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[W]hole: Journey to Fullness

by
Joni P. Gordon

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Contents	2
List of Illustrations	3
Abstract	5
Epigraph	7
Introduction	8
Epigraph	11
I. Where it all began: Awakening to the Effects of Blackness	12
Epigraph	17
II. A History Bigger than Me: The East St. Louis Race Massacre	18
Epigraph	27
III. Colorism: My Privilege Revealed	28
Epigraph	36
IV. I Long to be Whole±Fullness	37
Epigraph	46
Conclusion and Aspirations	47
Endnotes	50
Appendix	54
Bibliography	66

List of Illustrations

1. Figure 1: Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, Silver print, 1990. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art.
2. Figure 2: Joni P. Gordon, *All Mopped Up*, 2021
3. Figure 3: Joni P. Gordon, Silhouette created from self-portraits, 2018-2021
4. Figure 4: Joni P. Gordon, Silhouette created from self-portraits, 2018-2021
5. Figure 5: Kara Walker, *Virginia's Lynch Mob*, 1998
6. Figure 6: Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth*, 2022
7. Figure 7: Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing the portrait of Michael Brown through the glass of the middle door
8. Figure 8. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing how the rope is woven through the doors. Courtesy of the artist.
9. Figure 9. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing burnt newspaper articles of the Michael Brown shooting. Courtesy of the artist.
10. Figure 10: Crystal Z. Campbell, *Notes from Black Wall Street: Upon a Century*, 2021
11. Figure 11 Joni P. Gordon, *Bleached Identity*, 2023
12. Figure 12. Interviewing process at different city centers. Courtesy of the artist.
13. Figure 13. Joni P. Gordon, detail: *Bleached Identity*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.
14. Figure 14: Marlon James, *BLACKOUT: KGN 10, Jamaica*, 2013-2014
15. Figure 15: Ellen Gallagher, *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, enamel, rubber, ink on linen, 2016
16. Joni P. Gordon, *Some Rise to Fall*, 2023
17. Figure 16: Joni P. Gordon, *Untitled*, 2024

18. Figure 18: Joni P. Gordon, *[W]hole*, 2024

19. Figure 19: Joni P. Gordon, *[W]hole* detail, 2024

20. Figure 20: Joni P. Gordon, *[W]hole* detail, 2024

Abstract

My work raises critical questions about Black history, race, gender, beauty, and privilege. My practice also highlights the intersectionality of colorism and racism. I use materials such as cardboard rectangles with handwritten words, brown paper, doors defaced by scratches, fire, printed images, newspaper, and projected photographs to ask and answer those questions. I also use Work and Travel documents, broom and brush bristle, mop fiber, towels, and audio recordings of oral histories to exhibit invisible scars wrought by racist actions as physical and material manifestations.

My practice began after experiencing racial discrimination for the first time on a US work program where I worked as a room attendant at a hotel in Wisconsin. Being from Jamaica, a predominantly Black society, this was shocking and so I began to use art as therapy to aid in my healing. I started to incorporate the cleaning tools that I used on the work program to create art that showcased how the trauma of racial discrimination affected me psychologically. Since being in Saint Louis my art focused on historical issues that affect the Black community such as the East St. Louis Race Massacre in 1917, the Michael Brown shooting in 2014 and the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe Apartments.

Researching the history of Saint Louis made me curious about Jamaica, my home country and the potential hidden histories or public secrets in the society. Colorism stood out so I created art about it through sculpture, photography and sound - *Transcending Hues (Protest Wall, 2023* and *Vanitas Photographs, 2023*. One of the most valuable things that I learned from researching colorism in Jamaica is my privilege, since I am a light-skinned person, which led me to question my Blackness in my home country versus in the US.

My current work also asks, how can I adjust from being in a predominantly Black society from birth to now living in a primarily white nation? Did I have to experience racial

discrimination in the US in order to realize my privilege in Jamaica? How do I heal from the psychic scars caused from racial discrimination? Am I hiding? What am I hiding from?

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.

-Marcus Garvey

I. Introduction

As a multidisciplinary activist working primarily in photography, sculpture and sound, I am interested in unearthing hidden truths, public secrets or untold stories that affect the African diaspora. Artivism is the combination of art and activism. I give voice to those who are unheard. Katjivena Uazuvara's¹ book, *Mamma Penee: Transcending the Genocide* examines the Namibian genocide² through the personal experiences of the protagonist, Mama Penee. Uazuvara's traditional storytelling through the form of a first-person account is similar to how I collect personal narratives that either inform or become a part of my art practice. These narratives are often connected to a historical event or a social issue. My purpose is to continue on the path of unearthing truths and untold stories.

Mama Penee addresses the notion of hidden history during a conversation with her grandsons about what they learned at school:

At your school, the teachers can only teach you what is in the books, and these books were written by white people. The white people wrote those books with the aim of teaching you what was in their interests for you to learn. This was their way of telling you about your history and your way of life.³

I question my Black History and what I was taught in my secondary education. Is it factual or was this fabricated to suit the white man's interest? How do I know what is true, especially when I am being brainwashed by societal norms through various institutions? Being from a country considered independent yet still shaped and controlled by colonial practices⁴, the history of Jamaica was likely falsified. I observed in the US that the purpose of the histories, and education shared was to highlight the importance of what the white man did in an aim to gain wealth and power. In the US, the Jim Crow laws, from the late 19th and early 20th century, for example promoted racial segregation by retaining the best jobs, neighborhoods, parks, theater, restaurant,

schools, hospitals for white people.¹

My practice refers to Black History, so I am careful about the source of my information and gravitate to primary research. Being a Black artist, I think it is important to preserve and accurately depict key events in Black History such as social injustices, police brutality against the Black community, race massacres etcetera while acknowledging Black leaders and pioneers throughout the African Diaspora. For example, there is a collection of slave narratives titled, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938" that were recorded by white interviewers on behalf of the Work Progress Administration (WPA) through the Federal Writers Project.⁵ How authentic were these interviews?



Figure 1. Carrie Mae Weems, *Kitchen Table Series*, Silver print, 1990. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art.

I am inspired by the photographs of Carrie Mae Weems because of how her work focuses on Black representation as well as universal concerns such as gender and power. In conversation with bell hooks, a leading cultural critic, Weems states that her work goes beyond race into

¹ ("Jim Crow Laws: Definition, Facts & Timeline" 2024)

"previously undocumented emotional realms." For example, *The Kitchen Table Series*, 1990 (Fig. 1) discusses race, representation and gender politics. It shows the dynamic of a family using Black subjects. hooks believes that *The Kitchen Table Series* is "counterhegemonic in that it disturbs - it challenges and contests conventional perception"⁷ by inviting the viewer to see themselves in the image. Similarly, I want my art to be relatable, influential and impactful.

Racial discrimination, colorism, Black identity, healing, displacement and memory are the themes that animate my practice. Each artwork influenced the next. Generally, my approach to art making begins with identifying an issue that resonates with me, researching the issue, deciding on my premise, then visually translating my findings in the most impactful way. My process is both intentional and intuitive where the selection of the medium and materials are all planned, each having a meaning based on prior research, while the gelling of these materials is instinctual. I am interested in audience interaction by implicating the audience as a victim, perpetrator and a bystander through content and scale. I think about impact when I create my work, so most of my work either life-sized or bigger.

This text takes on a reflective approach starting from the beginning of my practice in 2021 to now, 2024. Through each chapter you will see how my layered and multidirectional practice evolved. For the past three years, my art has taken an 'inside'/ 'outside' approach, meaning the work I produce addresses issues that are both personal experience and historic record focusing on the African diaspora. The chapters will cover my awakening to my Black identity due to racial discrimination, Saint Louis' problematic history with the Black community, colorism in Jamaica and an exploration of my Blackness in Jamaica versus in the US. The awareness of my trauma, privilege and culture was heightened because of the exploration of Saint Louis' history with the Black community. Through art I step out of myself to see what was affecting me internally.

I mopped floors, changed the sheets others slept on and cleaned all kinds of slop in guests' rooms. I was a Jamaican student working as a room attendant at a hotel in Wisconsin, United States, to fund my final year of art school in Jamaica, through a US State Department Work and Travel Program⁸. I was focused on doing a good job, gaining work experience and making money to recoup what I had spent to get in the program. I planned to return to Jamaica with more money in my pocket. What I did not anticipate was what I was about to experience.

