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# Searching Self-Image: Identities To Be Self-Evident

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*Naming can alternatively be a definition of identity or a source of stigma. Un-naming can alter a story and serve to unhinge fixed definitions, initiating a democratic discourse that finds its own way of escaping the thrall of hegemony and dominating canons. Can qualitative research serve to un-name axiomatic frameworks of identity? This article is written to follow up to the author's* Messing Around With Identity Constructs *and continues his effort to establish the efficacy of a poststructural and poetic aesthetic in research writing.*

***Keywords:*** *identity; poststructural; poetic; aesthetic; art education*

## NOW

I am struggling to accept myself as an academic. Although everything about my educational preparation says that I am on track to become a notable professor with a respected research agenda at some venerable institution, there is lead in my belly. I am weighted down by something, some malady of the imagination. What is it? Is it some obfuscating image? Or is it the lack of a particular life-giving vision? The completion of my dissertation was a rough ride, impinged by two jobs, responsibilities to my wife and my church, the death of my father, my hospitalizations, and the sale of my father's house. My father's house. My institutional home.

Flying off the track
failing the system
the system failing me
r/ejecting me
I am catapulted
I hit hard
losing my sense of direction.

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Walking away from the wreckage
I am free
blue heaven above my head
no manufactured ceiling
no compart-mental sequence
to string me along
no clue
of who I am anymore.

There is a tremendous stigma involved with the death of a name, or a namesake, or a sire. Identity is subsumed in the grieving process, whatever that is (I do not think it is a uniform process for all); grief is assumed by those outside the name. Distance and difference from the nongrieving world is enforced and exaggerated through ceremonial and public acts of condolence.

In a certain sense, I have become homeless. While my father was alive, I was merely somewhat estranged. Now, more than ever before, I lack a core self-image; I often used my father's presence as a measure of what I did not want to become. In his absence, and not seeing myself quite so well anymore, I am further marginalized.

Likewise, given the marginalization of African American identity as constituted within Eurocentric academic discourses, through my dissertation I sought to craft a research methodology that critiques this problem from *within* Western epistemological and institutional structures. This was risky for someone like me, because a dissertation must meet the institutional standards of acceptable research, and my goal was to write a (re)positioning of institutional identity and research methodology. As I approached the exit to my institutional home, the intellectual territory that nurtured my ideas and my emerging professional identity, I remembered that I have been not quite acceptable as a little boy bussed into an alien neighborhood to go to school each day; not quite acceptable as the eldest son who chose not to follow in my father's footsteps as a graphic designer; not quite acceptable as a undergraduate student who was told by one of my lead professors that I did not have the design aptitude for the school of thought espoused by the Cooper Union School of Architecture; not quite acceptable as an artist who preferred the accurate rendering of portraits in an era of burgeoning postmodern uncertainties; not quite acceptable as an art teacher with his terminal degree in the fine arts and yet, unable to find employment as a full-time teacher; not quite acceptable as an African American man in an America unable to assimilate me into its core story of independence, democracy, and unassailable freedoms. Would I find myself homeless as a scholar as well?

Homelessness is a horrendous thing to have to admit. It renders unclassifiable those who occupy its murky stations. Without an acceptable address, how can I prove my legitimacy? And yet the state of homelessness is an important launching point for the following questions: If we are what we see ourselves to be, what do we become if we can no longer see our front door,

if we can no longer gauge the distance between where we are and where we first came from? Can I be myself if I cannot see my sheltering framework, if I do not know where I live, if I cannot entirely discern or speak my ideological address? I am more than my institutional home, more than my father's house—I am composed of imbricating images of self, each fighting for dominance as the overriding organizing pattern against which all other patterns must be aligned. The predominant pattern of organization is the home for all other identifiers. There is much in a name and most of it is language. Today, I am less certain as I tell of who my father is/was and how I am all that different from him. I am less certain as I speak of my intellectual inheritance. In this article and its precursor, I narrate several poststructural selves, now that originating structures have fallen from view. Sociologist Stuart Hall (as quoted in Drew, 1998) said that

> we . . . occupy our identities very retrospectively: having produced them, we then know who we are. We say, "Oh, that's where I am in relation to this argument and for these reasons." So, it's exactly the reverse of what I think is the common sense way of understanding it, which is that we already know our "self" and then put it out there. Rather, having put it into play in language, we then discover what we are. I think that only then do we make an investment in it, saying, "Yes, I like that position, I am that sort of person, I'm willing to occupy that position." (p. 173)

This article, an extension of the sheltering language game described by Hall, tells of identity (re)positioned. Yet in spite of the inadequacy of classifications, I am clearly more than has been previously stated.

