One of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Art Education and the Symbolic Interaction Of Bodies and Self-images

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This article begins with the premise that self-imagery is constituted as a shape-shifting aggregate of symbolic systems that incorporates the human body itself as one of its representations. At intermittent points of the body's embodiment of visual culture and tacit social experience, alternative representations accrete into varying symbolic systems, the multiple shapes a self-image may take over a lifetime. Given that social identity is derived from the interaction of various symbolic systems, how do some bodies and self-images come to be taken as that of identities incompatible with most others? In this exploration of the self-image and identity, the author reconsiders the purposes of art education in human development, especially when the self-image is given primacy over the objects we typically plan to make in the classroom.

Mr. Hooper's Store

I have a vivid memory of watching "Sesame Street" segments when I was little, where Susan or Bob or Gordon or Mr. Hooper would sing a variation of the categorization song that includes the lines, "One of these things is not like the other," or "One of these groups just doesn't belong here." This was in the early 1970s. I was being bussed to school in a White neighborhood, caught up in the nation's movement to address the social injustice of the unequal quality of schooling in ghettoes like the one I grew up in, located in a Brooklyn neighborhood called Crown Heights. It was eerie listening to these songs, watching little White boys and girls and little Black boys and girls sitting together in Mr. Hooper's store while no one addressed the giant blue furry elephant right there in the storefront with them. Even as a youngster, I was very much aware that most

people had long been quite comfortable with the idea that the kids sitting at Mr. Hooper's counter did not truly belong together. Even I knew that this was reason for the absence of White bodies on my narrow block in Brooklyn, and the absence of Black bodies anywhere near the wide lawns of homes in Sheepshead Bay. But this idea—the idea of different categories of bodies and of bodies that belong and do not belong—has generated many other stories worth noting.

Scientific and Narrative Traits

Science tells me that bodies have physical traits, distinguishing characteristics that can be named, labeled, or categorized, and which are reproduced and passed along genetically from one generation to the next. So when, during the last week of June, I was diagnosed by a physician as showing symptoms of the onset of diabetes mellitus, I was also asked whether either of my parents had diabetes. The answer was yes, my father, who died of diabetes-related complications at age 63.

Storytelling tells me that physical bodies also have narrative traits, distinguishing characteristics that can be named, labeled, or categorized, and which are also represented and passed along genetically from one generation to the next. For instance, in elementary school there was Thomas, seemingly always behind me on the schoolbus, who I allowed the minor social infraction of thumbing and rubbing the frizz of my hair, massaging the scalp of a quality of head clearly alien to his friendly white fingertips. This became mildly embarrassing in that I had never before truly embodied the representation of my hair texture as unlike the others. In high school, there was David, who pointed out that the skin on each of my knuckles, skin genetically thicker than his, was crinkled and scored in a manner that reminded him mostly of a reptile, a texture clearly alien to his friendly brown eyes. This was quite embarrassing in that I had never before embodied the representation that my skin texture

was not like the others. Embarrassment, or tacit bodily awareness, is an indication that social stigma has been embodied.

I have a story I must tell, one that tells something significant about art education and its place in the world, a story told most simply through personal narrative. First-person explanations—"the life story that people themselves tell about who they are, and why" (Carey, 2007, ¶ 1)—are a useful research tool, especially as researchers become more confident that "narrative themes are, as much as any other trait, driving factors in people's behavior" (¶ 12). This story begins with the following question: As I reviewed the literature for my dissertation, an effort to generate new knowledge in the field of art education, why was I drawn to the work of scholars like Simi Linton (1998) and Erving Goffman (1963), scholars who are central to the field of Disability Studies, when neither the art education or disability studies fields are quite like the other?

Convergences, Negations, and the Interaction of Categories

All research communicates stories, or the paradigms that support those stories. The story I wish to tell today came to the surface of my consciousness through a series of convergences as I began to conceive this article. On the eve of my start in the role as chair of the Art Education Department, I had been asking myself why art education is so irrelevant to so many, and so misunderstood in so many circles. Frankly, even as I have dedicated my life to professing its significance to me, art education as taught by art education professionals was non-existent in my elementary and middle school years. Why isn't art education included in the same category as reading, writing, and arithmetic as one of the essentials of a good education? Why isn't art education like the others?

Why are students of color overwhelmingly pathologized as a special education population in public schools? Disability studies scholar David J. Connor (2008) cites the work of scholars within

the field of Disability Studies who do not view impairments as "medicalized deficits (physical, sensory, emotional, or intellectual)," but rather "as natural human differences *categorized* as 'disabilities' by a society reticent to reorganize through the removal of barriers and restrictions" to those who are different (Connor, 2008, p. 452, my italics). In the identification of students to receive special education services, "African-Americans are three times as likely to receive the label of mental retardation and twice as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed in comparison to Whites" (Connor, 2008, p. 458).