While working as a room attendant, myself and other Jamaican students were called Jamaican Donkey and putah. We were certainly not animals, neither was it the responsibility of our supervisors to determine or judge whether me or the others were 'whores' as the word putah suggested. To add to these insults, Jamaicans and Africans were overlooked, overworked and mistreated by our Latinx supervisors who favored persons whose skin tone was closer to white. To them, I was an object. A cleaning tool. A Mamie. A Slave. Certainly, I had not signed up for this type of degrading treatment. Or did I? I felt discriminated against as a person. I felt discriminated against for being black and Jamaican. For the first time in my life, I was subject to racial discrimination. It was a strange yet familiar feeling, like those gripping sad emotions that were stirred inside me when I watched the movies, Roots (1977) and The Help (2011).

II. Chapter 1

Where it all began: Awakening to the Effects of Blackness

I had never felt inferior in Jamaica because of race. I won every race I ran. I never ran one that I was not trained to win. Being in the US, I became conscious of another race that determined how I was treated. This was determined by the color of my skin and my African ancestry. My blackness. As Asia Jones suggests, I became "hyperconscious" of my race. Jones writes, "Being in the skin that I am in inevitably makes me "hyperconscious" to remarks with subtle insinuations about my race, which, to the untrained ear, may easily be missed."⁹ My experience as an immigrant worker facing racial discrimination on the US State Department's Work and Travel program deeply affected me and became the foundation of my art practice.



Figure 2. Joni P. Gordon, *All Mopped Up*. Mop fiber, cardboard, wire on plywood, 83.25 x 59 x 5.5 inches, 2021. Courtesy of Deborah Anzinger.



Figure 3. Joni P. Gordon, Silhouette created from self-portraits, digital image, 2018-2021. Courtesy of the artist.

The work, *All Mopped Up*, 2021 (Fig 2), represents the feeling of being overwhelmed, overworked and the internalization of the trauma of working in the U.S. under racial discrimination. It was created using photos of my body contorted in slouching positions - head to knee. The digital images of my body were transformed into digital silhouettes which transformed my identity into a black abstract shape (Figs. 3 & 4). The body position in the silhouettes embodies the emotions that are stored in my body, subconsciously protecting myself from further harm. The selected silhouette was hand drawn onto plywood. The outline of my body that was cut out using a jigsaw tool became the material substrate of the artwork. I stapled mop fibers and wove them onto mesh that took the form of the body. The fibers overcrowded the form in seas of various colors and patterns arranged in sections of white, blue, pink, green, orange and black. The work was created during the 2021 Coronavirus pandemic when there was a constant need for proper sanitation and mops were very expensive and scarce.¹⁰ I may have bought enough to open a store as I traveled all over Kingston, Jamaica to source approximately 500 mops to create this life-sized artwork. I was able to evoke an image of tiredness, burden, fear, loneliness, depression and isolation through the slouched body position and the mop fibers. The labor was implied as well as literal in assembling the work.

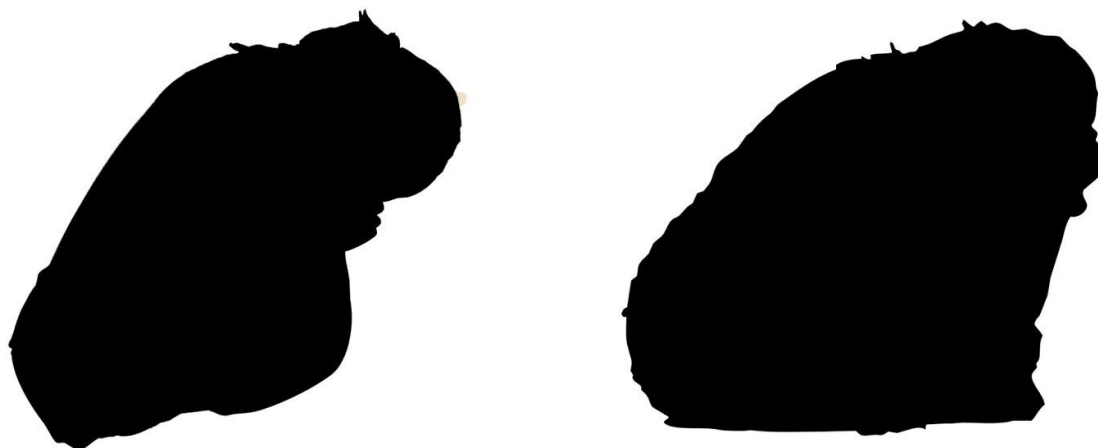


Figure 4: Joni P. Gordon, Silhouettes created from self-portraits, digital image, 2018-2021. Courtesy of the artist.

The black abstract shapes (Fig 3 & 4), used to inform *All Mopped Up* reminded me of the theme "black hole" mentioned by Kara Walker in an interview titled "Kara Walker. A Black Hole is Everything A Star Longs to Be."¹¹ Walker refers to it as a: paradoxical "hole which is an emptiness and [w]hole which is a fullness." She goes on to mention that the theme black hole is also about "Blackness in a sort of white colonial landscape, a kind of non-being or non-entity." This accurately depicts my experience in America, feeling displaced and longing to be whole in a foreign country.

My artwork *All Mopped Up* (Fig. 2) was created to aid in my healing process and to highlight the scars that linger from my experience of being racially discriminated against. The artwork symbolizes how I was objectified, perceived as a cleaning tool. Mop fibers represent the scars left behind which can mentally, emotionally and physically overwhelm and poison the victim. The fibers obscure the body which communicate how the trauma of discrimination altered my perspective of the world and the treatment of different racial groups as well as my self-esteem. I was a victim. I was exposed to and affected by the filth present in my environment. I was led to question America's audacity in outsourcing skilled workers then treating them inhumanely. My work openly portrays America as a country that exploits immigrant workers - in what resembles modern day slavery and segregation based on racial discrimination. The work targets Caribbean nationals who flee to America for what they call a "better life."¹² That "better life" should represent improved wages, proper living, healthcare and social conditions. Instead, it often consists of racial discrimination, being overworked, being exploited and unhappy arranged marriages. Many stay in these situations until their contract ends or better ones come. Through the obscuring of the figure by the mop fibers, my work, *All Mopped Up* shows how remaining in these unhealthy situations for a "better life" can affect one's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.



Figure 5. Kara Walker, *Virginia's Lynch Mob*, cut paper silhouettes, unspecified size, 1998. Courtesy of the artist's website.

I reference Kara Walker's art practice because of how we both confront America and its history of racism, slavery, and historical injustices. Like Walker, the intention of my work is to implicate the audience through the use of scale. Walker creates monumental silhouette tableau installations and sculptures to provoke the viewer. She challenges her audience to confront the truth about America's dark racial history. In *Virginia's Lynch Mob*, 1998 (Fig. 5) Walker uses cut paper silhouette forms to translate a lynching that is about to happen.¹³ Walker's multiple life-sized figures incriminate the viewer in the collective trauma of African American history and injustices. Both *All Mopped Up* and *Virginia's Lynch Mob* consist of forms that embody the collective trauma and communal healing of the Black community. I concede, as does Walker, that there is always room in my work for communal healing, an opportunity for the audience “to view oneself as a kind of clay that is being shaped and reshaping.”¹⁴ Walker's work also

contains a duality confronting the audience, using whimsical forms which at first glance can appear humorous but are interpreted differently upon further inspection. Similarly, the texture and colors of the mop fibers engage the viewers senses but transforms when the audience knows the content.

I am back in the US. This time to pursue my Master's Degree in Visual Arts. My experience is now from the perspective of a student from Jamaica, studying in St. Louis, Missouri. Culture shock met me at the arrival gate of the city. The informalities in greetings and attire, robotic smiles displayed by persons when greeting friends and strangers were new to me. Encountering this, I reflected on the warm smiles I left in Jamaica, how well dressed everyone was at the airport, as my family waving energetically bade me farewell. I came to realize quickly that I was no longer in Jamaica. I missed the food, the weather and the people of Jamaica. I longed for jerk chicken from the jerk man on the street, home cooked curry chicken with all the right spices, escovitch fish from Hellshire and cheese patties from Juici Patties. The tradition of eating bun and cheese during Easter and the gathering of family and friends with food on Christmas day; I missed these the most. But I was now in a different place, with different people and culture. I quickly realized I was in a segregated city.

While slowly adjusting to St Louis, I found interest in the history of St. Louis in relation to the Black community. I discovered that the development of this city is rooted in the escape and erasure of the Black community under the guise of urban development¹⁵ and previously in unbridled violence. Here I am again in a racially divided state. This time I was intrigued, ready to investigate and make art about these injustices.

III. Chapter 2

A History Bigger than Me: The East St. Louis Race Massacre

Through research, I was introduced to the history of St. Louis concerning the Black community. I observed through various texts the patterns of escape and erasure among the Black community due to structural racism and racial capital. In *The Broken Heart of America*, Walter Johnson outlined that St. Louis hosted many of the events central to the history of the United States such as the Lewis and Clark expedition, the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014 which brought the Black Lives Matter movement into national awareness,¹⁶ the East St. Louis Race Massacre of 1917,¹⁷ and other race massacres that affected African Americans. I was inspired, eager to pursue and share my views on the preservation of memory that affects a specific group of people and the ethics involved.