## PREVIOUSLY

In a previous article titled *Messing Around With Identity Constructs* (Rolling, 2004), I examined my own identity crisis after the unexpected death of my father from diabetes-related complications. In my position as author, my father is reconstructed as my namesake, although on my birth certificate, I am his. In that article I wrote,

> My name is itself . . . constituted of subliminal self-images posing me in many specific situations against the larger, more formidable, more threatening, more unpredictable elder Rolling. A *poststructural* identity construct, it is argued, takes me a step further toward an unfettered freedom to name myself and a self-concept unbounded from authorial pens and validating structures. (Rolling, 2004, p. 551)

Self-image is self-naming. Self-image is the product of memory, present experience, and prognostication. We retain a fading image of who we have been, of what we have been named, we attain to fulfill that name in our present being, and we project a legacy to be passed along to our descendants. In

hindsight, I have wondered why my self-image as a Rolling does not hold. Why does it slip away from me? I hold tenaciously to my name, to its correct spelling and pronunciation, yet the name does not adhere to my image. Now, image peels away from name.

As alluded to above, memories of my father are not warm and welcoming. Images that might inform self-knowing, self-confidence, are held captive to the shadows of the dim hallways in 1260 Lincoln Place. I am not certain I have ever owned the name that has passed along to me through institutional documentation. It has always felt like it was my father's name. As though my name was my father's house. As if I were a guest in the dwelling of a distant host. My father did not share his possessions easily. My mother's name was never put on the lease of the house they made together for more than 30 years.

**My Father's Wall Unit**

My father's living room is unlived in anymore,
the house about to be quietly sold.
My father wanted it so, I think.

I found his mother's death certificate
in a neat pile on the front edge of the upper right hand shelf
over the bar of his funky late 1970s wall unit.

The pile was just in front of the out-of-date
set of World Book encyclopedias
and just inside of the glass doors with the magnetic latch.

The certificate was stacked along with carefully kept photos
of his mother who died of cancer
in 1965 when people only whispered about such things
when they thought the children weren't paying attention.

Carefully kept with two blue envelopes
now stained with 40 years of time, written by the hand of Eva B.
while still of sound mind and bed-ridden body.

Written ever-lovingly to her only son
to guide the distribution of her earthly possessions
here at 1260 Lincoln Place
which we are about to sell.

My father wanted to sell, I am certain.
He signed the papers himself, without consultation.
A week after his signature, his body betrayed him.

We used those encyclopedias a lot
all four children under parents who made us do our homework

before we went outside to play
amongst echoes on a narrow street,
echoes against red orange brick buildings,
through the tall chain link schoolyard fence,
under the white turrets of P.S. 167.

We used those encyclopedias inside my father's living room
on the wide oval coffee table beneath my father's wall unit.

The couch is dented where he slept each night, uncomfortable in beds,
the upholstery is oily from years of seepage from skin and scalp,
the carpet embedded with a snowfall of dead skin.

His shoes and slippers, odorous and misshapen
are collected in a black garbage bag
in the middle of the matted rust-colored carpet.

My father preferred to walk alone
walking to chess wars where no mercy was shown
known only as "Nemeses" to the men he mentored for 15 years,
men my family met for the first time at the wake.

My father walked to the recreation center
where he could no longer run the paddleball courts
and he walked to the V.A. hospital where he disagreed with Nurse Riley
on the care of his diabetic foot
an ulcer growing
my father's peculiar cancer
merciless at his heel
dogging him as he walked in his orthopedic boot,
or precariously in unlaced, oversized sneakers.

Sometime during his last week at 1260 Lincoln Place
as his sugar went screaming to a final count of 628
and his body cried out for help, my father did not
call for the hospital, did not call his children,
did not call his wife or his neighbors, he did not call
until his voice was too weak to hear through the walls.
He wanted it so.
In his final three weeks, he never recovered his speech.
He never recovered his breath.