I saw a glimpse of this phenomenon firsthand in the aftermath of a Sunday service as I observed the 6-year-old son of a friend at my church. The child's parents were in the music ministry, his father a drummer. As was his habit, the young boy had climbed behind the drums after the service and was playing them intently, autodidactically focused on keeping exact rhythm with a couple of the musicians still fingering the keyboard and the bass guitar. Having worked with children identified as gifted for many years at Hunter College Elementary School, I knew some of the signs and mentioned them casually to his parents. It turns out that they had suspected their son's giftedness ever since he had begun speaking in full sentences unusually early in his development. Months later, I had a second conversation with his mother. She related her frustrations with acts of social determinism apparent in the school her son had recently been attending. The teachers there had already labeled her son, only in kindergarten, 'a problem child' who was in need of special attention because of all his kinetic energy, the kind of energy any percussionist is sure to exude from time to time. When the child's mother countered that she believed her son was gifted, the incredulous retort was, "Well, who told you that?" The implication was that if the school's professionals had not declared the boy to be gifted, it could not be so. This boy was one of the very few Black

children in a predominantly White school. Why aren't Black boys included in the same category as those taken for granted as able-bodied, able-minded, and normal? Why aren't Black boys and girls like the others?

Senator Joseph Biden, at the start of his campaign for the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, felt it appropriate to distinguish one of his competitors, Senator Barack Obama, as follows: "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a storybook, man" (Tapper, 2007). Now I will admit here that I have long held insecurities about my personal ability to speak in the greater public arena, probably due to the invisibility in the media of other folks who looked like me addressing the "American" public. But there have always been articulate, bright, clean, and nice-looking leaders in Black communities. Why aren't the many Black leaders from my neighborhood illuminated in the national and international media and included in the same category as those taken for granted as mainstream, articulate, bright, clean, nice-looking? Why aren't Black men and women like the others?

I recently rented the movie "Miss Evers' Boys," a 1997 HBO film. It tells of a clinical study gone awry, the infamous Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male, which was conducted under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service from 1932 through 1972. In this 40 year study, the longest non-therapeutic scientific experiment on human beings in medical history, 600 African-American sharecroppers were studied in Macon County, Alabama—399 chronic syphilitics and a control group of 201 men without syphilis—under a ruse that deceived the participants into believing that were indeed being treated for what was known in the vernacular as "bad blood." Placebo treatments, medical hyperbole, and promises of funeral benefits were all plied in the place of informed consent. Long after penicillin had become the standard and effective

treatment for syphilis, the men who were recruited as human guinea pigs during this effort to watch the natural progression of this fatal disease, lived and died without ever being informed that they were not being treated for anything at all. How could this take place? Easily—this study took place in an era when the lives of the Black men, women, and children, if valued at all, were certainly not valued the same as those who were White.

In fact, the prevailing definition was that of the utter abnormality of the descendants of slaves as was declaimed by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, founder of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in 1868 for the manual training of colored people. Armstrong was of the opinion that his charges were mentally, morally, and materially destitute, each one burdened with the unfortunate affliction of a number of birth defects issuing forth in the form of "[h]is low ideas of life and duty, his weak conscience, his want of energy and thrift," and "his indolent, sensuous tropical blood" (Kliebard, 1999, p. 14). The long-prevailing prescription of an education appropriate for a Negro was explicated by John Dollard in his exposé of a Southern town in the 1930s where schools were used "to educate the Negro in order to fit him for place first as a slave and then as a caste man in society," an educational trajectory that would "prepare him for, but not beyond, the opportunities of lower-class status" (Kliebard, 1999, p. 224). These words and institutions and the ideas they represent have become a part of the layering of Black self-image. Why aren't the bodies of Black laborers included in the same category as those taken for granted as valuable, non-defective, and worth the investment of social capital? Why aren't Black bodies like the others?

I happened across a television interview with popular journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell (2005), author of the book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, in which he explores rapid cognition, "the sort of snap decision-making performed without

thinking about how one is thinking, faster and often more correctly than the logical part of the brain can manage" (Lasser, 2007, ¶ 2). In the course of the interview, Gladwell—who could pass as White in many circles even though one of his parents is Jamaican—related the phenomenon of snap judgments to how pejorative stereotypes are assigned, citing Harvard's *Implicit Association Test,* and the fact that ever since he let his hair grow out into a prominent afro, he has been stopped by police while traveling about in what seem to be snap decisions by those authorities and certainly without just cause. Why isn't Black hair like the others?

