

“WHAT STANDS OUT TO YOU AT FIRST GLANCE?” IDENTITIES IN MOTION: ART AND RECEPTION

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Abstract

During the Fall of 2021, I conducted seven structured interviews with Barnard College students to explore patterns of reception of selections of the work of Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Elia Alba, and Ana Mendieta. This paper analyzes how the comments made by participants expanded, limited, or did not impact the “imagination” of boundaries of identification. The work of Pierre Bourdieu and David Halle and their perspectives on reception as a means for understanding the production of culture is relevant to my findings. While developing this study and my analysis, the work of Bettina Love, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, and bell hooks have been particularly inspiring. Ultimately my conclusion is that the method and findings serve as grounds for arguing that “isolation, identification and imagination” could serve as a pedagogical tool for teaching and working through the “social” nature of systems of power and oppression that exist in the USA with youth of various ages and backgrounds.

Introduction

I often think about the following statement made by Coco Fusco, an Afro-Latina Cuban artist, when asked to introduce herself during a panel hosted by El Museo Del Barrio “imagine any identity [for me], I am more interested in your reception of me” (October 2021). In this short sentence, Fusco summarized the precise sphere of reception I seek to explore in my research, identification, and imagination (Bourdieu 1979, Halle 1993, Jones 2012). In my analysis, I focus on moments during which participants voice some form of imaginative claim (or voice their reception) on the works of art in isolation and how this imagination possibly shifts or stays the same after a brief lesson that identifies both the artist and artwork.

My research consisted of structured interviews during which I showed participants photographs of the following four works (see appendix 1); Adrian Piper's self-portrait titled *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981), Kara Walker's cut-out silhouette titled *Shadow puppet from Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions* (2004), Elia Alba's sculpture *Hands: Ghosting, Imprint and D* (2020) and an image of one of Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* (1973-1981). In my research, I sought to understand the following questions further: the relationship between people's consideration of lines of identity along racial and ethnic boundaries (themselves, the artists, what they saw), and how they consume and attribute meaning to something or someone. Additionally, what can anecdotal commentary reveal about how this may relate to their tastes and preferences (Bourdieu 1979; Halle 1993)?

With these questions in mind, what I coded while analyzing conversations was how the reception of the works shifted as the viewer became more educated on the art. Ultimately, my findings stem from the result that there was no concrete flow to any of the conversations and people's expressions of taste varied immensely. Some participants grounded themselves concerning the work regardless of the context. Others consistently engaged with the work from a purely analytical standpoint

detached from personal attributes. Others drastically shifted their engagement and reception after learning more about the artist.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu and David Halle and their perspectives on reception as a means for understanding the production of culture is relevant to my findings because they served as foundational grounds from which I could develop an original creative framework of analysis. Bourdieu and Halle both contributed language, methodological practices, and valuable perspectives that inspired the development of this project. It is essential to note that this research emerged from a specific course at Columbia University that followed a western-centric canon to conceptualize the sociology of culture. Thus, I began with the work of Bourdieu and Halle for this reason. However, my interest in the pedagogical use of my methods was deeply influenced by the work of scholars Bettina Love, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, and bell hooks. Combining these thinkers ended up blurring lines of time and context, allowing for a unique framework situated in an interdisciplinary realm of sociological theory and applied education studies. I am aware that there are inherent boundaries in the scope of the work of Halle and Bourdieu as theorists in specific environments (Bourdieu in France during the 1960s and Halle in NYC during the 1980s).

In future continuations of this work, I plan to incorporate the work of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who focuses on the Sociology of Images (2015). In future iterations of this project, I plan to also be more explicit in my inclusion of social theory that emerged from the Frankfurt School (such as Gadamer). This specific analysis should be read as a text inspired by the work of Halle and Bourdieu as thinkers who tied claims on cultural production and patterns of reception to the study of art-based conversation but grounded in the theoretical claim of the contemporary pedagogical developments spearheaded by Bettina Love, bell hooks and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot as well as the framework employed by art historian Amelia Jones.