Filling the open bar of my father's wall unit
there are white boxes instead of liquor bottles,
gauze and plastic prescription bottles and topical solutions.
The insulin syringes are hardly used.
As I exit the living room, turning into the darkened hallway,
past the cracked green ceramic lamp with the broken switch,

the lamp we can finally throw away

I also know I am leaving the scene of an accident that waited.
Waited.

*How does the un-named body re/figure itself out—how do I root myself in an alternative self-image?* How does the new name—the uninherited legacy, the nonessentialist caregiver—become home, a new and researchable identity and framework? How do I tell myself to others as a professor of worth, an owner of valuable intellectual property, rather than as an orphan? As an African American, my perspective on the necessity of un-naming and renaming has been engendered as a result of Western social practices of image-making. African Americans have had much, and much due cause, to reinterpret. I have argued that a poststructural identity can be created from the reinterpretation of identities (Rolling, 2003).

As a social being, I have been ferociously, visually, named—Bad, Bad Leroy Brown, the brutal black buck; Topsy or Buckwheat, the untamed, unkempt, watermelon-eating pickaninny; Uncle Tom, the smiling, wide-eyed, docile servant; Aunt Jemima, the obese, utterly contented, pitch-black maternal figure; Jezebel, the uninhibited whore, fulfiller of all sexual fantasies; Sambo, the lazy, inarticulate buffoon; Jim Crow or Zip Coon, the traveling darkie entertainers, song-and-dance minstrels; Peola, the quadroon, the self-hating mulatto, poisoned with the scourge of Negro blood and the selfishness of White social aspirations; Golliwog, the grotesque and alien rag doll, the antithesis of porcelain beauty. Within the conceptual hegemony of Western popular and visual cultural norms and ideals, we are consigned to inhabit the ghettoized symbols of social stigma. Because these adverse namings are the reifications of Eurocentric epistemological, ontological, and axiological positions, African American identity is reduced to a discourse of marginalization.

As an individual, I seek a foster name, a reorganizing image. What shall I call myself now that I can no longer call myself a doctoral student, now that Jim Rolling is deceased and my nickname, Jim-Jim, is bereft? How shall I do research if I do not occupy a framework? According to scientific historian Thomas Kuhn (1962/1996), modern scientific inquiry lends itself to the achievement of a continuing discursive articulation through ensuing research only as long as gaps in the bodies of knowledge composing a scientific discipline do not begin to appear. Kuhn argued that it is the emergence through experimentation of unanswered or unanswerable question(s) that provides the impetus to shift the paradigms of a particular scientific belief to a newer paradigmatic and discursive sense.

I would propose that postmodern inquiry also achieves discursive articulations, ambiguous though these inquiries may be in their effort to posit samenesses. Stuart Hall (Hall & Jhally, 1996) suggested that the obviousness of difference will invoke a discourse, a system of meanings that sanction the

difference as true. It does so by invoking the sanction of a **reductive** discourse. Through a reductive discourse, the development of an imagined or theorized identity into a rationalized and definitive identity is a progression of decreasing possibilities, each step in the execution of the discourse reducing future options by converting one—and only one—possibility into a reality (Bayles & Orland, 1993, p. 16).

I will use the Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis (2000) definition of *discourse* or *discourses* as those "systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects" (pp. 3-4). According to these authors, the character and being of ***all*** things are constituted through discourse just the same as ***all*** things are the objects of discourse as "their meaning depends upon a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences" (Howarth et al., 2000, pp. 3-4). More specific, discourse interprets identity, the stations of identity, the plurality of identity, and the relativity between one's own identity and those subjects and objects constituted as other than oneself.

In analyzing the visual reinterpretation of African American identity, I must explore another kind of discourse, an ***expanding*** discourse that proliferates the possibility of plausible alternatives rather than reducing them. Rather than paring down a single model to ever greater certainty, in conformance with an authorized generalization, an expanding discourse constructs projections tossed off of previous models for the purpose of improvising ancillary structures for making meaning, each projection a de/re/construction of a previous model—not in an effort to "fit" a named criterion of constraints but to refigure perceptions and do so parabolically. Drawing on the original Greek definition, the word *parable* means "to place beside, to cast alongside" (The Parables of Jesus, n.d.). The postmodern twist on the refiguration of identity is that parables of the self imbricate like the scales of a single piece of snakeskin—overlapping, intersecting, and disappearing beneath the selfsame surfaces of one another.