Finally, on a recent episode of the Oprah show a long-standing crisis in self-image and identity was revisited as Black children were asked to categorize their preferences and distastes for White baby dolls that don't look like them and Black baby dolls that do in Kiri Davis's eight-minute documentary, "A Girl Like Me." One of several young ladies who were also interviewed in the video expresses near the end how "Everybody else in society is throwing their ideas and what they believe we should be at us [sic]." Why aren't the self-images of Blacks included in the same category as those taken for granted as valuable, central to the popular culture, and worth opening up all media avenues and opportunities for Blacks to self-promote? Why aren't Black self-images and self-esteem like the others?

Identity as Reinterpretation

The previous convergences are just starting points. Ultimately, I am interested in the intersectionality of all self-images in an Information Age, not just Black self-image. In a May 10, 2007, *New York Times* website multimedia presentation about a new exhibition at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem called "Stereotypes vs. Humantypes," images featuring Blacks in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were displayed revealing how widespread stereotyped and distorted representations of Blacks were

during that time period ("Fact vs. Fiction," 2007). But the exhibition also showcases a concurrent phenomenon that was almost invisible and is still for the most part unknown: images that sketched the undistorted, uncaricatured life of Blacks at home, in weddings, at play—images of common everyday life in opposition to multiple social and scientific discourses declaiming Black abnormality and pathology—images reiterated and reappearing in the old photos in shoeboxes, in the corners of cracked dresser drawers, in crumbling envelopes on closet shelves, in heavy attic trunks, in frames adorning faded wallpaper. What can we learn from this? If nothing else, I believe we can relearn the purpose of art education if we take a new look at the reinterpretation of African American identity that took place in the midst of centuries of visual cultural vilification, a perfect storm of imagery that told only of our ugliness and unacceptability in the world. This reinterpretation was worked through the arts surrounding the Harlem Renaissance as much as it was anyplace else (Harris, 2003; Willis, 2000).

All educators ought to celebrate any group's ability to visibly reinterpret personal and social significance. What if the ranks of art educators were charged with developing the human ability to defy disparaging labels and expectations and to lead meaningful and transforming lives in spite of the persistent social will to stigmatize? What if art educators were to take up the charge of opening up curricular spaces for students to locate personal significance for themselves, along with the agency to change the signifiers they have thus far embodied? To paraphrase one of the catchphrases from the popular new television show *Heroes*, "Save the self-image, save the world."

Self-imagery as a Symbol System

The conception of the self as an instrument of inquiry has birthed whole new branches of qualitative inquiry (Eisner, 1991).

However, the self is not a form in itself, but a shape-shifting arena of possibilities bounded and overwritten by a palimpsest of self-images making sense over and over again of our experience of the world. A reading of the self is complicated with arrays of diaphanous self-images, an archaeological layering of "verbal images" and "mental images." As it signifies an aspect of self, a "verbal image" is a name; if a "word is an image of an idea, and an idea is an image of a thing" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 22), then a name is simply an image of a proposed identity, not dissimilar from a label, category, or stereotype, none of which are necessarily true or even apt. Yet once applied, a name, label, category, or stereotype becomes a part of the archaeology of self-imagery, a part of the emerging story.

A "mental image" of self is akin to the narrative of personal memory, images of the self held in mind that have been impressed on us by the experience of our selves as reflected back to us in our passage through the world (Mitchell, 1986, p. 22). To explain further, philosopher David Hume is cited as describing the remnants left after memory's dynamic process of minimization both as "faint images" and "decayed sensation" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 23). Thus, a memory is a selective remnant of an experience, a motion picture dissolve, a glancing recollection of texture, an echo, a whiff of a scent, packed with dense, continuous meaning. Every memory is a symbol. Every self-image is in vertiginous alignment with a deeper archaeology of identity, that is to say, a multiformational arrangement of representations that is manifested in the visual culture, a construction that tells who you are like and who you are not like, hybridic at times, subliminal at times, always interactional, all images contesting for preeminence and position in the constitution of a larger story of identity, the story of who I am and of who we be.