Setting a Frame: Beyond Bourdieu, Grounded in Du Bois and Building on Jones

I began my research to move beyond Bourdieu and his rigid classifications but not necessarily without him. His ambition to categorize cultural patterns through art is a point of validation and a foundational inspiration for the methods I developed in this study. During the 1960s, Pierre Bourdieu surveyed with the intention to,

determine how the cultivated disposition and cultural competence that are revealed in the nature of the cultural goods consumed, and in the way, they are consumed, vary according to the category of agents and the area to which they are applied” (Bourdieu 1979 p. 13).

Bourdieu claimed to have established "two basic facts." The first is the linkages between opinion formation (cultural practices) to "educational capital" and to "social origin" (based on the occupation of the father) (1979 p. 13). The second is that social origin becomes more relevant in the shift away from "the most legitimate" areas of culture (meaning painting or music as legitimate and "clothing, furniture or cookery" as personal) (1979). There are many nuances missed in these findings, but it is still a valuable base for validating the work of cultural sociologists as means for understanding social behaviors (Halle 1993).

The conversations I had were an affirmation of how "cultural goods" (Bourdieu 1979) produced by artists who intend to grapple with their lived experience through systems of social orders that impact their own identities in some way are vessels for sociological conversations on taste and preferences that yield a nuanced and complex understanding of social structures such as racial binaries. A significant complexity in the question I sought to understand arises from Du Bois's sentiments on the fictional aspects yet violent lived reality of race in America in many of his works, including his studies *The Philadelphia Negro* and *Souls of Black Folk* (1898; 1903).

Du Bois writes, "race lines are not fixed and fast" (1940 p. 42). Other facets of identities, class, ethnicities, gender, and sexuality also all exist on spectrums of fluid expression and performance and thus must be understood as ever-changing and malleable constructs of social organization. In the bane of grounding complicated conceptualization of fluid categories into simple questions, the work of art historian Amelia Jones has been constructive. My study, in particular, resonates with the questions she poses at the beginning of her book; "(how) is identity visible?" and "how do we name what we think we see in bodies and images around us and how do we give this named quality meaning and value?" (Jones 2012 p.14).

Methods: Creating the Space for Imagination

Bourdieu's claims on consumption are grounded in his analysis of tastes and preferences, exemplified through rigid categories he develops such as the "three zones of taste" that "correspond to educational levels and social classes" (1979 p.16). From here, he builds a study that is very different in approach from what I sought to do, mainly because he sets strict parameters both in his sample and analysis, something I intentionally tried to avoid uncovering nuances such as changes within one single conversation (a finding I will discuss at length below). The following statement he makes serves as a starting point of sorts for the contextualization of the method I chose to develop for my research, "when faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence" (Bourdieu 1979).

The method of structured interviews that slowly walked participants through basic observation proved to be successful in creating a space of comfort for the expression of each participant's most organic "ethos" to reveal what I was seeking, which is how these works were speaking directly to their "everyday perception of everyday existence." The following set of quotes made by the same participant at the beginning versus the middle of our conversation reveals how my method was successful in allowing for an expression of opinion and also changes within one interview;

[Section One] I usually like knowing more about the artist when we are looking at art, especially like what in their life or what parts of their identity impacted what they created that is what I find interesting.

[Section Two] This is so cool like learning about it [the artworks]. I have never like literally this is my first time I have ever looked at art and tried to like form my own opinions so like this is new.