In the Fall of 2022, I visited Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma where the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre occurred. I observed efforts being made within the community to preserve the memory of the massacre that happened there. I saw murals commemorating the race massacre, markers of the location of businesses before they were destroyed, and museums dedicated to the violent history. Visiting East St. Louis, I noticed that there is little to no effort in preserving the memory of the East St. Louis Massacre. The East St. Louis 1917 Centennial Commission & Cultural initiative¹⁸ installed historical markers (See Appendix B) with a website that would take you on a tour of the events of the massacre, however, when I went to explore the area, I realized that the website was not functioning. I decided I would create work about the East St. Louis Race Massacre and preserve its memory through art.

How can I use art to preserve and amplify the history of the East St. Louis Race Massacre? Insight came from an interview with Dhati Kennedy¹⁹ in *Smithsonian Magazine*.

The story highlights Kennedy's recollection of the race massacre:

According to my uncles, it took four hours to get across that river. . . They fashioned a raft out of old doors and charred wood to cross the Mississippi River and get to the St. Louis side. The raft [sprung] leaks, but they were able to get across.²⁰

I found that story to be heart-rending. Kennedy's recollection symbolizes the resilience, survival and hope, and escape of the Black community as they flee violence. Immediately, I decided to use doors as the main element in my artwork called *Layers of Truth*, 2022 (Fig. 6).

After analyzing the narrative of the East St. Louis Race Massacre, I began my process. I sourced three doors from an antique warehouse, a huge dusty junk yard called Junque that houses St. Louis' architectural discards. My cousin accompanied me to the depot and transported the doors on the backseat of his car. Transporting the doors meant that the front seat where I sat was pushed close to the dashboard creating a most uncomfortable ride. Of course, my discomfort is no comparison to what the Kennedy family experienced crossing the Mississippi River using doors. The thought of their perilous journey to escape haunted my mind. Emotions of fear, dread and anxiety consumed my body. I could imagine them trying to navigate the rough and unpredictable waters of the Mississippi on a make-shift boat while also evading gunshots from white mobs.



Figure 6. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth*, antique doors, rope & newspaper clippings, 39 x 41.5 x 79.5 inches, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

The sourced doors were old and worn, with paint stripping away, exposing the raw wood, rusty door handles and a circular hole where a handle should be. The doors allude to time. I applied a different technique to each door as a way to refer to the erasure of the East St. Louis Race Massacre. I printed archival photographs of the race massacre onto both sides of the gray door using image transfer. Since fire was used as a weapon by the white mobs against Blacks, I transformed a brown door to burnt charcoal using a blowtorch and a propane cylinder. I then collaged newspaper clippings from 1917 and 2014 on the charred door and torched sections of the clippings. I chose not to manipulate the green door as it was perfect with its transparent glass. It was sandwiched between the charred and gray doors, allowing the viewer to see the others through it (See Fig 7). It felt like a portal teleporting the viewer to either the written history of the massacre or the horrid aftermath depending on which side of the door they look through. I attached the doors to the wall with hinges to make the work interactive.



Figure 7. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing the portrait of Michael Brown through the glass of the middle door. Courtesy of the artist.

I intertwined a 100 feet rope through the doors to hold them together, which made it difficult to open and access the information on each door (see Fig 8). The doors made an eerie creaking sound whenever moved. The sound acted as a wakeup call for St. Louisans to acknowledge their history. I was asking the audience to interact while making it difficult for them, thinking about how the East St Louis Race Massacre was a crucial part of Black history, yet is not taught in the Illinois public-school history curriculum.²¹ I wanted to implicitly incorporate the role of the rope in lynching by wrapping the rope around door knobs, under and over the doors and on the wall. At one end of the rope is a noose hanging from a charred tree branch, forcefully protruding from the back of the burnt door. Each door carries its own message and together they highlight a history of racial violence against the Black community in Saint Louis.



Figure 8. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing how the rope is woven through the doors. Courtesy of the artist.

I question the role and function of memorials and monuments in my practice as they correlate to my intention to preserve memory and history. Maya Lin, an artist who created the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial stated in her proposal that, "The memorial is composed not as an unchanging monument, but as a moving composition, to be understood as we move into and out of it."²² A monument is fixed, whereas a memorial allows for interaction of its space. *Layers of Truth*, is a memorial as it allows the viewer to interact within its bounds. The doors became a metaphor for the Black body, symbolizing how the victims of the massacre were burnt to death or hanged during the riot. The use of the doors is also symbolic of the rejection, false hope and lack of access experienced by the Black folks whose intention was to escape the Jim Crow Laws and gain work.

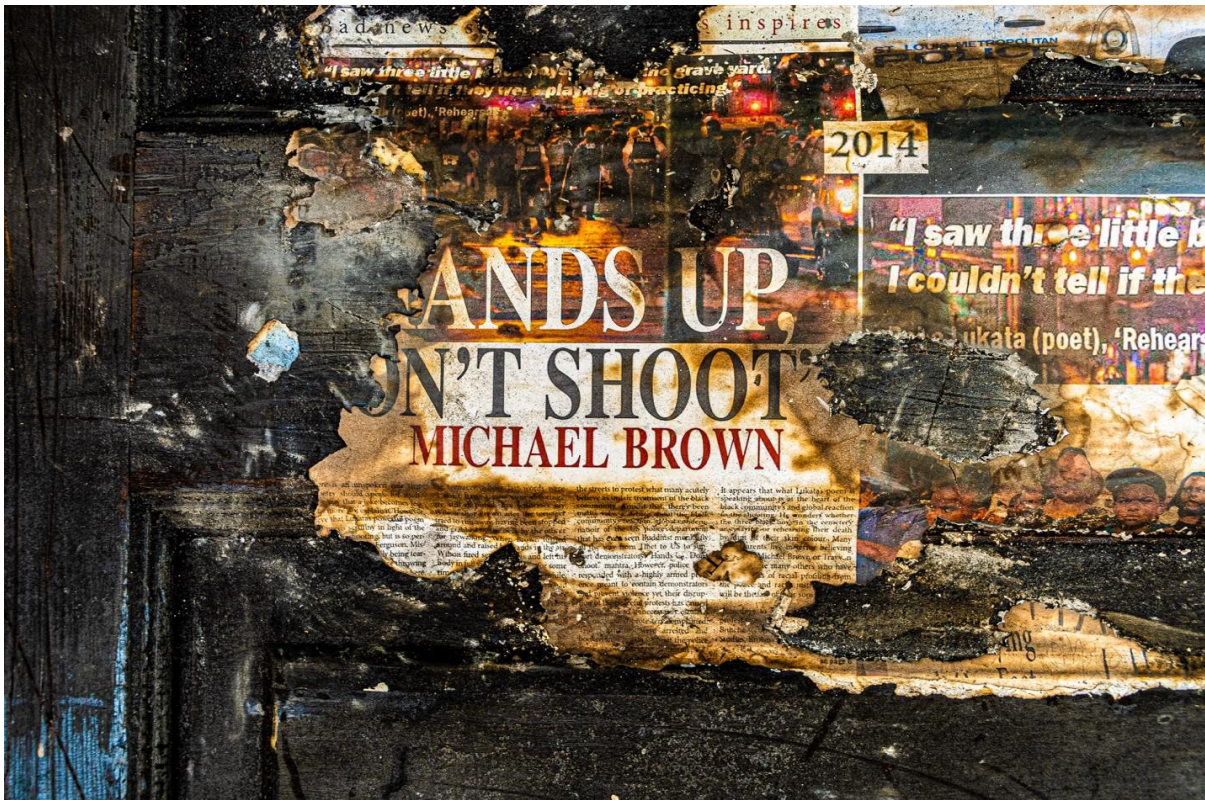


Figure 9. Joni P. Gordon, *Layers of Truth* detail showing burnt newspaper articles of the Michael Brown shooting. Courtesy of the artist.

Layers of Truth focuses on my encounter with St. Louis as a foreigner and my identity as a Black person in its history. I translate themes of escape, erasure and violence towards African Americans in the summer of 1917 through the history of the East St. Louis Race Massacre. The work also contains a reference to recent events of police racial violence, specifically the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson,²³ (see Fig. 9) which highlights the recurrent violence against the Black community in St. Louis. Unsurprisingly, survivors are still dealing with the aftermath of the East St. Louis Race Massacre. Kennedy confirms that, "To this day, the family tells children answering the door to look out of the window and stand aside-somebody might be waiting outside with a gun."²⁴

The practice of artist Crystal Campbell inspires my own art practice and the way I created *Layers of Truth*, 2022. They were named the 2023-2024 Henry L. and Natalie E. Freud Teaching Fellow at the Sam Fox School. In the teaching fellowship lecture, Campbell described their art practice as an excavation of public secrets through multiple mediums such as installation, sound, performance, drawing, film and public interventions.²⁵ Their work centers around the under loved and under spoken histories that amplify narratives, people and histories that they wish to highlight. Though I may phrase the description of my art practice differently, it is synonymous with Campbell's practice.

