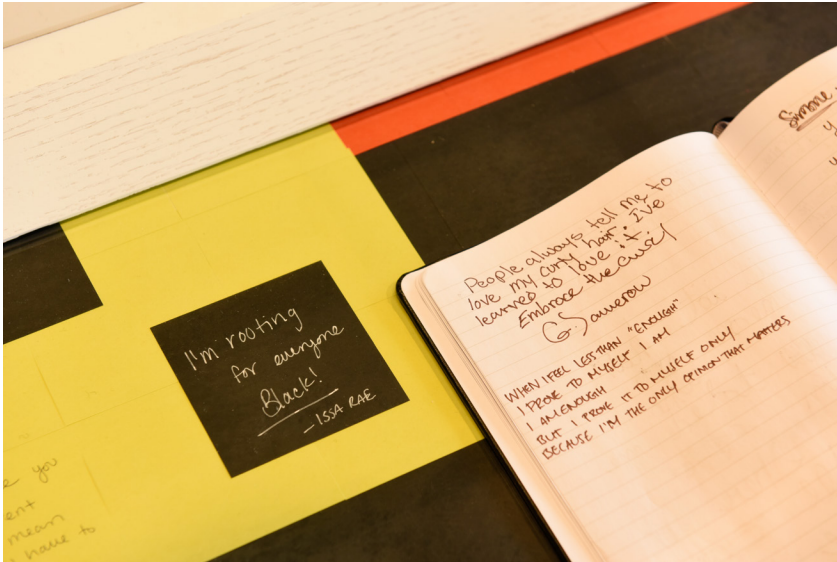


Figure 40. Journal entry from “Enough” side of Looking Glass (2018)

of racism and resists the pressures to alter her blackness to satisfy a status quo or beauty standard set by white dominant culture. The vanity on this side is covered in sticky notes in the colors of red, green, and black and form the African American Flag created in 1990 by artist David Hammons. Her sticky notes pressed under the glass to memorialize the flag share a variety of quotes from today and several decades ago. Above the glass on the tabletop is a small silver elephant which is a double symbol of intelligence as well as symbol for the Black female sorority Delta Sigma Theta, founded in 1913, that was the second of its kind in America.

Both vanities were placed on domestic carpet, however the carpet was subtly different displaying two varying shades of brown in the same style of carpet. This subtle difference highlights the skin color of each perspective side, which could represent a dark skin Black woman or a light skin Black woman. Just as the two-way mirror lets them see through to each other, both sides, both types of women have some-