The fluid shift from a desire for context to finding comfort in the isolation of the works as an agent for imagination through the style of my method was a finding that speaks directly to the strategies employed by David Halle. The development of the research I conducted intends to follow the pressure Halle places on existing theories based on “power, status or investment” (including Bourdieu’s) through a radically different method and perspective. Halle is determined to deviate and expand on these theories by specifically capturing the voice of the audience with the setting “(house, neighborhood, and the family and social life woven therein)” (1993 p. 11). Halle seeks to explain how “many meanings emerge...the content of these meanings cannot simply be deduced from the meanings assigned by the artist ...these new meanings then have an impact on twentieth-century elite and popular culture history” (1993 p. 11)

My research follows the explosion of Bourdieu that Halle proposes and builds on it by questioning how observations made during and post the intentional isolation from the “meanings assigned by the artists” are a gateway for understanding another facet of meaning-making correlated to individual and collective realities such as race or family histories.

In a search for capturing the "naming" and "seeing," I intentionally decided to use the work of two African American women, one Afro-Latina woman, and one Latina woman and interview a selection of participants from various racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds but not include these identities they hold as an explicit part of my analysis nor ask them about their identities directly (some did share) (Jones 2012). This set-up created a space for the grappling of race, ethnicity, and the historical development of structures based on hierarchies of power (patriarchy, white supremacy) in an organic form. My focus specifically on selecting the artists based on their art as acts of resistance is because I wanted to understand what emerges in conversations when the art has a meaning that is tightly intertwined with the artist's identities. This allowed me to openly explore what happens when the artists' identity is not explicitly told to the audience, which in this case consisted of participants of various backgrounds (more discussion on this below).

Sample and Interviewing

I applied convenience sampling to recruit the seven participants I interviewed. All seven participants are students at Barnard College. The first participant was part of my "preliminary" interview process; their data is included but not highlighted in my analysis because this interview format was slightly different. Two of the seven conversations were held over Zoom, and the other five occurred on campus. The average time for all seven conversations was around forty minutes. For each participant, I followed the same template of questions and descriptions. Section one consisted of introductions. Section two consisted of prompted observations for all four works of art. Section three consisted of reading about three minutes of context on each artist and then repeating a few questions from section two.

I recorded all of the conversations and manually transcribed the data. I coded all interviews by dividing the data into three distinct sections. The question that brought about the patterns that I primarily focused on analyzing was the original and revised (after context) answers to “what stands out to you at first glance?” and “if you had to create something to react to this work, what would it be”?

I intentionally chose to show all pieces of art on my laptop instead of trying to navigate showing interviewees' artwork in a museum/formal exhibition space. Using my computer to show digital versions of the artwork solved issues of practicality and resources. I also believe that the "informal" setting created in isolating prestigious works within my laptop screen did curate a specific environment that allowed viewers to be more vulnerable and honest when voicing their tastes, preferences, and thoughts on the works. For example, people commented about having "no idea" or strongly disliking a particular piece. Museum spaces as designated arenas of fostering a culture within parameters of elite standards and practices could potentially limit the freedom felt by participants in voicing their most honest take. I also personally did not have access to all four pieces, so the solution of showing them digitally was the only way to experiment. The finding that this mode of delivering the art yields rich data is important in my results because it indicates that this method could be easily applied within a classroom from a practical standpoint. In my investigation, I hope to more critically question the idea of space and how this interacts with my project.

My first datum was all of the participants' willingness to engage in the structured interviews I conducted; their decision to talk about art indicates a base-level comfortability with more abstract components of culture. To understand how perhaps an academic focus on art would change patterns in reception, I split my sample into those who are majoring in art and those who are not. Ultimately, however, everyone shared some previous background in art and expressed their informal connection to the arts. I found that apart from recognizing works, when all participants were not aware of the context, their answers were highly similar regardless of academic focus. This was reflected in concrete moments such as all seven saying similar adjectives when asked to describe the Adrian Piper piece, focusing on the flame in the Kara Walker (the only component of the work with color) and the red flowers in the Ana Mendieta *Silueta*.