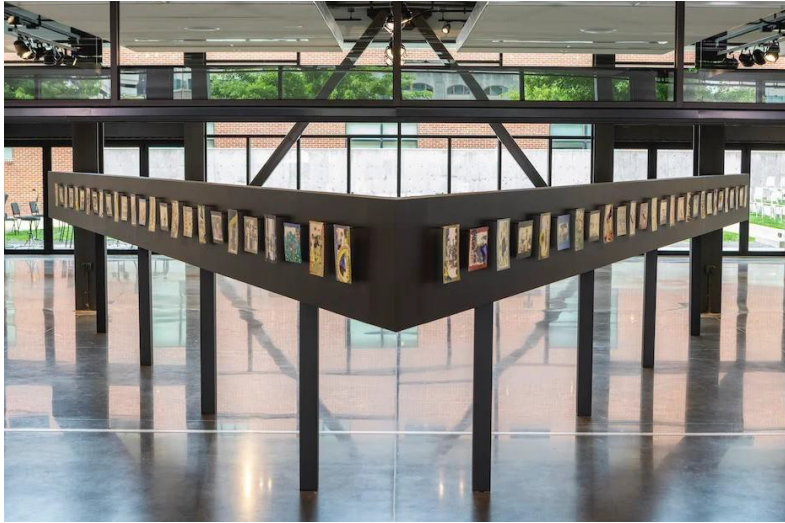


Figure 10. Crystal Z. Campbell, *Notes from Black Wall Street: Upon a Century*, mixed Media Paintings on archival paper, each work on paper is 8.5 x 11 or 11 x 8.5 inches, 100 works on custom built structure measuring 110 feet x 5 feet x 2.5 feet fabricated by Jeff Sellers, 2021. Courtesy of the artist website.

Campbell's work, *Notes from Black Wall Street*, 2021 (Fig. 10) is a memorial to the Black lives that were lost in the thriving Black community of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma during the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921. On the centennial of the race massacre, Campbell created *Notes from Black Wall Street*, which is a 110 feet long, black, narrow, rectangular wall in the shape of a 'v' - 55 feet on each side. The work consists of archival images of Black people succeeding in Greenwood, painted on top and resembling a film strip which could allude to the stories of these Black people being played as the viewer walks around the wall. Though from Oklahoma, Campbell was not aware of the race massacre as it was not taught in schools, similar to the lack of education on the East St. Louis Race Massacre. Campbell posits that the Tulsa race massacre was a multigenerational hidden history and wondered where it might be stored in the body.

The difference between Campbell's work *Notes from Black Wall Street* and my work, *Layers of Truth*, is that Campbell focused on the prosperous community of Greenwood, amplifying the voices of residents and their resistance to the race massacre as a way to

memorialize it. My work is a metaphorical memorial representation of the East St. Louis Race Massacre that addresses the mistreatment of Blacks from East St. Louis and challenges the viewer to acknowledge the memory of this pogrom. Though Campbell uses photographs and I use doors as materials for our work, we both drew upon the archive to create a statement. Campbell and I share a similar intention in highlighting hidden histories and public secrets through our work.

The summer sun did a pelt in Mobay.²⁶ Me walk so till me could fin' somebody fi talk to. Nuff people did ready fi talk but once dem hear say mi ago record dem, dem change dem mind. The one dem that say no, a di one dem that bleach. What me think 'bout dis? What dem a hide? Dem can't shame dem bleach, 'cause is a great accomplishment fi dem. Is the scamming capital this still, so dem must a keep dem voice a secret until dem haffi make a foreign call. After all they must be wondering why this browning asking to them 'bout bleaching.

IV. Chapter 3

Colorism: My Privilege Revealed

Colorism is a social ill that has influenced the practice of skin bleaching in Jamaica.²⁷ The unequal treatment and discrimination against individuals based on their skin tone define colorism. This devastatingly biased system privileges and upholds Eurocentric beauty standards marked by lighter skin, straighter hair, and a narrower nose.²⁸ Centuries of colonization have rendered Jamaicans slaves to European indoctrination. Jamaica was established through slavery and has an indigenous population of predominantly Black people and people of mixed races with varied skin colors.²⁹ At the time of Jamaica's independence in 1962, the leaders, who were primarily members of the brown elite, portrayed Jamaica as a multiracial society through the national motto, "Out of many, one People". The motto promotes racial equality among the people of Jamaica further supporting claims of unity among people of different skin tones. The Honorable Norman Washington Manley,³⁰ the first and only Premier of Jamaica and the one who helped to coin the motto states:

[We] are made up of predominantly Negro or of mixed blood, but also with large numbers of others, and nowhere in the world has more progress been made in developing a non-racial society in which also color is not psychologically significant.³¹

In this Anglo-Caribbean country, it is rare for people to refer to their racial identity as 'Black'. I join Stuart Hall,³² a Jamaica theorist's recollection of never hearing "anybody either call themselves or refer to anybody else as "Black." I heard 1000 other words." Hall went on to say, "my grandmother could differentiate about 15 different shades between light brown and dark brown."³³ Most Jamaicans avoid racial classification by referring to someone's identity based on the shade of brown of their skin tone. For me, I can remember knowing I was Black but never vocalized it until I was a young adult. 'Black' referred to a very dark-skinned person and

'brown' to a very light-skinned person. Generally, we address people based on observation and description. Holger Henke, a political scientist whose dissertation was on Jamaica's foreign relations, describes this well:

For a Caribbean person to call or (nick-) name a fellow islander of Chinese background "Mr. Chin," a mixed person a "browning" or "red-skin girl," a white person "whitey," or a black person "Blacka" is usually not a show of disrespect but rather a neutral observation turned into a form of address. Whereas in the United States, the category white generally means to exclude all those who have any "non-white blood," in Jamaica, "white" has been an inclusive category that embraces not only Anglo-Saxons, but also Jews, Syrians, and even some people with multiracial or Chinese background[s].³⁴

The neutral observations mentioned by Henke constitutes the social status and hierarchy in Jamaica with the dark-skinned person at the bottom of the pyramid. The closer one's complexion is to whiteness, historically and in many ways today, the more privilege is extended in all aspects of life. Growing up I knew I had a lighter skin tone than most of my friends and family members because I was constantly reminded through catcalls- *Psst. Browning, you skin clean ee!* -and my maternal grandmother's praises-*you a the only brown gran' pickney you granny have*. My experience in the US, being a subject to racial discrimination and critiquing Saint Louis' problematic history with the Black community, heightened my awareness of colorism in Jamaica.

Through personal narratives and skin portraiture, my work *Bleached Identity*, 2023 (Fig. 11) brings awareness to the issue of colorism and its physical and mental effects on the Jamaican population. My work also highlights the potentially irreversible impact of skin bleaching. The creation of this work took both a spontaneous and calculated approach to engaging participants. In summer 2023, I traveled to rural and urban city centers in Jamaica, identifying a total of five (5) random persons and eight (8) selected persons (see Fig. 12). I chose participants from a broad demographic - of varying skin tones, persons who lighten their skin tone, those who don't, persons from multiple generations (16yrs-80yrs), various gender identities and sexual

orientations, and persons with diverse educational backgrounds. Along with recording personal narratives, I used my phone to photograph skin portraits of the persons I interviewed and those I did not. I used my phone to avoid unwanted attention and to help assure potential participants. I captured over ninety (90) macro skin portraits and displayed sixty-one (61) images in a grid. Sixty-one (61) coincides with Jamaica's celebration of sixty-one (61) years of independence from the British Monarchy.³⁵