Is it plausible that a particular discourse of identity may traffic almost solely in images, in self-images, and by dint of the qualitative nature of imagery, circumnavigate the sphere of Western norms and positivistic inquiry? If so, such a discourse would be inquiry nonetheless, with its sole sanction being the inalienable right of the uncommon man or woman to agitate and interpolate authorized definitions; to reinterpret difference as sameness, alienation as belonging; to ask of ourselves again and again the unanswered question, "Who are we? They don't know. Who are we?" *Can identity be created from the reinterpretation of identity?*

The visual representation of the African American body in Western visual culture has been unique in the all-out effort of those who sought to define us as either less than human, less than American, less than Christian, or less than statistically significant. Represented in this fashion, our bodies became enclaves for the agency of Western hegemony; we became a part of the discourse of modernity, not entirely whole unless we were in obeisance to the

title story. Conversely, when we developed responses, indigenous and idiosyncratic responses, our responses entered the discourses of public opinion and modern popular culture and resonated there, changing meaning.

There is the story of a White Jim Crow–era farmer who suspects one of his sharecropping tenants of stealing eggs from his chicken coop. Through his window one night, he hears a sudden ruckus of clucking over by the barn, peels out of bed, grabs his shotgun, and with his nightclothes still on, approaches the now quiet chicken coop. Poking his head and the barrel of his gun into the dark of the weather-beaten wooden structure, he angrily yells out, "Who's in there!" There is a silent pause.

"Ain't nothin' but us chickens, boss," comes the whispered response.

In African American vernacular, identity is established *in the response*. The response may validate the call, may question the call, may refute the call, but above all legitimates a human identity as its source because after all, chickens can only cluck. The call-and-response is foundational to the archaeology of African American social and cultural life. Not only is the respondent identified by the response but also the caller. I have heard more than one preacher make the statement from the pulpit to the effect that he must not be preaching if he is not receiving rolling choruses of "Amen" and "Tell it, preacher" in response to his exhortations! The response (re)names the caller as valid even as it names the agency of the respondent in the structure of this discursive language game. Until validity is relegated in the discourse, the caller could very well be a charlatan and not a preacher at all.

In this piece of research, I have begun a discourse that renames me. Names can be called from within the African American community and suddenly we are "playing the dozens," snapping on one another in response. Zora Neale Hurston (1945) wrote,

> I was a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on my tongue. . . . It was not that my grammar was bad, it was the idioms. [Northerners] do not know the way an average Southern child, white or black, is raised on simile and invective. They know how to call names. It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mulletheaded, mule-eared, wall-eyed, hog-nosed, 'gator-faced, shad-mouthed, screwnecked, goat-bellied, puzzle-gutted, camel-backed, butt-sprung . . . razorlegged, box-ankled, shovel-footed, unmated so-and-so! . . . When they get through with you, you and your whole family look like an acre of totem poles. (p. 45)

But let us assume the constitutive and totemic power of naming as a documented given. I am much more interested in the re/figured responses to modernist, defining, discursive namings generated from outside my body. When the social body is named in modern terms, what has been the response that moves us deeper into a leveling postmodernity? How has my own body responded to numbing affliction of harsh and certain namings ("You're just like your father"[1]) and dumbing negations ("Sir, you need to use the delivery entrance"[2])? How do African Americans validate our research findings, our

own reconstituted bodies, addressing "the social processes and policies that constrict [our marginalized] lives" (Linton, 1998, p. 11)?[3] How do I persuade others to respond to my new discourse and state my new name?

Epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies all begin as embodiments within a local mind. Self is the site of such research, and embodiments of the modern and postmodern selves are its data. Not the self in abstract but the self in its living, breathing, reconstituting body. Deviations are always predicated on narratological norms. Any given norm will always be the majority of instances falling within a particular "bell curve" of empirical sightings, observations, or empiricized beliefs. A society strives to make beliefs of what it sees or thinks it sees with its own eyes and ideates the preponderance of its constituents as at the core of those beliefs and ideologies.

Hence, the majority population or power rules the center of the roost, and its point of view establishes the boundaries of significance and normalcy as well as the stigmatization of "abnormalcy" conferred on those who do not compare to those in the center, existing at points that apparently fall beyond established boundaries.