I did not explicitly ask participants about their race, class, gender, religion, or sexuality. The first question I asked all participants was to introduce themselves. The most notable self-classifications were that one participant mentioned that they are Jewish, and another participant said that they are non-binary, queer, and of Southeast Asian background. I chose to not use identifications of the participants as a form of conceptualization of data because it allows for organic moments of self-realization. For example, some participants who are POC inserted themselves into the narratives of the artists based on their lived experiences, while some white participants removed themselves from the art directly once they knew the artist's identities, I ultimately am glad that I did not intentionally prompt this by asking for demographic information at any point during the conversation.

Embracing "Ambiguity and Confusion"

I found three recurring patterns in these conversations. Participants either related to the work in its isolated form and later shifted the degree of alignment when they were educated on the context of the work based on the factor of race and ethnicity (their own versus that of the artist); recognized the work directly or indirectly and attributed vague meanings using history and background knowledge, or did not positively engage with the work at all until they had the context. I could locate patterns

in these conversations through close attention to "ambiguity and confusion." The subjectivity and shifting nature of these processes is an additional form of evidence for Jones's ideas on identification as a fluid practice (2012 p.12).

Jones provides concrete language to ground how my finding adds to an existing conversation in the overarching realms of cultural theory (she discusses the works of scholars across many disciplines, including cultural sociology), which ties into this course's discussions on multiplicities. The following quotes are points of affirmation for the idea that when considering processes of meaning-making that are meant to break beyond static binaries, "ambiguity and confusion" is productive..

Identification [is] a reciprocal, dynamic, and ongoing process that occurs among viewers, bodies, images, and other visual modes of the (re)presentation of subjects...

A shift from an identity politics based on visibility and knowable, singular categories of identity to a politics of identification, often charged through queer theory, allows for ambiguity and confusion but insists upon the role of identification as a process (Jones 2012 p.12).

The key element of Jones' work I am applying to my analysis is the emphasis on "processes." Attention to processes of self-awareness, for example, my discussion on Participant C's attention to curly hair below, is meant to open channels for understanding how the nature of non-linearity in these conversations is a marker of the human capacity to react based on a broad set of factors not limited to a particular category such as class or race of audience versus that of the artist, but rather the intersection of the many facets of self that emerge. In this claim, I do not erase set boundaries like class as influencers of meaning-making. Instead, I wish to elaborate on the many components that are potentially at play in addition to something like class status based on the comments made.

"Curly Hair"

Participant C begins our conversation with her curly hair tied back in a ponytail. We are sitting on a Zoom call, and she seems comfortable based on her relaxed tone of voice and body language. She comments on how she is still in her dorm in her PJs. She is a senior Art History major and references courses she has taken throughout our conversation. At one point after I show her Ana Mendieta's work, she laughs and says, "this is another one I am familiar with. It is so much easier to talk about art when you have a professor tell you about it. I think that the 'why' is considering women and the space they take up or leave behind...."

Before this comment, during the introduction, Participant C had just been telling me about her journey through art therapy, saying that through the process, she has realized that "I do enjoy making art about myself, it is like I can share and maintain my privacy at the same time." These comments heavily influenced my analysis of her conceptualization of self and art; Participant C found comfort in the idea of meaning-making as a process during which truths can be both revealed and concealed between the creator and receiver based on internal and external factors. I am interested in understanding the specific factors that open or obstruct how she views herself in her

meaning-making processes. This close analysis of this one conversation also creates a framework for understanding the comments on factors that lead to isolation or self-awareness in other interviews.

An essential layer of this interview that could be tied to her experience as an Art Major and person who attends art therapy was her attention to why she was making statements. Participant C actively questioned how she reacted to a question by reflecting on where she was pulling an answer from. This made data from this conversation particularly rich in its reflective structure. In future iterations of this project, I would want to consider how this type of reflection could be fostered more amongst participants without a specific background experience like art therapy.