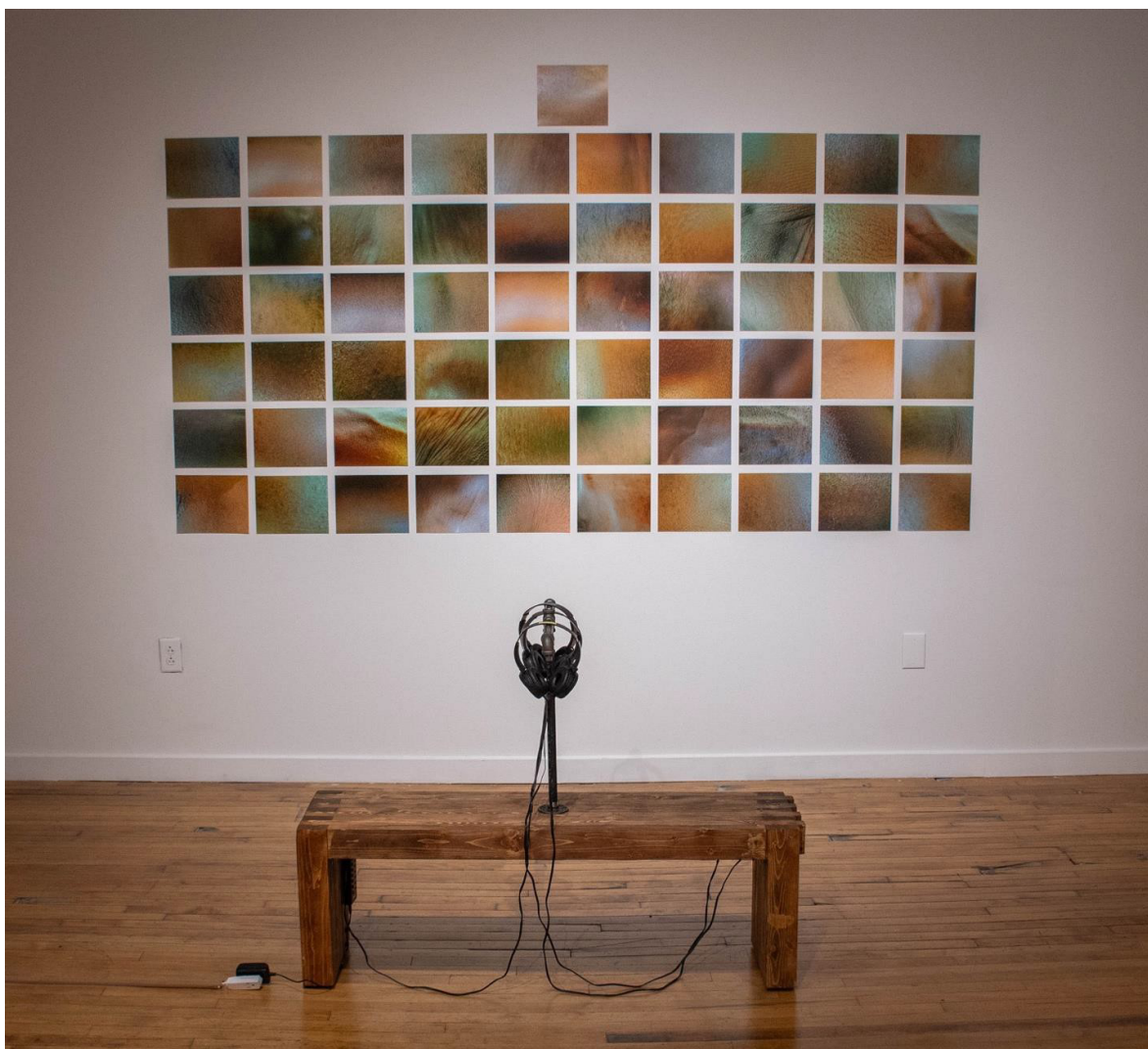


Figure 11. Joni P. Gordon, *Bleached Identity*, personal narratives, stained and inkjet prints, each photograph is 10 x 8 inches. Installation is approximately 111 x 109 x 60 inches, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

I wanted the viewer to be comfortable while interacting with the work, spending time looking at the entire grid from a distance and viewing the work as a collection, so I constructed a wooden bench, stained it in various shades of brown and divided the bench in two (2) sections with an industrial styled 'T' shaped headphone stand (see Fig 13). Made from metal pipes, the headphone stand creates an awkward divide between the sitters, similar to how dark-skinned people are segregated from light-skinned Jamaicans due to colorism. The headphone stand (see Fig. 13) housed three headphones, each having different color earmuffs - black, green and yellow referring to the colors of the Jamaica flag. I labelled each headphone with color stickers corresponding to the title of each interview- *Formalities*, *Informalities* and *Improv* (see Appendix C). *Formalities* are the narratives of selected participants; *Informalities* are narratives of random participants and *Improv* is a recording of my spontaneous visits to stores to purchase bleaching products.



Figure 12. Interviewing process at different city centers. Courtesy of the artist.

One of the most memorable cities that I visited was Montego Bay, where I aimed to record six (6) persons. I remember walking in the blazing sun with my equipment bag on my back and my Xoom recorder in my hand, seeking participants for my research. Despite the scorching sun, I hesitated to approach anyone as I was scared to start a conversation. When I gained the courage, I began each conversation with: *Hi, I am a college student doing research on*

different skin tones and the effects of bleaching. Do you mind if I ask you some questions and record it? (See Appendix D). A majority of the people wanted to participate until they were told that their responses would be recorded. Some agreed after I convinced them that I only needed their vocal responses. After my first three affirmative answers, I realized that my recorder did not capture their responses. I can recall my anger, frustration and the determination to quit. I thought of the boiling sun and how hard it was to get a positive response. Thinking of the project's completion motivated me to continue and I recorded three additional persons. In total, I approached approximately twenty persons in Montego Bay but only six participated.

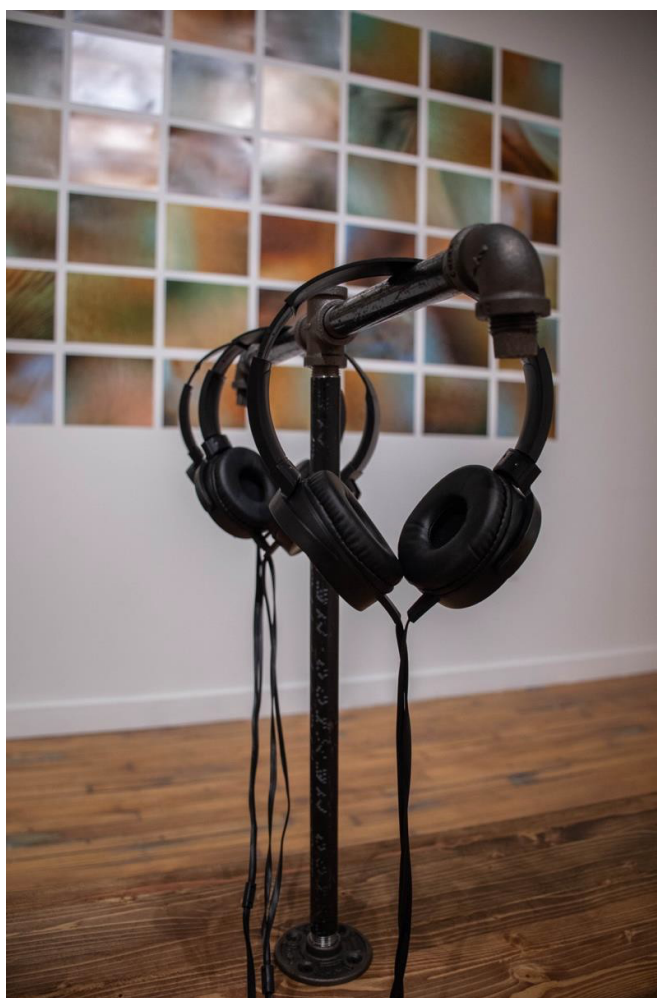


Figure 13. Joni P. Gordon, detail: *Bleached Identity*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

From the oral narratives, I gathered that there is a privilege associated with the lighter skin tone which is widely embraced and sought after. One participant from my audio narrative *Formalities* (see Appendix C) states:

I have seen it where persons with light skin tend to get more privileges. They are the ones highlighted. They are the ones who tend to get featured in our magazines, our newspapers. These persons tend to be the ones, especially when I was growing up, [who] got the jobs at the front desk. They are the ones the teacher would call on to do special thing with them while the darker-skinned person tends to get more of the menial task. For example, the little black boy is sent to sweep the floor.³⁶

This hierarchy and its effect is evident through the skin-bleaching epidemic in Jamaica. I found that the persons who bleach are from working-class backgrounds and the common reason offered by these individuals is that having a lighter skin tone allows for preferential treatment, better opportunities, and self-confidence. A participant from the audio narrative of my artwork *Bleached Identity, Informalities* (see Appendix C) expresses that being brown helps to complement the clothes he wears therefore boosting his self-confidence:

Me like how it look pan me. It just bring me out. If you have a brown skin [and] you wear certain clothes it bring you out more. It show you up more especial white or red or so. So the clothes would a bring you out more when you kind a brown-ish³⁷

There were also persons who were prescribed skin lightening creams by a dermatologist as a skin treatment for a short period but prolonged the use of the prescription due to skin lighting effects. Though these creams are illegal if not prescribed by a doctor, they are sold on the streets and in stores (see Appendix E).

