

Coloring in the Space

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She colored the grass blue.
As if sun could sweep
under her feet. Lift her
as droplets into air,
into wide sky without frame.
Carry her to better,
to anywhere else but here.

When my niece was in kindergarten, her teacher offered her a coloring worksheet, a picture of an outdoor setting. My niece filled up the illustration with a spread of lines, shading, and color. After some time alone coloring, her teacher noticed her work and walked over to my niece and corrected her coloring choices, telling her that “the grass should be green, and the sky should be blue.” The teacher later marked her coloring wrong on the paper, in red pen, reiterating that the grass and the sky should be true, representational. Her marking communicated that *there is no room for creative thinking here*.

My niece, who is now a teenager, and at one point wanted to be a fashion designer, makes art less and less these days. She was a motivated and talented visual artist as a young child—but that desire whittled away—in part due to a lack of inspiration and opportunities to nurture her creative interests and efforts. In her school there was little room for girls to take creative intellectual risks, to channel creative ideas, and receive feedback and encouragement towards innovative thinking.

In the classroom, my niece’s identity and creative notions were not reinforced as valuable contributions to the learning environment. She had no room to both think creatively *and* be a Black girl. To survive school, with its ongoing intimate and subtle academic assaults on her identity and ability, in a predominantly white cultural space, she leaned into a performance of self-loathing, interrogating her gender, race, and socio-cultural sensibilities. She learned to make herself small in order to attempt to make the learning space and her teachers comfortable with her innovative thinking, her body, gesturing, and voice. She pretended not to notice or be emotionally impacted by microaggressions from peers and teachers.

She turned that trauma into silence and bent into her body and mind all the ongoing external micro-assaults. She began to self-censor as to not *disrupt* the learning environment with her bold ideas, expressive gestures, sensory sensitivities, and creative intuition. Navigating a learning environment that did not *see* her or her creative abilities and contributions took a toll on her self-esteem. By high school, she emotionally withdrew, and eventually her ability to access a flexible and imaginative mindset nearly disappeared.

Without practice, creative notions, including risk, imagination, and flexibility, can weaken over time. In some of her most critical and impressionable years, something or many things reinforced that creative thinking and art making was not for *her* and not valuable as a skillset. In tandem, her very identity and way of being in the world were also disregarded and silenced, for seven hours a day, five days a week. That too, took a huge toll on her psyche. Outside of the home, there were few people helping her develop a whole sense of self. Moreover, there were very few people if any, encouraging her to take art classes or making art classes available to her, or at the very least impressing upon her a kind of permission to make, see, think, be.

She chiseled a draft.
Did not yet have the shape

of sounds to draw from
her mouth. To color a space

the way she imagined it.
Name it strange and safe.

The way circles and needles
canopy the ceiling.

Cast a crown, a wonder,
a glory, in all this alone.

Growing up as a young artist and creative thinker, I could not imagine there were options for me to pursue a career in the arts. What a notion—making a living with art—manipulating with creative thinking and tools. Art as a career or a place for my creative sensibilities to land was not a discussion my mostly white K-12 teachers were having with me. And to be fair, neither were my parents or other adults with influence in my life. Often societal norms and historical precedence reinforce themselves in practice. I cannot speak for other Black girls—but no one made me aware that

making a living with my creativity was an option for *me*. Even my mother, a staunch supporter of me being exposed to the arts, and way maker for all of my creative endeavors, never explicitly gave me “permission” to consider a career in the arts. Perhaps she too could not imagine such a thing as the arts leading to a job. However, in some ways, my mother’s creative way-making did serve as a kind of quiet “permission.” But my options post-high school were never fully discussed or explicitly encouraged. I had the love and support of the adults around me—which was half the battle—but as a first-generation college student of color, interested in the arts, I had to find the academic, psychological, emotional, field experience, and resourcefulness necessary to make my own way to an arts career. Along the way, mentors and friends were essential to me finding my way.