When we arrive at section two, I show Participant C the first work: *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* by Adrian Piper, and I ask her to tell me the first thing that stands out to her. She says, "At first glance, beautiful hair, I also have curly hair so I have an affinity for other curly-haired women." In this moment of isolation (I covered the piece's title and set the sketch against a black frame), Participant C immediately chooses to connect themselves directly to the art without hesitation, mapping her physical characteristics onto Piper's. We continue through the conversation, and we arrive at section three. I explain who Adrian Piper is, how this reflects her identity as an African American woman with white-passing features, and how she forces viewers to grapple with stereotypes. The immediate reaction is the following;

Well I think it just makes me think of, like you having asked the first things I noticed, you know I said the eyes, the hair, and the mouth and I think she is trying to emphasize these features associated with Blackness so I think she is doing so effectively, and it makes me think about like why those features jumped out to me. Ummm and also, I guess I am thinking about how while I feel this sense of kinship over my hair, it is important to remind myself that I have a very different experience of having this hair texture than a Black woman does. (Participant C)

While I listen to her immediate response to the context I provide, I think of participant C's original comment on creating art. Adrian Piper is an artist who also shares and maintains privacy in her work. Participant C's comment reflects how boundaries of sharing map onto lines of identities and self that separate Participant C and Adrian Piper as two women with curly hair along boundaries of oppression and histories of violence. Her comments are tied to broad structures of power and social organization based on hierarchies. My conversation with Participant C reflected many other moments during which participants went through isolated observation to self-awareness in their reflection of their reception in a manner that mirrors broad-based social structures going way beyond individual identities. This finding has prompted me to consider how my method could be used as a tool for teaching youth within the framework of abolitionist teaching in a way that centers on lived experiences of the voice of the people in the classroom to come to conclusions on life beyond the class (Love, 2019).

Kara Walker

The art I showed by Kara Walker yielded significantly more linear and straightforward commentary from all participants. The observations had the most minor variance between sections one and two answers. A notable component of this data was that three of the seven participants recognized the work and attributed it directly to Kara Walker. Two others alluded to having some sense of her work but did not say her name. All seven participants made comments during section two that collectively resonated with the following statement on her work,

If it is what I think it is, I think it was made to illustrate a certain experience, so the Black experience in America, I think that it helps to shed light on histories that are typically erased by our education system and the ignorance within people in this country. I think to raise awareness and also bring it back to light because these situations are still happening, it is not just the history of it.

In contrast, when viewing Adrian Piper's self-portrait, many comments in section two fell under the following lines of thought, "I think it is a really realistic portrait of a woman," "I feel like maybe the person that drew it probably wanted to engage with it for themselves" and "I think the person that made it did it because they wanted to." The contrast between the individualistic emphasis on Adrian Piper's work and the need for historical context/apparent detachment from personal connection to the Kara Walker art provides insight into how participants connected to the humane nature of Piper's face as a means for grounding themselves in her work. This is interesting because it bridges how identification processes are intrinsically tied with a desire, as one participant spoke on to "connect the material to myself to ground myself in it."

Kara Walker and Adrian Piper are both commenting on broad-based structures of oppression faced by the Black community in the USA historically and in the present. Kara Walker does so from an expansive vantage, recreating images of violent histories of enslavement in a story-like narrative that has been controversial in its simplicity yet undeniably powerful in how it gets at the raw and unfiltered horridness of white supremacy throughout the history of our nation (2014). Meanwhile, Piper's self-portrait directly plays with her position along binaries of identities. Jones wrote the following, "As a person who could pass as white but identified herself as African American, Piper found multiple ways to interrogate beliefs about visible cues of identity— particularly those attached to whiteness and Blackness in the US" (2012 p. 10-13). Jones argues that the work created by Piper in the 70s and 80s "relied on a binary" of white versus Black to critique it. I am drawn to consider how my conversations revealed how visual artists working along binaries enable reception grounded in individual ties rather than context.

Of the works I showed, Piper's was the one in which the comments made were most directly related to individual thoughts on "identification." Piper's position as an artist working within a frame of binaries placed participants into a space in which I believe they were actively considering their relationships to binaries in a way that the Kara Walker artwork did not do.