Marlon James, a Jamaican artist, explored the skin bleaching epidemic in Jamaica through his photo series *BLACKOUT: KGN 10, Jamaica, 2013-2014* (Fig 14). He photographed a small group of adolescents from Jamaica's inner-city communities in Kingston to understand the skin bleaching practice and highlight their notion of beauty. He found that some persons were unaware of their reason for skin bleaching and believed it was just style, while others believed they looked better with a lighter skin tone, consequently increasing their self-

confidence.

Through flash photography and simple compositions James highlights the evidence of skin lightening on the portraits from the photo series. The flash flattens the image and aggressively reveals the harsh effects of skin lightening. The participants face has a lighter shade than the shade of their body, a residue of the products being used on the face, as well as, skin blemishes. Based on the background of the images-graffiti walls and old less maintained buildings-I can tell that this is the inner-city part of Kingston Jamaica. Though the composition is simple, their eyes reveal that these participants are longing for acceptance.



Figure 14. Marlon James, *BLACKOUT: KGN 10, Jamaica*, photographs, 2013-2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Similar to James, my intention for *Bleached Identity* was not to denounce bleaching but to understand the practice. I also intended on exploring the root cause of colorism. James' findings were similar to mine. However, our conclusions based on the participants' responses diverge. He concluded that *these sentiments are perhaps born out of a flawed concept of beauty that prevails in Jamaica and throughout the majority of images put forward globally through*

advertising.³⁸ Though I agree with James' conclusion, I believe that there is a deeper reasoning behind it. I believe the skin bleaching epidemic in Jamaica is due to colorism which is a residue of colonialism. It was through slavery that Black people were taught that being white is better, hence whiteness is sought after by the Black man,³⁹ the veil of superiority internalized.

Unlike James, I chose to capture skin portraits rather than the persons face to protect their identity because skin bleachers are stigmatized in Jamaica. It was important for me that the skin portraits from my work, *Bleached Identity* (Fig 11) were displayed in a grid to show how diverse the people of Jamaica are as well as covertly challenge the viewer to try to decipher who was skin lightening and who was not. The grid display also allowed the audience to see all the skin portraits at once while listening to the audio recordings activating the senses of listening and vision simultaneously. I think the kaleidoscope of skin colors takes the viewer into a meditative phase allowing them to focus on the audio. Engaging participants was a new way of working for me and highlighted the activism aspect of my practice. Through this experience, I recognized and now acknowledge my privilege.

What does it mean to be Black in Jamaica versus being Black in the US? How can I adjust from being in a predominantly Black society from birth to now living in a primarily white nation? Am I hiding? Did I have to experience racial discrimination in the US in order to realize my privilege in Jamaica? How do I heal from the psychic scars caused from racial discrimination?

V. Chapter 4

I Long to be Whole–Fullness

My first experience of feeling displaced in Saint Louis was when I visited an art gallery. I was the only Black person in the room. Everyone was white; even the gallery walls were white. I felt uncomfortable, confused and self-conscious because this was an unfamiliar space both geographically and emotionally. I slowly and unconsciously started to hide by being quiet and withholding my opinions in predominantly white spaces. I observed my surroundings based on two perspectives—through my own eyes as well as through the eyes of a white society that perceives Black people as strange or an alien. My work *[W]hole*, 2024 (Fig. 18) depicts this double-consciousness through the layering of material. Some layers are covered with paint or material and cannot be seen while other layers the viewer has to find the image by adjusting their body. W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American sociologist, describes double consciousness as the quintessential existence of Black people in a white society. He states:

[Black people are] **born** with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only let him see himself through the revelation of the other world. 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 [Black person]; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁰

Ellen Gallagher is an artist who creates layered paintings through "a mode of archeological extraction of history and matter".⁴¹ I am intrigued by Gallagher's process- "the physical act of layering her canvases and carving meaning into her work"⁴² - that creates textured surfaces hinting at nature, subjectivity, and identity. Adrienne Edwards, the curator of the 2016 group show untitled "Blackness in Abstraction", describes how Gallagher applies multiple types of paper and printed material from obsolete Black American magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet* to

the canvas before carving into the surface.⁴³ Edwards goes on to state that Gallagher's creative process has an "air of randomness, reflecting the importance of chance in the painting's development."⁴⁴



Figure 15. Ellen Gallagher, installation view: *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, enamel, rubber, ink on linen, 2016. Courtesy of Power Plant Contemporary Gallery.

I am particularly drawn to Gallagher's four-painting series, *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, 2016 (Fig. 15). The black surfaces of the series use rubber, enamel, ink and collage to create depth which in turn creates an immersive experience. Like *Negroes Battling in a Cave* my work, *[W]hole* (Fig. 18) invites the viewer to come close through its intense black and heavily layered surface. The psychic scars that were once hidden become physical, appearing on the surface through creases and openings. I can describe the surfaces of my artwork like Edwards describes Gallagher's paintings as "fugitive surfaces - paradigms of resistance, as what may have remained invisible rises through the cracks, animating from within, and up in the raking black light; a line of flight."⁴⁵ The surface of Gallagher's work *Negroes Battling in a Cave*, (Fig. 15) is completely reflective with refined and rounded layered edges that appears to be strategically placed. Though similar in many ways, my artwork is different as it has a raw, rough and mostly matte finish with varying shade of brown, white, black and grey.

In my third semester, I created work about the history of Pruitt-Igoe highlighting the

experiences past residents had while living there in the mid-20th century. This work was to become my thesis project. I intended to create a multi-media, site-specific installation composed of objects, projections and sound. The key element of the installation would be an artist book, which would consist of photographs, archival imagery, collage, and writings. Audio narratives that I collected from at least five past Pruitt-Igoe residents during interviews would be included in the book as well as presented through a sound dome. Additionally, projected imagery of the site, objects and text would be strategically placed to occupy the exhibition space. By the end of my third semester, I had completed the draft of the book (Fig. 16) and was ready to start working on the other elements of the installation over the break leading into my final semester.



Figure 16. Joni P. Gordon, *Some Rise to Fall*, 11.75 x 9.25 inches, photography book, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

In January, I became overwhelmed by the content of the Pruitt-Igoe project since it is based on a sensitive, psychosocial, socio-political and racial history. Working on this project for thesis did not feel authentic as I believe the installation would need more time and space that my thesis could not provide. So, in mid-February, I went on a retreat to rediscover my voice and to find out what my work needed to communicate. This spiritual journey was holistic, consisting of a healthy natural diet, fasting until noon, meditation, exercise, nature walks, and journaling. As a

way to reconnect with my voice I trusted my intuition and was spontaneous with my actions.

During my meditations, I repetitively saw visions of a black structure that went from the wall to the ground. I knew then that I was to create an artwork with a black-on-black technique discussing my Blackness in the US versus in Jamaica. This technique utilizes the color black in different shades and finishes that causes a push and pull effect. Previously, I used a black-on-black technique (see Fig. 17) to make a screen-printed self-portrait. The background was black with hints of gold and the portrait was hidden in the work so the viewer had to search for the image. It was about dealing with the transition from having locks to now having loose hair. I believe that the screen print work also influenced my current work.

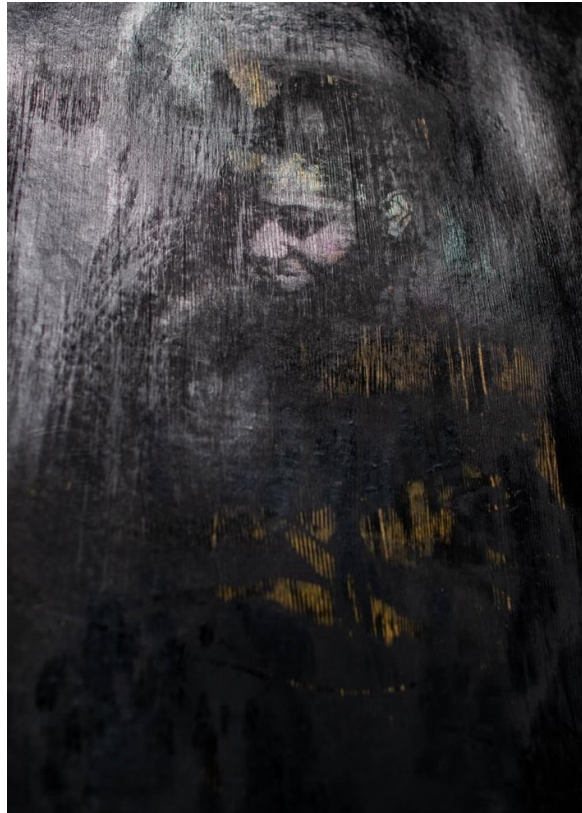


Figure 17. Joni P. Gordon, *Untitled* 24 x 18 inches, paint, screen print on chipboard, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