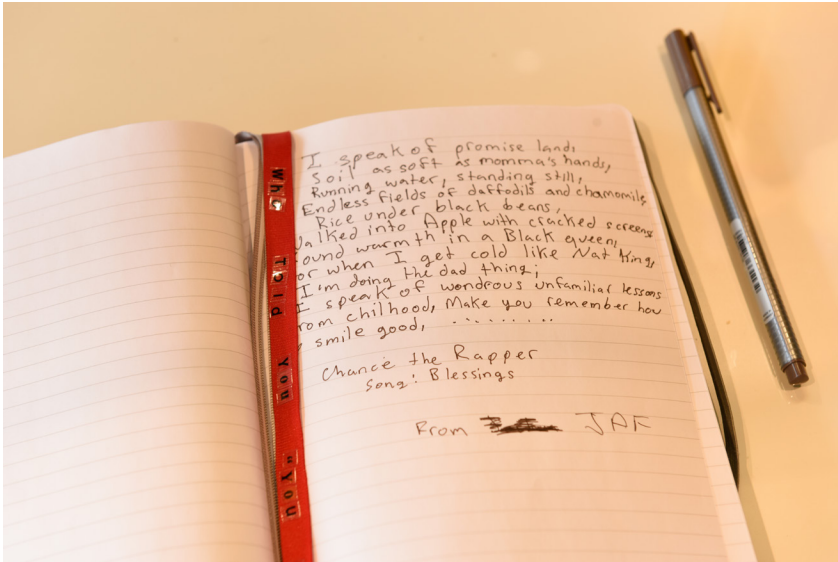
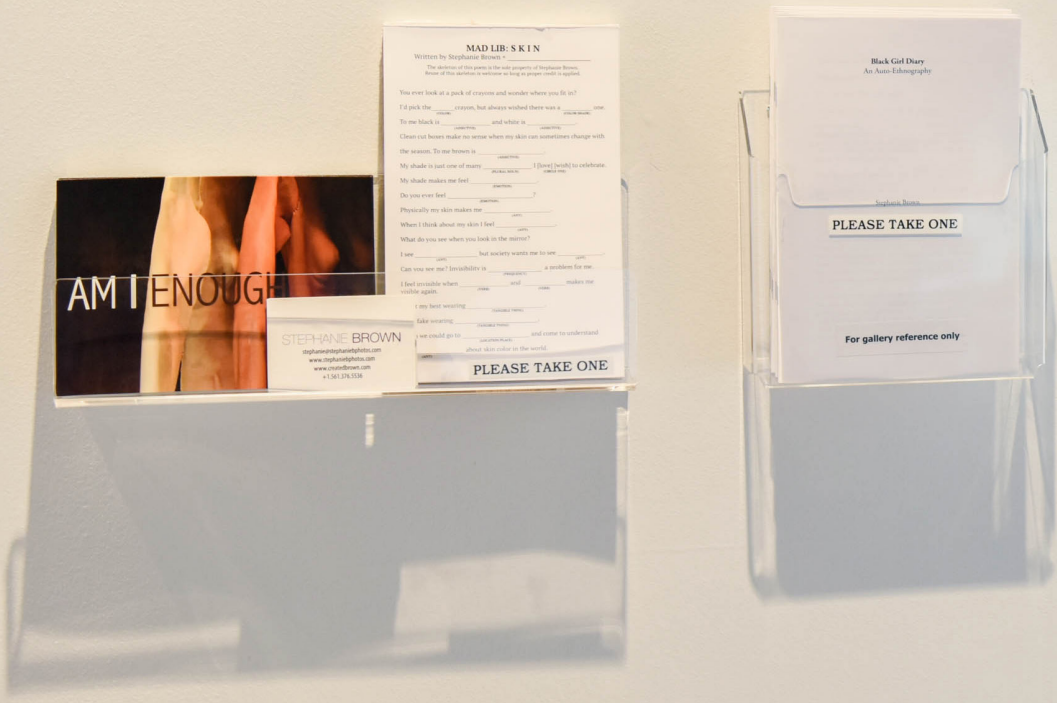


Figure 41. Journal entry from “Not Enough” side of *Looking Glass* (2018)

thing to learn from each other. Each side has a pull-out drawer, though seldom discovered, that was open for viewers to browse through as an extra but not mandatory site to see. The drawers contained objects and tools like a wide tooth wooden comb for the “Enough” side vs. a narrow tooth plastic comb on the “Not Enough” side. A simple comparison between such combs says a lot about the type of hair the woman has and her hair can suggest a lot of things about her character and self-esteem. The contents of the drawer and the written sticky notes and other elements are placed to provoke and prompt direction allowing viewers to craft their own narratives for who may use one side over the other.

The live responses I got in the journals for the duration of the show filled a perhaps ambiguous gap within the collection of works that went from private to commercial back and forth continuously. The interactions sparked thought, reflection, and transformation that could be observed when flipping through what people took the time to pen down.