Walker works within a more nuanced frame of resistance through the transcript of narratives, a simplification of the horrors of enslavement works to illuminate the lost histories and present realities of racialized capitalism in the USA (Scott 1990). Meanwhile, Piper is mitigating front and backstage performances face-on. The impact of these questions of performances of selves versus performances of histories on the work's reception is a channel of my preliminary research I would like to continue exploring.

"My Dad's Hands"

The most controversial work of art regarding people's preferences was Elia Alba's *Hands*. Halle highlights the dangers in reducing the audience's meaning-making motives to "one-dimensional" ideas (1993). A goal of my research was to provide space for multi-dimensionality and as much dialogue as possible between the participants and the art. An exciting facet I observed was how as participants went through our conversations, they increasingly looked at me less and directly at the art on my laptop more.

Dr. Love argues for art as a form of radical expression in developing anti-abolitionist teaching. I am drawn to the functional properties of arts that Dr. Love provides in the context of education and art as a means for stretching and redefining how cultural components are tools of resistance, something that all of the artists I chose to use in this project deeply employ. Dr. Love claims that "art is what connects people to what is lost and what has not yet happened" (2019). The idea of connection to self as a means for "liking" or "disliking" concerning art as a connector and grounder of histories was an interesting thread that emerged during my conversation with Participant F.

Participant F was the most adamant and direct in their dislike of Elia Alba's work during their comments in Section Two. While conducting my interview with them, sitting in seats at Barnard's prestigious campus, I was drawn to consider how broad statements on the idea that "art and culture is the drive for power and class denomination" become complicated through isolated conversations with people; it is difficult to entirely place all the comments made regarding tastes and preferences into a schema of "art as status, art and culture as ideological denomination or art as cultural capital" based on my one conversation with Participant F or even the known privileges that inherently come with being a third-year student at Barnard College (Halle, 1993, p.10). I do not know enough about Participant F's particular class status nor how they interact with systems of power based on other identifiers to conclude the motive for their taste and preferences.

However, dissonance within this conversation provides more evidence to expand on Halle's ideas on the need to look beyond just a cultural capital theory when analyzing the motives behind people's interest in abstract art. Halle writes on the importance of recognizing the many possibilities of why people choose to like or dislike art. When I first showed Participant F the hands and asked that they share what stood out, they made the following statements;

[In a confused/disgusted tone] so fleshy, ugh stuffed human flesh is just weird! [I notice the] big hands, tiny nails, ahhh the material!... It's not disturbing but the word for like its something familiar but put like

out of context, disconcerting, jarring, yeah and it's confusing, I need to stare at this for 10 more minutes, I really don't like big hands, it puts me off, I just really don't like big hands, I just have a thing about big hands...

Participant F expressed deep discomfort. That was their most "natural" reaction to this art. This was mirrored in their answer to "if you had to create something to react to this work, what would it be?" To which they initially responded, without hesitation, "I wouldn't want to." They had no desire to engage with this art in its isolated form. In contrast to the Curly Hair comments, it was not until after they received the context did they begin to reflect on this art as a potential vessel for their self-reflection, and did they begin to find any connection to the artist's choice as a mode of expression for themselves to use. This is evident in their answer to that same question after I told them about Elia Alba, highlighting how she claims that "my work has always been concerned with fluid identities and the collective community" (Alba, 2020). After this, Participant F made the following statement;

"I would want to think about what my version would be, of my own hands, or someone like my dad's, like someone I know and care about, I think that is a very interesting project, to like really know someone or talk to them and then think about their hands, because definitely as people, especially like family who are older you really notice their hands so that is just a really nice way to capture it."

During their introduction, Participant F had shared their closeness to family, highlighting that their parents had immigrated from Southeast Asia. The desire to create the hands of someone they care as deeply for as their father, after having already discussed their family as an important sphere of their life, highlights how drastic the shift was in their reception before and post receiving the art context. How does this fit into Halle's argument? Considering the limitations of my interviews, I do not dare say it creates a new category. Still, it is essential to note that through this conversation, the claim can be made that flows in the direction of isolation and meaning making are not rigid.