I returned from my retreat a new person with clarity and confidence about my work. I was eager to start creating, even though I was not clear about the physicality of the work. However, I was so in tune to my voice that the work started to create itself. Whenever I felt stuck or about to begin working, I would take a breath and ask, *what do you need?* Listening for what the material wanted, I would then know exactly what to do next. Sometimes my responses were bold and irreversible-like cutting a chunk out of one of the panels-but those decisions were always what the work needed. My installation *[W]hole*, (Fig 18) is an 8 x 10.5 x 4 ft wooden structure made from six 4 x 4 feet panels stacked on top of each other-three panels at the bottom and three on top. The two stacked panels to the left and right corner are angled at 45 ° from the wall. My work *[W]hole*, (Fig 18) takes the shape of a trifold dressing mirror or a room divider. I decided on that shape because I wanted the viewer to be surrounded by the work when they get close to see the details. The panels variably have holes, sutures, stitching, scratching, Band-Aids, hints of brown and white, and more. Each panel is painted black but has its own message and unique finish due to the different textures added and the altering of the surface.

The process of creating my installation, *[W]hole* (Fig 18) is intuitive. I am being self-guided in the selection and application of materials placed on the surface. The layers are created from brown paper bags, cardboard and Band-aids to refer to colorism, capitalism, and segregation respectively, which affect the Black community. The brown paper bag refers to the Brown Paper Bag Test which is a form of racial discrimination practiced by African Americans in the 20th century history in which the individual's skin is compared to the color of a brown color paper bag.⁴⁶ The cardboard refers to capitalism in that cardboard is taken from nature, processed and used to carry goods from one place to another, which is similar to the way Black people were taken from their homeland to be slaves historically and now are recruited from their country to be used as commodities through work programs. The Band-aids refer to segregation

as there is hardly any color matching the skin tone of Black people. What does it mean to actively cover these materials with black paint? It is a protest! A reclamation of space!

The title of the installation, *[W]hole* refers to the holes or scars created from racial discrimination and the journey to completeness. Throughout the creation of this piece, I was thinking about colonialism, intersectionality, colorism, racial discrimination, Blackness, healing emptiness and displacement. In Jamaica, I am a light-skinned woman or browning and that comes with privilege. In the US however, there is no stratification. I am a Black woman and that comes with peril. Creating the work, I think:

Black is a hole-emptiness.

A void in a colonial landscape.

A fragmentation and displacement of self.

I used the color black to suggest a void, the emptiness I feel in a white landscape which I repair, stitch and suture. Black represents the trauma I experience that now causes me to think like my perpetrators. To think that I do not belong in certain spaces in the US or am not worthy enough for opportunities because I am Black. James Baldwin, an African American author and civil rights activist, states in a conversation with Nikki Giovanni, an African American poet, writer, and activist that:

What the world does to you, if the world does it to you enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself. You become a collaborator, an accomplice to your own murderers, because you believe the same things they do.⁴⁷



Figure 18. Joni P. Gordon, *[W]hole*, 8 x 10.5 x 4 ft, paint, sand, brown paper, cardboard, yarn and acrylic on masonite, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

[W]hole (Fig 18) is cathartic. Though the figure is not physically present, the body is evident in the work as most of the panels contain my raw emotions—anger, rage, hurt, confusion—based on the experiences of racial discrimination and the attempt to heal from the psychic scars. There are open scars in the panels and attempts to suture them or cover them with Band-Aids. The wounds are still open, and the sewing is incomplete with the needle hanging from the panel (see Fig 19) or the Band-aids are unable to cover the wound. Through the work:

*I long to be whole-fulness.
For my Blackness to be complete.
To reclaim the missing piece.*

*So, in anguish I try to mend the psychic scars.
Will they heal?*



Figure 19. Detail: Joni P. Gordon, one panel of *[W]hole*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

For one panel (Fig 20), I intertwined dark brown yarn in holes where white yarn would be and from that hole a light brown yarn would emerge. Each yarn color has its own path but at different points they unwillingly connect hence the tying of the strings referring to intersectionality. After creating the surface, I realized that it looked like the topographies of a map and that the yarn travelling through the panel is me trying to figure out who I am and where is my place in the world. This discovery made me think about how it was through travel that I experienced the trauma of racial discrimination when I came to the US in 2018 on a Work Program.

[W]hole begins the journey to fullness.



Figure 20. Detail: Joni P. Gordon, one panel of *[W]hole*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

Art allows us to speak boldly about a cause. Art helps us find catharsis with others-hope, joy, healing grief and celebration. Art helps us tell stories bigger than ourselves. Everyone can bloom from trauma. Art tells us we are not alone. Art shows us what's possible. Art is a power for social change. Art is a form of love. -Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya

V. Conclusion and Aspirations

My personal experiences influence my art practice. Being a victim of racial discrimination in the US influenced my art career. Traveling to St. Louis and observing how the city neglects the history of marginalized racial groups, especially the Black community, inspired me to create work about the East St. Louis Race Massacre and Pruitt-Igoe. Critiquing St. Louis' history influenced the critique of my home county, Jamaica, through colorism.

Through my time in St. Louis, I realized that my focus was on creating art for external catharsis while neglecting my needs. The more I researched these issues, the more I internalized them, draining my energy and subsequently losing my artistic voice. Though very passionate about the artwork I was creating, it began to feel foreign and inauthentic. I took a step back, reflected on my artistic journey and questioned the purpose of my art in this time. Because of the findings from my work *Bleached Identify* (Fig. 11) - the privilege of light-skinned Jamaicans - I reflected on my Black identity in Jamaica versus in the US. I was not aware of my privilege as mentioned by one of my interviewees.

I feel like brown people in Jamaica don't realize that they are actually Black as well because there was this presentation on colorism but it was being presented by two light-skinned women. They were only giving us examples of their colorism experiences because they exited Jamaica. So, they could not see that their contribution to colorism was even happening in that space and time. When you are privileged, you don't see that you are privileged. These women only saw that they were being mistreated when they came out of the country. I don't have to come out of Jamaica to know that there is racism because I am facing racism from the people [who I am not supposed to receive it from], which is colorism.⁴⁸

For the short time I went home in the summer, I observed so much discrimination against dark-skinned persons. In Jamaica I never experienced discrimination due of my skin tone because I am light-skinned. In the US, however, my Blackness is more evident causing discrimination.

[W]hole is a testament to the reclamation of my artistic voice which transforms my art practice into a spiritual one. I now communicate with my art, listening to its needs and fulfilling

them. I hope to maintain this practice as I transition into a new phase of my artistic journey. I aspire for my art to serve as a catalyst for communal healing and connection within the community. Through my creative practice, I want to address and soothe the collective wounds and struggles that we face, fostering a sense of unity and understanding.

By exhibiting my work in museums, I aim to provide a platform for deeper contemplation and appreciation of art. Museums offer a space where my art can be studied, discussed, and reflected upon in a curated environment. This exposure not only elevates the significance of my work but also allows for meaningful dialogue and engagement with a diverse audience. Simultaneously, I envision my art being displayed in public spaces, such as parks, plazas, and community centers. These spaces are accessible to everyone, breaking down barriers to art appreciation and inviting participation from a broader demographic. Public installations bring art into the daily lives of people, sparking unexpected moments of inspiration and connection.

This duality in showcasing my art-both in museums and public spaces-allows for a multi-faceted approach to reaching people. It ensures that my art is not confined to the walls of galleries but rather permeates various aspects of society. By engaging with both traditional and unconventional exhibition venues, my art can touch the lives of people from all walks of life, fostering a sense of belonging and interconnectedness within the community.

Endnotes

¹ Katjivena Uazuvara born in Otjiwarongo, Namibia in 1941, served as Executive and Central Committee member of SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organization) before he went into exile for 26 years, during which time he studied in Berlin (Biography).

² Between 1904 and 1907, German military forces committed genocide against that Namibia's indigenous populations to gain control over the land. The German government ordered the murder of the indigenous Herero and Nama people through battle, forced starvation, forced dehydration, sexual violence, life-threatening medical experiments, and incarceration in concentration camps. These actions became the blueprint for Germany's strategies to exterminate Jews and other targeted populations during the Holocaust of World War II, 1933-1945 ("Namibia - The Herero and Nama" n.d.).