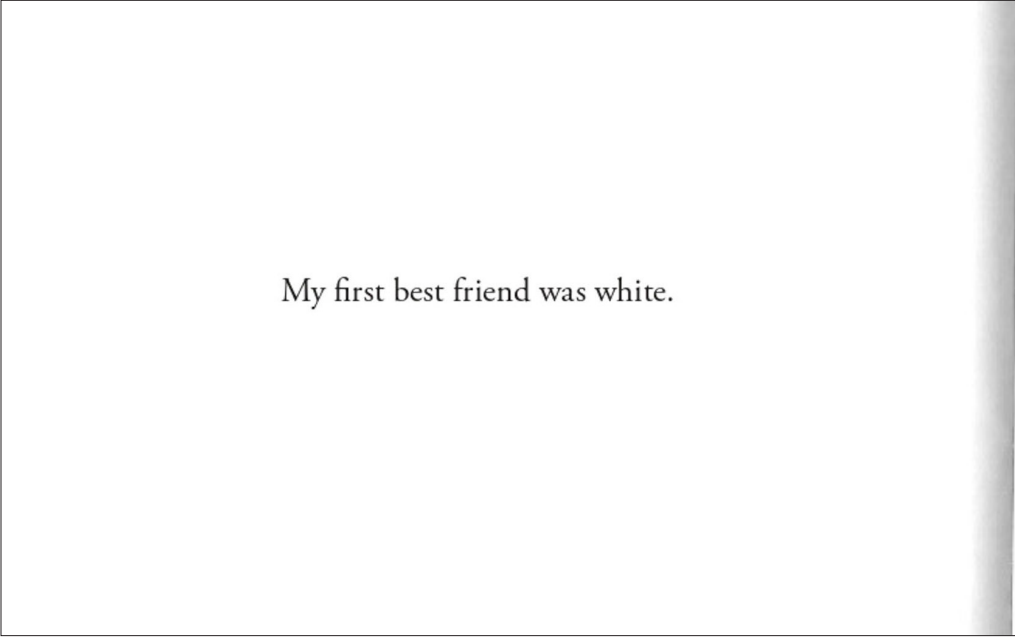


## Black Girl Diary

Over the past two years my writing practice has continued to play a greater role within my art practice. Each piece that I have described so far has inspired me to generate a poem as my point of entry for the creative work and that allowed viewers to glean. As I unpacked colorism and its influence on American society, I also unpacked myself internally by recording and documenting collections of quotes, personal observations, and life anecdotes that came to mind during my research and making process and every different iteration of the works. I jotted

my thoughts down on sticky notes, napkins, and in the margins of class notes as they would come to mind. I later compiled them and organized them into one chronological Bildungsroman document.

For the final exhibition, I strongly considered what the relationship between text and object would be. In early works poems placed adjacent to the art pieces they were made in honor of. For the exhibition that changed with the exception of *Revolution*, because it was a mandatory instructional text form. I separated the poetry from the works of art and instead added them to *Black Girl Diary*. I discovered pairings of poems, observations, and personal narratives that not only spoke to the collection of works in the exhibition but revealed parts of me as an artist that would make the work even stronger for my melanated audience while acknowledging harder truths for someone who is not a person of color. Together the selection of writing I chose for *Black Girl Diary* ultimately inspired the title of the piece. *Black Girl Diary, An Auto-Ethnography*, portrays a transformation of self that I argue occurs during the construction of one's identity. Racism, as a construct which feeds into colorism and manifests itself in so many moments of my everyday life, and has led me through confusion, self-hate, search of self, and transformation. Transformation occurs at the point in which you resist the constructs, acknowledging systems in America have been and are built to oppress, and then consciously decide to regard yourself above them all and not fall victim to them. By addressing personal moments in a variety of experimental written forms I make it easier for people of color to relate and find themselves within my narratives which offer moments of agency, self-reflection, and ownership. It was written in many respects with an honesty that can become humorous and emotional all at once with plenty of "inside" language weaved in for only a select audience to decode, granting a special amount of privilege to my melanated viewers. I enjoy the shift in experience of this book for both audiences. In this respect, the language becomes a medium for dialogue between the viewer and myself, whereas for those who don't identify as a person of color the language acts in a decrypted mode.



My first best friend was white.

Figure 42. *Black Girl Diary*

*Black Girl Diary, An Auto-Ethnography*, was printed on 24lb paper and scaled to be six inches wide and eight and a half inches tall. The books were presented in an acrylic brochure shelf scaled at six inches by nine inches. Three copies of the book were labeled as “Gallery Reference Only” and the remaining books were free and available for anyone to take. This display was located on a narrow wall in between *The Shades We Wear* and the works *Revolution* and *Launder*. The interior of the book begins with an open letter to my older brothers and sisters on page three. I identify them as a source for my self-esteem and self-identity conflicts when posing the question to myself, “Where do I fit in my own topic of colorism and skin color inferiority?” In the event that this first piece is the only one read, I resolve my conflicted thoughts at the end of the short letter acknowledging the years it



I used to wish my hair would fall flat when I came out the pool... but gravity knew better.

would take before I would evolve from thoughts of shame and envy to thoughts of self-love and pride for my brown skin. The book continues into various types of poetry, some of which determined the titles for featured art works in the exhibition. The second half of the poetry book, page 19 to close, is subtitled “Confessionals” and has a format change in the book to also signify the difference from the poems that came before.