> A common assumption would be that some concept of the norm must have always existed. After all, people seem to have an inherent desire to compare themselves to others. But the idea of a norm is less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society . . . the social process of [invalidating] arrived with industrialization and with a set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and [any other area of apparent incapacity or shortcoming]. (Davis, 1995, p. 24)

An example of the conferral of abnormalcy, and the stigmatization attached, is found in the oft-told Cinderella narrative:

> *It happened that the King's son gave a ball, and Cinderella's sisters were invited, for they made a fine shew, and their bad dispositions were not known. Cinderella was consulted how they should be dressed, for she had an excellent taste and had to dress them. As she was doing this, they said to her, Cinderella, would you not like to go to the ball; Ah, said she, you only jeer me. You are right, said they, it would make the people laugh to see a Cinderbreech at a ball. When they went to court, Cinderella followed them, but when she lost sight of them, she burst out crying. Her godmother call'd while she was in tears, and asked her what was the matter? Cinderella said, she wished to go to the ball. Well, said her godmother, you shall go.* (*Cinderella*, n.d., p. 1)

The establishment of intractable norms and castes soothes the anxiety of indeterminability (Who belongs in our group?) and solubility (Can our group be preserved?). The conferral of abnormalizing castes is safer—however, it also makes the conduct of democratic ideals nearly impossible. If some receive printed, hand-delivered invitations to the ball, while others are named "Cinderbreech" and ridiculed for the desire just to be seen at court, an oppositional caste is created. Democratic society demands the creation of what might be understood as the more fluidly bounded "relational other"

that lends to the creation of nonessentialist and reinterpretable identity, rather than the "oppositional other" that is required by narrative to remain bound to its station of difference (see Cooper, n.d.). In a truly democratic society, difference must be posited as a useful fiction, transferable, held in common to some degree and, thus, navigable (as all signs are) rather than as uncommon, intractable, factual, and thereby abnormalizing. The bell curve, once it has been drawn, also redlines, also districts, keeping all who are "unfit" unflinchingly at bay, banished to dwell in the garrets. Cinderbreeches are proscribed from taking on that more magical and transformative name.

The allure of the determinism of the bell curve is not new to the mindset of public policymakers. In 1908, when Charles W. Eliot—near the conclusion of his term as president of Harvard University—had the question addressed to him as to how the decision might be made that certain children go to industrial schools, others to ordinary high schools, and others to mechanics arts high schools, Eliot's response was that "the teachers of the elementary schools ought to sort the pupils and sort them by their evident and probable destinies" (as cited in Kliebard, 1999, p. 43).

Such a prognostication *must* be deemed a conclusion drawing on previously agreed norms and the positioning of a society's borders of "statistical significance." Who counts more? Who counts less? Who is willing to address me in the terms I choose? Nearly 100 years after Eliot's departure from Harvard's halls, determinations of the probable values of children's lives, lives not yet lived, still prevail because of the norms of race, class, and global significance that Western societies put forth and hold in common. "Normalcy" or "normality" is a narratological contraption that attempts to permanently ensconce the unfortunate denizens of the unacceptable ranges of modern society in an oppositional system that "preserve(s) the irrational status quo" (Schafer, 1981, p. 41).

The conferral of societal significance and insignificance in turn leads to attempts to normalize as much of the world as we can while holding the center for ourselves. We attempt to make the rest of the world safe for democracy. Those who cannot occupy the center along with us, lacking the requisite politics or popularity or physiognomy or speech pattern—those who deviate, who are not safe or sensible, sedate or schoolable, are summarily stigmatized, labeled, and invalidated.

In the heyday of the American countercultural movement, there were several active means for expanding the boundaries of knowledge beyond the normalizing frame. The growing visual culture and new accessibility of popular cultural forms allowed new footholds for new subjectivities; clashing with the formidable exemplars of acceptability, formal schooling in a Westernized society is intended to cultivate ideologies such as "freedom," "justice," "democracy," and "the American way." New subjectivities emerged for me in researching the 1999 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American

Art titled *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1950-2000*. My data emerged in the form of the following poem, which continues to evolve.

**Kind of Blue**

I was listening recently to *Kind of Blue*
the 1959 jazz recording by Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and others
when scales tumbled into place for an hour or two,
skipping across our rooftops
like fresh rainfall
pelting the protective beachheads of insistent collective memory;
scales like wandering cascades came down
to reinterpret the ragged edges of America's shores.
I was listening to a seminal moment,
when all that was noteworthy was forgotten,
and all that was noteworthy was remembered.