My parents grew up in a government-mandated segregated America, and the assumption was, as a Black girl, to navigate the social and societal constraints, laws, and barriers, my way forward would be more traditional: a 4-year college degree, followed by a sensible, practical field like healthcare, law, education, or business. It took many years before the adults in my life, especially my parents, could trust my burgeoning and nuanced career in the arts. It took a long time before my well-meaning parents, who made their living in the service industry, utilities and manufacturing, believed art could “pay the bills,” and contribute something valuable and necessary to a household and society. Perhaps, the idea of making and teaching art was a wholly impractical notion to my parents who worked hard their entire lives so that I could grow up with more opportunities than they ever had—and ultimately pursue a post-secondary education. Perhaps my parents assumed art was not a sustainable career option. However, if a career in the arts seemed impractical or implausible, why did my mother take me to so many museums, enroll me in music theory classes, private piano and flute lessons, and creative writing workshops? Did she not think I might work my creative into a job someday? Perhaps my mother thought that art might smooth my blue-collar edges, offer me more range in my performance of *Blackness*, expand my sphere of thinking, problem solving, being in the world. Imagine growing up with all of that art exposure and training, and no idea what to do with it.

Today, I am an artist educator, and I currently work in an arts space as a museum educator and serve as Associate Director of Education at the Wexner Center for the Arts. For many years I was one of few people of color working in the space and the only programmer of color—which aligns with US national statistics of how few people of color are working in the arts as programmers, educators, curators, and administrators in museums, galleries, and arts spaces. A recent segment on NPR’s *Code Switch*, cites a 2015 Mellon Foundation report

which found that 84 percent of the staff in US museums are white, with 4 percent black, 6 percent Asian, and zero percent Native Hawaiian or Native American. The article highlighted commentary from UCLA professor and art historian Steven Nelson, who discussed the disparities in the fine arts field and noted that encouraging *interest in arts careers must start in high school and college.*

I would go further and suggest that the nuanced development of the brain and emotional intelligence in children and adolescents makes K-12 a ripe and necessary environment for exposure to the arts, arts careers, and experimentation with creative thinking in the arts and design. The field I work in, art education, is also aligned with US national diversity averages as it pertains to people of color pursuing or working in arts careers. I know there are people of color working in the field in academia and in art museums—but our presence, perspectives, and prominence in the field of practice and academic literature are sparse.

My role in the museum is serving K-12 schools, building community partnerships and developing and facilitating programming. And in many schools today, access to art education programming, artists-in-residence and artist educators, are limited or nonexistent for many children, especially children of color—so I am mindful that the practice and programming I do is urgent and significant. Over the years, I resolved that part of my critical work as an artist educator was standing still in the art space as a woman of color—persisting, as difficult as it often is, in a historically unlikely context. In a field that is predominantly white, existing as a person of color, being in the line of sight, for the art participant, youth and adults, colleagues, for notions of my younger self, is a critical act of erecting oneself in a space that is narrow. It is an act of enduring. As African American visual artist Mickalene Thomas, suggests in her work, it is radical *seeing and being seen.* Doing the work of art education in a field that has unclear notions and indecisive objectives on inclusion is a complex and necessary work.

Historically, and in the present, the lingering perception, the field, the cannon, and landscape, suggests that the arts: making, administration, curating, programming, research, has little room for people of color. That is evidenced in every aspect of the business of the arts, from front of house to back of house, in administration roles, in leadership, curatorial practice, and in research and scholarship. In some ways, even as institutions are in critical conversation and are developing equity practices, a glaring and assumptive exclusion still lingers, and blatant disparity and inequity exist in advancement and compensation. Who is responsible for developing a pipeline of diversity, a sustainable practice of training new innovators and creative professionals? What is the role of art education in K-12?

As a practitioner in the field, I am in some ways standing still while doing and questioning the work. I am in the practice of engaging colleagues in intercultural dialogue and programming. I dare the institution and those in and around it, to be bold in its equity and inclusion practices, and have the courage to change and sustain the change needed to provide access and support to those who have historically and who are presently marginalized in the systems and spaces in our society. I am asking hard questions and engaging in critical conversations with those in and beyond the field. I am pushing and being pushed. I am uncomfortable daily. I do not take the value and possibilities of this work for granted. I am critical, curious, and coloring in the space.