In this section I provided, in chronological order, selections of those anecdotes, quotes, and personal observations I noted previously. Italicized “signatures” serve as a reminder of the confused identities making these statements; a tactic inspired by author A.M. Homes who uses this technique in her memoir, *The Mistress’s Daughter*.

“Your hair looks like spaghetti.”

*[An observation by some white boy in 7th grade]*

Figure 43. *Black Girl Diary*

African American classmates never saw me  
unless it was track season.  
The moment I ran I suddenly appeared before their eyes.

# MAD LIB: S K I N

Written by Stephanie Brown + \_\_\_\_\_

The skeleton of this poem is the sole property of Stephanie Brown.  
Reuse of this skeleton is welcome so long as proper credit is applied.

You ever look at a pack of crayons and wonder where you fit in?

I'd pick the \_\_\_\_\_ crayon, but always wished there was a \_\_\_\_\_ one.  
(COLOR) (COLOR/SHADE)

To me black is \_\_\_\_\_ and white is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(ADJECTIVE) (ADJECTIVE)

Clean cut boxes make no sense when my skin can sometimes change with

the season. To me brown is \_\_\_\_\_.  
(ADJECTIVE)

My shade is just one of many \_\_\_\_\_. I [love] [wish] to celebrate.  
(PLURAL NOUN) (CIRCLE ONE)

My shade makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.  
(EMOTION)

Do you ever feel \_\_\_\_\_?  
(EMOTION)

Physically my skin makes me \_\_\_\_\_.  
(ANY)

When I think about my skin I feel \_\_\_\_\_.  
(ANY)

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

I see \_\_\_\_\_ but society wants me to see \_\_\_\_\_.  
(ANY) (ANY)

Mad Lib: S K I N

*I truly never cared about the race of my classmates  
until they made my race an issue.*

— *Black Girl Diary: An Auto Ethnography*

Just as every child enters a period of color consciousness, every person of color has their first-time story: the story of when they became aware that their skin color was wrong, other, dark, incorrect, not

enough, too much, and just plain other. After writing the poem, “Transcendental Shame,” where I disclose a period in time in which I wished I were white, I wanted to write a piece that could engage other people of color in a dialogue about their first-time stories.

Mad Libs are a template word game where one player prompts others for a list of words to substitute for blanks in a story, before reading the — often comical or nonsensical — story aloud. The game is frequently played as a party game or as a pastime. I grew up playing with Mad Libs, sometimes with my sister but often alone, finding comfort in controlling the narrative with my selection of parts of speech with which to fill in the blanks. Since poetry was often my best way of communicating my feelings and emotional events, I wrote a poem as a Mad Lib.

When coordinating my one woman, one-piece show at The Trotter House with *The Shades We Wear* piece, the committee requested a way to start the round table discussion about colorism with attendees. I presented the idea of the Mad Lib, and tested the piece with this audience. Each person on the committee — black, white, Indian, Asian, male and female — spent ten minutes filling in their Mad Lib poem. Their complete poems became co-creations, my skeleton of a poem filled in with their parts of speech/narratives resulted in a poem that represented the individual and their first-time story. When we did the exercise on the night of the event at Trotter House people had the choice of sharing their first-time story and/or sharing just the poem. This roundtable became an oral storytelling experience. I learned of a light skin girl growing up being teased by other black students for looking white. I learned about an adopted Asian boy finding his tan to be improper compared to Eastern beauty standards. The stories reflected the global reach of colorism across borders, genders, and ethnic groups. These stories reminded me of Toni Morrison’s work, *The Bluest Eye*, and the number of racial slurs thrown between little black girls and little tanned girls in the book.