³ (Kapombo Katjivena 2020)

⁴ Though Jamaica has gained independence from the British Monarchy on August 6, 1962, the country still carries out British practices evident in the political system and culture. All elected officials in Jamaica must take the oath of allegiance to His Majesty: "I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to [His Majesty Charles III], Her heirs and successors", according to law. Jamaica has a Governor General who represents the King (Haughton 2014).

⁵ Over 2,300 interviews with former slaves were recorded living in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The project contains interview transcripts and more than five hundred black-and-white photographs of interviewees. It is considered the largest collection of primary source materials from former slaves. ("Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938 I The Historic New Orleans Collection," n.d.)

⁶ (hooks 1995)

⁷ (hooks 1995)

⁸ The Work and Travel Program is a US State Department program that recruits tertiary students for cultural and work exchange. The program is active annually in the summer when students are on break. Participants pay up to \$3000 USD to be on the program. This sum covers the local Work and Travel agency fees, US sponsor fees, work visa, health insurance, legal documents and other miscellaneous fees. These fees are acquired through loans that are from family members or local agencies. The jobs offered may not be related to the students major of study. The students are placed in menial jobs such as cooks, housekeeping, ride attendants, bartenders, waiters and more. Not every job offers housing so participant may have to find housing independently. Depending on the state and job you are chose, the pay rate is from 2-8 dollars per hour. Most participants seek another job in order to meet their financial goals. Participant are encouraged keep the job they went on the program with. If they are fired or decide to quit, they will have to

find an approved job replacement within a month. If a job replacement is not successful the participant will have to return to their home country (Salmon 2022).

⁹ (Jones 2020)

¹⁰ Coronavirus (COVID-19) was discovered in Wuhan, China, in 2019. It spread rapidly around the globe and was declared a pandemic by World Health Organization in March 2020. According to World Health Organization, most people infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention. Older people and those with underlying medical conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, or cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. Anyone can get sick with COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die at any age.

¹¹ (Kunsthalle Frankfurt 2021)

¹² "Better life" is a term used to refer to someone migrating from a third world country leaving the horrid conditions of their country to a first world country for economic improvement, exposure and new consciousness. Caribbean nationals mostly flee to America, Canada or Europe (Buddan, n.d.).

¹³ ("Kara Walker: Virginia's Lynch Mob and Other Works," n.d.)

¹⁴ (Kunsthalle Frankfurt 2021)

¹⁵ (Johnson 2020)

¹⁶ The Black Lives Matter Movement was created as a response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman in 2013 (Johnson 2020).

¹⁷ According to Rudwick in his book, *Race Riot At East St. Louis July 2, 1917*, in the Summer of 1917, African Americans living in East St. Louis, Illinois were mobbed, hanged and burnt to death by white supremist mainly due to the employment of Blacks (Rudwick 1966).

¹⁸ The East St. Louis 1917 Centennial Commission & Cultural initiative was formed in 2014 by the City of East St. Louis as a way to recognize the 100th anniversary of the 1917 East St. Louis Race Massacre. The commission retired in 2020 and passed on its mission to the East St. Louis Historical Society ("ESTL1917CCCI," n.d.).

¹⁹ Dhati Kennedy is a descendant and a preserver of the memory of the East St Louis Race Massacre. Every year on July 2, the extended family of 67-year-old. Dhati Kennedy gathers on the banks of the Mississippi River to pray, sing and place a memorial wreath in the muddy waters (Madeson 2022).

²⁰ (Magazine and Keyes 2017)

²¹ (Madeson 2022)

²² ("Maya Lin," n.d.)

²³ (Onion, Sullivan, and Mullen 2014).

²⁴ (Magazine and Keyes 2017)

²⁵ The lecture was a part of the Public Lecture Series held at Washington University in St. Louis, Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts. It was held at the Steinberg Auditorium on October 4, 2023.

²⁶ Montego Bay, Jamaica

²⁷ Skin Bleaching is the lightening of one's skin tone through the use of beauty products, chemicals or pills.

²⁸ (Dixon and Telles 2017)

²⁹ Jamaica consists of 92.1% Black, 6.1% mixed, 0.8% East Indian, 0.4% other and 0.7% unspecified ("Jamaica - The World Factbook" 2023).

³⁰ Jamaica's national hero. Helped Jamaica gain independence

³¹ (Nettleford 1970)

³² A Jamaican-born theorist, sociologist and political activist

³³ (Hall 1997)

³⁴ (Henke 2000)

³⁵ Jamaica celebrated sixty-one years of independence from Britain in 2023

³⁶ Excerpt from (Bleached Identity: Formalities 2023)

³⁷ Excerpt from (Bleached Identity: Informalities 2023)

³⁸ ("Blackout KGN 12," n.d.)

³⁹ (Fanon 1952)

⁴⁰ (Du Bois 1994)

⁴¹ (Edwards 2018)

⁴² (Collymore 2018)

⁴³ (Edwards 2018)

⁴⁴ (Edwards 2018)

⁴⁵ (Edwards 2018)

⁴⁶ If one's skin tone was lighter or matches the color of the bag, they would be more likely to be accepted in various Black clubs and social institutions as than a person with a dark skin tone (Yecheilyah 2021).

⁴⁷ (LoVetta Jenkins 2022)

⁴⁸ Excerpt from (Bleached Identity:Formalities 2023)

Appendix A



Joni P. Gordon, *Transcending Hues (Protest Wall)*, 144 x 96 x 2 inches, cardboard, brown paper, bleach, and masonite on pine wood, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Micah Mickles.



Detail: Joni P. Gordon, *Transcending Hues (Protest Wall)*, 144 x 96 x 2 inches, cardboard, brown paper, bleach, and masonite on pine wood, 2023. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Micah Mickles.



Joni P. Gordon, *Untitled (Vanitas Still Life Photographs)*, 22 x 17 inches, inkjet print, 2023



Joni P. Gordon, *Untitled (Vanitas Still Life Photographs)*, 22 x 17 inches, inkjet print, 2023



Joni P. Gordon, *Untitled (Vanitas Still Life Photographs)*, 22 x 17 inches, inkjet print, 2023

Appendix B



Sacred site of the East St Louis Race Massacre number 18



Sacred site of the East St Louis Race Massacre number 18 of 24

Appendix C

Audio Narratives:

Bleached Identity
Formalities
Informalities
Improv

Appendix D

Bleached Identity Interview Questions Bank

This interview will be conducted as a part of an art project I am creating on colors affecting the Black community in Jamaica and the United States of America. The interview will be conducted verbally and the participants' voices will be used anonymously in the artwork. There is no requirement to speak standard English when responding to questions. Participants are encouraged to be as honest as possible and will not be judged based on their response. I understand that everyone has their own opinion I respect that. Thank you for your participation.

1. How old are you/age bracket and how would you describe your skin tone currently?
 - a. If bleaching what was your original skin tone?
2. What is colorism and what do you understand by the term colorism?
3. Do you think colorism is present in Jamaica and how do you know it's colorism?
4. Have you experienced colorism? Explain? (mention which skin tone you have in your answer)
5. Have you experienced any form of bias because of your skin tone? Can you give an example
6. Do you think colorism has affected your self-esteem?
7. What does it mean to bleach one's skin?
8. How do you feel about people who bleach?
9. If bleaching gives you a better advantage, why not continue? What is keeping you from going back to bleaching? OR
 - a. Do you bleach, why?

- b. Would you bleach your skin?
10. Do you think colorism defines Jamaica's standard of beauty? How?
 11. Where do you think colorism came from and why is it so embedded in our culture?
 12. Do you think classism and colorism go hand in hand?
 13. Who are the perpetrators of colorism in Jamaica? The browning, the dark-skinned person, the society on a whole? Are we all perpetrators against ourselves?
 14. Do you think colorism is a topic that is talked about in Jamaica?
 15. What are some of the discriminatory saying that are said to a dark-skinned person that make them feel inferior to light-skinned girls?
 16. Describe your relationship with light-skinned women and men.
 17. How does colorism affect your daily life?
 18. What is your relationship with your skin tone, do you love your skin tone?
 - i) If yes, what are 3 things you love about your skin tone?
 - ii) If no, why not? What don't you like about it?
 19. How would you describe a light-skinned person vs a dark-skinned person in Jamaica?
From hair texture, shade and behavior.
 20. What are the first impressions of a light-skinned person vs a dark-skinned person in the Jamaican society?
 21. What does it mean to have pretty hair?
 22. What would you say to a dark-skinned person who feels inferior about her skin tone in Jamaica?
 23. What would you say to a light-skinned person in Jamaica about colorism?
 24. If you were to describe Jamaica in the context of colorism, how would you describe the country?

25. Where can we begin to fix the issue of colorism in Jamaica? Who does it begin with?

Appendix E



Mixed and manufactured lighting products sold on the streets



Manufactured lighting products sold on the stores

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