While some may understand identity as an immutable text, I see identity as the gaps in the deterministic text, the possibilities that redress our certainties and our destinies, the parts of the story that

cannot be scripted because they are still being contested, because they have not yet been lived. For those who rail against inappropriate names and unwanted self-images, there is a danger and there is a hope. Identity tantalizingly presents itself intact and may then be immediately overwritten, either as an act of malicious or indifferent subjugation, or as an act of self-preservation. According to Julia Kristeva, "a text works by absorbing and destroying at the same time the other texts of the intertextual space" (cited in Marshall, 1992, p. 130). Identity can thus be understood as an ongoing interpretation, pertaining to whatever experience holds true for those situated within their particular context-boundedness (Eisner, 1991). In writing on the act of interpretation, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1976) suggests that there are multiple phenomena that, although not text, are analogous to text in that we treat them as the objects of our interpretation:

> Interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. This object must, therefore, be a text, or a text-analogue, which in some way is confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory—in one way or another, unclear. The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense. (p. 153)

Our self-images do not reconstitute facts about us. What is a fact? It is a thing that is incontestably the case. In the realm of law, a fact is the purported truth about a case as opposed to any interpretation of said facts. However, if you, like me, have ever had difficulty relating the facts about a particular situation, have you ever fully considered why that is? It is because you have not yet generated an interpretation of the interacting facts, events, and emotions surrounding that particular situation—you haven't yet formed it into a story. Our representations of the world we know and of what

we do aren't based on facts—they are founded on our needs, on our desires, on our hopes, on our beliefs, on our desperation, on our shaping of some oasis of order out of the chaos. We are compelled to give life a shape. In other words, the facts that populate our histories are meaningless in and of themselves until someone renders those facts significant by interpreting them. A truth held dear always begins by sorting disparate facts into a re-cognizable relationship, a story we will be able to recall, remember, and relate to others. The truths we hold dear are, thus, interpretations. We go even further to make art and discourse and imagery of those interpretations by exaggerating the things we hold most significant, embellishing the things that mesmerize, distract, and hold our attention, heightening the saliencies that texture our existence. Ironically, our facility at shaping variations of truth around the very same facts makes any interpretation of facts highly contestable.

Our self-images are variations in an ongoing and embodied and personal story; thus, they are malleable. Self-image, like memory, can be erased by time or modified as facts are forgotten or misremembered over time. Self-image can be contorted by falsehoods or accusations. Self-image can be invaded by trauma or brain lesion. Self-image can be altogether disconnected from factuality and be reinforced by fictional episodes or fantasies. Self-image can be recalled by alternative cues, and be remembered in emotional keys varying from the discordant to the melodious. For instance, on a day full of embarrassments that assault the mind and stresses that expose the body, self-imagery might represent itself with fits of visceral self-loathing. Yet, on a day when the mind and body are stroked with a sense of belonging, self-imagery will shape itself at rest in a harbor connecting it to all the trade routes on the social map. An individual's archaeology of self-imagery is a story-in-progress. The story is intuitively told, proceeding "from everything we know and everything we are;" the story is improvised, and as with all improvisations, converges "on the moment from a

rich plurality of directions and sources" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 40).

Symbolic Interaction

So how do we as art educators "save the self-image?" How do we "save the world" from the contemporary crisis in self-image? Postmodernist assumptions view identity constructs as narrative admixtures spoken in polyphonous sign systems, "a multiplicity of ironic and conflicting interdependent voices that can only be understood contextually, ironically, relationally, and politically" (Slattery, 2001, p. 374). Does this really have anything to do with art education at all? What if I told you that my job description as an art educator has never been to teach students to make pretty pictures and things, or the history of pretty pictures and things, or how to perceive when a picture or thing is pretty, or how to persuade others of the prettiness of a picture or thing in words that are captivatingly pretty?

I submit that my job as an art educator is actually much simpler than this; it only has three moving parts. My job is first to open up curricular spaces where students can picture themselves in the world, no matter whether that picture is pretty or not, locating self-image along with the agency to reinterpret the signifiers they have thus far embodied; secondly, my job is to open up a space where students can picture a more just and refined world, critiquing the cultural stories we hold to be socially significant or insignificant and exercising their acquired agency to make changes along the way; thirdly, my job is to open up a space where students can practice and expand upon a repertoire of marks, movements, and modelings that will make visible the self-imagery and stories that they have rendered to be personally and socially significant, capturing the attention of others so that they too may see, share the vision, and find common meaning.

Michael Parsons (1992) cites Charles Taylor's suggestion that

anything interpretable must be a text or text-analogue. Interpretable events are the stuff that constitute the aggregate site of identity. What we see, hear, and emotionally experience, becomes us. Identities then may be viewed as semiotic creations, the archaeology of which is expanded by each ensuing reinterpretation. Identities are signs. Umberto Eco (1976) writes that, "A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else" (p. 7).