In the final exhibition, *AM I ENOUGH*, I had the Mad Lib poems printed on half-sheets and bound with glue just like a tear-off notepad. The top of the page listed the title of the poem, and the first blank was for the participant's name right next to mine, offering the participant a space to claim their narrative as their own and create a collaborative piece of creative writing. To encourage further engagement, I note on the sheet to copy and re-use the mad-lib in order to continue the dialogue outside of the gallery. I put out a hundred of these tear-off sheets and by the end of the three and a half week exhibition, only about twenty sheets remained.

## Notes for Part Two

45 Patricia Lehman, aka Tish, is a retired University of Michigan educator and a long standing member of the Ann Arbor Doll Club.

46 Behaviorism is a learning theory that emphasizes the role of environmental factors in influencing behavior, to the near exclusion of innate or inherited factors.

47 Bean, Annemarie, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy*. Wesleyan University Press, 1996.

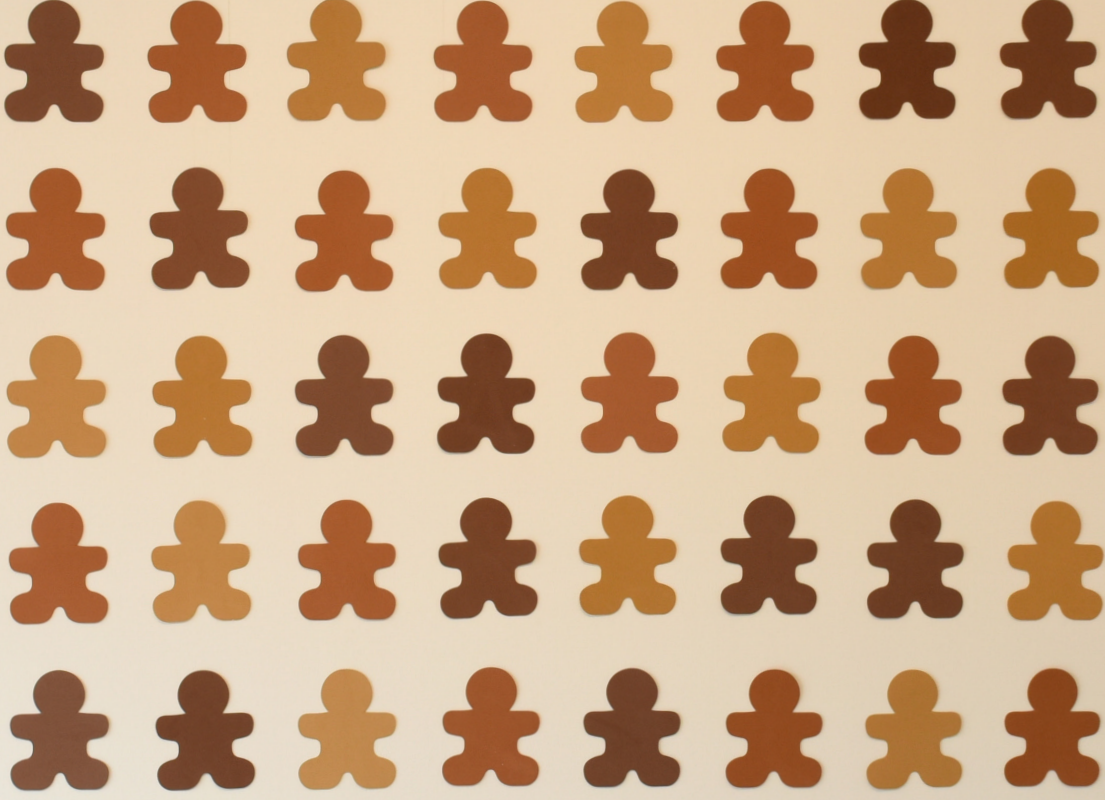
48 DailyNation, "Racism in a Chinese laundry detergent advertisement," YouTube Video, 0:48, May 27th, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Few8kJOzfnY>.

49 Daily Motion, "Dove Commercial Advertisement," Daily Motion Video, 0:50, October 10th, 2017, <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x643bby>.