"My dad's hands" highlights a moment in which isolation had not enabled positive nor constructive reception. It was after the Participant felt personally moved by the artist's story that they chose to engage with the piece and insert their history into this context. In a future conversation, I would have wanted to explore how this may have related to their own identity as the child of a parent who comes from another culture concerning Elia Alba as a woman who also had parents who immigrated and speaks on how these different positions (being both Dominican and American) made her realize that "people's characteristics are not limited to their race or ethnic heritage but rather subject to change and modification through experiences" (Alba 2020). Isolation of the Hands did not allow for Participant F to use it as a form of imagination about themselves and their story; the learning of the context did.

Section Three: An Emergence of More Questions

Participants shared how they connected personally to the inanimate artwork when it was both isolated and in context. The following statements made during section three reveal the variance in thinking that occurred throughout the conversation; the conclusions went well beyond simple questions of like or dislike, and by the end, I found that participants deeply engaged with both what was in front of them and their brief knowledge on the artists;

[regards to Ana Mendieta] Thinking about the borders of ourselves and like the borders around us, and I think that is generally something I am thinking about...because it [the silueta] is made in such an organic way it is really a testament to how artificial borders are “

[Adrian Piper] I think that I would ask after making this, did she notice the Blackness in her features more, like did she notice because if this is an exaggerated version of her Blackness right so I wonder if that liked helped her to view herself as more a part of that identity.”

[reaction to the silueta] I mean like I guess it kind of adds another layer to what I said like I would make one I feel like probably not, well you know I am torn between is this something that is so personal, no reproduction would ever be right, so I guess like the personal element, I would be a white woman artist so like would that be an appropriation of her materials and her methods?

The isolation of the art from the artist's identities enabled viewers to provide a direct reflection of self-concerning the work. And then, once they had the context, I am drawn to how they were isolating components such as histories of borders or the lived experiences of race into their receptions.

Conclusions: From Conversations to Classrooms

The processes of isolation, identification, and imagination (in various iterations) found in my work begin a sociological interpretation of reception grounded in, beyond, and between boundaries. The comments, questions, and reflections that arose in my study are a form of "destabilization" as intended by the work of artists like Piper, who "aim[s] not to assert racial identity but to destabilize the very concept of it" (Cotter 2014).

The "destabilization" of sorts of racial boundaries was substantiated through the intentional acknowledgment of white participants' standing within white supremacy. They felt as though they had broken a norm that crossed into realms of disrespect and appropriation when they had crossed into a boundary of personal insertion into the work of the women of color artists. After context, participants' acceptance of Elia Alba's *Hands* destabilized their original perception of "likes" and "dislikes" based on meaning. The work of Kara Walker served as a grounding force in that it revealed how regardless of recognition or education, everyone had a limit where since they recognized that the art depicted specifically Black history or at least gauged there was a "story" to it their imagination was limited by their knowledge on structures like slavery.

The method as a form of motivation for self-reflection on performance is a tool that I would like to apply further in the context of an elementary classroom to teach ideas commonly reserved for higher education sociology classrooms, such as race as a construct for purposes of power, control and economic gain or gender performativity (Du Bois 1940, Butler 1990). The study results prove it to be a tool that could be effective in working with youth on these topics because of how it prompted participants to formulate their questions.

A question that leads to more questions affirms that learning is happening. I am excited to continue working through how the processes of imagination in these conversations potentially tie together how a combined focus on sociological theory with the education and abstract thinking prompted by art could create the room for discussions beyond the study I conducted this Fall. I hope to continue understanding, with the minds of thinkers like W. E. B Du Bois, Bettina Love, bell hooks, and the work of these four artists, Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Elia Alba, and Ana Mendieta, how reception itself becomes a fluid process that allows for participants to critically engage with themselves and the social structures they find themselves in for the better.

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