Identity is a meta-symbol, a by-product of the symbolic systems of verbal and mental imagery by which we construct or re-construct our version of the world. Walter Truett Anderson (1997) claims that "personal identities would be hard to locate without the network of symbols within which we are defined and the internal monologue with which we continually remind ourselves who we think we are" (p. 263). As a meta-symbol composed of sub-archaeologies of self-imagery, an identity is a living text. Identities are also then intertextual. Brenda Marshall, citing a definition of intertextuality by Jacques Derrida, describes a system of interrelationships "between the psyche, society, [and] the world" (Marshall, 1992, p. 122).

In the field of sociology, the term symbolic interactionism refers to "the theory that the meaning of symbols is determined through the course of human interaction" ("Symbolic interactionism," 2007, ¶ 1). According to a Wikipedia article, Herbert Blumer (1969) set forth the major tenets of symbolic interactionism as follows:

1. "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them"

2. "The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows"

3. "These meanings are handled in, and, modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters"

With the interaction of symbolic systems in mind, reclaiming the relevance of art education necessarily involves a rethinking of

art education. If we rethink art education, we must also rethink our approach to the objectives of the art education curriculum. Focusing for a moment on my job description to open up curricular spaces where students can picture themselves as critical agents in the world, I would argue that traditional art educational curriculum planning clogs up the spaces to extend and deepen self-imagery with its jump-cut, object-centered focus—make a little bit of pottery, then a few prints, then some observational drawings, then a painting or two, with a little bit of jewelry making or some digital photography, if we can squeeze it in. There is little attempt to facilitate the construction of extended personal narratives as rendered by our students, through curricular sequences that engender new self-imagery and new installments in the continuum of our collective story.

If "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," why not allow students to work in the media they hold most significant, elaborating on the subjects they identify as being most significant to them irrespective of our professional teacherly desires? Educators need only to mark out the widest possible thematic parameters and allow students to find their way to the specificity they desire. Youngsters have no difficulty finding the stories they want to tell or re-tell; all we need to do is give them the permission to fill in the gaps of their choice. The major adjustment for educators is to no longer think in terms of class projects, but rather in terms of individual projects. This will be more work for us in some ways and less work in other senses as the individuals in our classrooms and studios are given the license to interact with each other and with us as independent agents on their projects, in keeping with Blumer's (1969) assertion that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.

In Jane Gooding-Brown's (2000) examination of the social construction of self and difference, and the negotiation of established

interpretations as an agency for change, she argues that a disruptive model of interpretation can initiate incursions that reposition story values. Robert McKee (1997) defines a story's values as the "qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next" (p. 34). One could say that the great efficiency of disruptive discursive repositioning is the ability to alter a story not by attaching an amendment to the story, but rather by infiltrating the story sequence and flipping the polarity, so to speak, of definitive events already ensconced in the narrative. The authorities have no defense against it. It is through the agency to alternate the currents of their lives that the meanings most significant to our students are "handled," "modified," and reinterpreted. Agency is conceived here not as the "freedom to do whatever the subject wills but rather freedom to constitute oneself in an unexpected manner— to decode and recode one's identity (Stinson, 2004, p. 57).

Our bodies and bodies of knowledge are evidentiary. They are documentary. We position these bodies to tell stories—to tell histories, sometimes slightly false, sometimes barely true, but always significant enough to marshal our attention. Some wield the power to trap bodies in names, labels, categories, or stereotypes. Sometimes we must reposition our bodies to save our lives and liberate our self-images. Somehow, in the years succeeding the great Harlem Renaissance literary reinterpretation designated as 'the New Negro,' the old broken, whipped and degraded Negro body was also reinterpreted as a document of strength and beauty, yet no less Black! These were reinterpretations that altered the visual culture of "America," connoting humanity rather than monstrosity.

In the music video from the 2001 song "Who We Be," rap star DMX questions whether or not the dominant culture really knows who he, or any African American for that matter, really is. At several points in the video, brilliantly directed by Korean American Joseph Kahn, the rapper's body is digitally recoded, his image repositioning

itself, a floating signifier interacting throughout social history, caught up in the visual cultural drama of "America's" most significant events and the rapper's most salient surroundings, events that, in truth, are already subsumed within the archaeology of DMX's self-imagery.

Ultimately, DMX appears to conclude that who he is is not at all bound up in difference, but that he could be just as well represented by any one of the number of children, each of unspecified ethnic origin, who identify themselves in his stead in the closing seconds of the video. Likewise, each of those children could be just as well represented by the final image of DMX himself in the concluding frame; DMX and the children are intersectionalities, alternating currents for one another's self-image. DMX cannot be held behind prison bars that tell him he is not like the others.

Art educators, take note: the question, "Who am I?" posed by an inquiring and creative mind is likely the most powerful thing we have going for us as we decide who *we* be as teaching professionals in the 21st century.

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