50 The Humble Life is a company in Caldwell, Texas that provides handmade natural products that genuinely benefit people without doing harm to the planet.







*What white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.*

— James Baldwin

My work argues that skin color discrimination is not just a historical issue but one of great relevance today. It portrays how Black identities are constructed. In a sense, we “shop” for our constructed identities from everyday life, media, products, and therefore reflect the racial/tonal stereotypes that thrive in commercial industries.

In James Baldwin’s essay, *Letter From a Region in My Mind*, he explains that the Black man can never be fully liberated unless the White man comes to accept all that he is. All Black people have ever lacked in America is power. No matter the amount of “progress” made from any movement of resistance, white audiences must accept people of color as they are. I believe the public influences the private the same way that the biases white people feel toward Black people can also influence how Black people regard themselves. Everyone becomes complicit in the construction of one’s identity no matter which constructed racial box you choose to subscribe to.

In the exhibition, *AM I ENOUGH*, I have co-opted personal and public spaces into participatory installations which harness moments of discomfort to visually entice viewers into contemplative discourse about identity. I use my installations to intervene by referencing products that already exist to support my claim that discrimination based on skin color is prevalent in both public and private spaces.

The journals from *The Looking Glass* installation reveal anecdotes of external factors that influenced people’s understanding of themselves. People share moments in life where a person, their skin color, or lack of representation told them that they were not enough or that they weren’t capable of their aspirations. For example, one participant wrote about an instance where her white educator instructed her, the only Black child in the class, that they were not enough in comparison to her white counterparts. People of color eager to don a *Do Not Bleach* T-shirt also validate my claim, because melanated individuals are hungry for moments of affirmation and resistance to the status quo.

My exhibition stirs up dialogue that is not “appropriate” dinner table conversation. Instead the work shows how this conversation is internalized and normalized, which encourages the behavior and makes the psychological effects of colorism even worse. My work argues that these conversations need to be made explicit. Just as we carry it from private to public spaces and back, my work offers an opportunity to bring it to the surface and keep it on the surface. This is the only way things may change.

These experiential works engage with racial and skin color discrimination by making implicit biases and private internal doubts explicit and public. Like a light turned on in a dark room, I intend for my installations to take viewers from empathy to civic action; suggesting alternative perspectives and leaving room for viewers to insert themselves into the work by way of personal narrative and/or participation. I confront the hard questions in order to present them to my viewers and spark a dialogue that can reach broader communities beyond the museum.

*Black Girl Diary: An Auto-Ethnography* and the *Skin MADLIB* offer two examples of how to bring such dialogue to the forefront and keep it there. Just as the MADLIB was used as an exercise to start discussion at the Trotter House alongside *The Shades We Wear*, silicone suits piece. These works were presented as experimental written forms on a shelf at the *AM I ENOUGH* exhibition so that viewers could take it with them as supplies lasted. A Mexican woman shared with me that my show allowed her to have some meaningful conversations with her Mexican-American children immediately after they viewed it as a family. My Jamaican doll from the work *Revolution* is another example. I took the doll with me to two different art-related conferences and its provocative appearance made it hard for me to get very far without people stopping me and inquiring what she was, the purpose she served, and how I came up with the concept.

Looking forward, the strength of my work rests in its ability to intervene on the world by way of a social art pedagogy that I have adopted into my art practice. I believe my calling is to utilize art forms that transcend ethnic groups and foster dialogue and growth surrounding the themes of: racial identity construction, implicit/explicit bias, skin color discrimination and its influence on our self-esteem and perception.

If I was to have a follow-up exhibition it would be titled *I AM ENOUGH*. This prospective show would harness the research I have done and provide workshops and activities as forms of resistance, opportunities to gain affirmation and takeaways that make it easy for viewers to share the good news. I would also like to see my work installed in a variety of venues that target everyday people of color, such as laundromats, malls, community centers, churches, and parks. I intend to continue to use my work as catalyst for discussion on these internalized and normalized effects of colorism, to make implicit biases more explicit and attempt to replace these traumas by affirming melanin everywhere I go.

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