Jimmy Cobb, the drummer during that recording session,
said "it must have been made in heaven."
Bursts of horn and strings, a high cloud gathering density,
dropped into the airwaves above our American shores
changing the cadence of a national conversation
just as Pollock changed the direction of the brushstrokes
just as the Beat poets, blues and be-bop
changed the words of our stories.

Jack Kerouac was mad,
writing one of those stories in one long 3 week session,
vomiting words onto a 120-foot long scroll of teletype parchment.
*On the Road* published in 1957, born of a postmodern malady,
a hang-up of the spirit that comes when the only story ever told
comes abruptly to an end, and in kicks the tom-tom
that outlasts the songsheets
telling us what was safe to believe.

Rodgers & Hammerstein seemed unassailable entertainments,
held sacrosanct in homogeneous homophobic suburbias,
fortified against communists, deviants, A-bombs, invaders from space,
and brown-skinned neighbors. Or so the senators and their social clubs thought.
But rock'n'roll seeped in along with the jazz,
infiltrating the weatherproofing
staining the seams of white cinderblock bunkers.
There was no defense, really, no duck-and-cover
for this over the airwaves air raid of popular culture,
these high-fidelity saturations of the status quo.

Peripheral American dreams were telling other stories,
gathering cold fronts of Sturm und Drang,

hot-pressed into vinyl by provincial artists,
pressed again into impressionable minds
packed into festival and outdoor arenas,
wide open faces pointing tongues toward drizzling skies,
drinking in the rousing peal of dissent
then diving into muddy bars live with jazz
altering the state of our civil liberties.

Daytime fever dreams over the AM dial,
detox tremors after the nightly wailing ended,
reverberated multi-local voices, speaking several languages at once:
rhythm & blues, country & western, black & white, north & south,
rebel yells percolating dissatisfaction into subversive action
against protectorates of public decency and cul-de-sac serenity
eroded in the downpour
caught in the dissonance of unrelenting sets of scales.

Clement Greenburg bellowing his ivory contempt.
Allen Ginsburg howling, "Everything is holy!"
Howling Wolf, Junior Parker, and B.B. King groaning the blues on Sun Records.
And Saul Bellow's warning that the postwar economic boom
was never really the dream we were sold.

As the landscape acclimated to the countercultural squall
there were those who shuttered the windows and locked out the rumblings
while others walked headlong into the gale.

Truth fades and reemerges,
like Count Basie's 1955 *April in Paris*,
unending flourishes
cycling into the atmosphere, returned to the groundwaters
rising again to rain from the nation's uncertain skies
overspilling the measured levees of history
with mixtures of sweet and brackish identity
drawn from countless regional waterways
changing the color of our saturated rooftops
coloring the stories implicated in our sheltering remembrances.

Embankments were ruptured in the rising inertia,

protective sandbars yielding to the innumerable displacements

of clear blue notes splashing hard from heaven

crumbling the sodden social architecture

as all that was noteworthy was forgotten

and all that was noteworthy was remembered.

## ONCE AGAIN

Those who deviate from hegemony-establishing norms of beauty, speech, and lifestyle, are invalidated, made social invalids, dependents on the welfare of the reigning body politic that valorizes its compassion and patriarchy in opposition to a useful fiction—that some are normal citizens of the state, others marked by a tragic failing, and never the twain shall meet as the Enlightenment project marches forward. At best, the normal and the stigmatized may nod their heads, bow and curtsy, as they pass in mute acknowledgement of separate planes of existence.

When the body itself is marked with the socially inflicted stigmata of invalidity as a citizen, illegitimacy as a contributor to history or normal ways of knowing, as a symbol of difference made relevant to the public gaze, the body is transformed by the normalizing/stigmatizing language game into something akin to a corporealized fingerprint. The stigma is now taken to be "real" in the court of public opinion, where the language game plays out:

> Thus the body has an identity that coincides with its essence and cannot be altered by moral, artistic, or human will. This indelibility of corporeal identity only furthers the mark placed on the body by other physical qualities—intelligence, height, reaction time. By this logic, the person enters in an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one's place on the normal curve . . . this fingerprinting of the body means that the marks of physical difference become synonymous with the identity of the person. (Davis, 1995, pp. 31-32)

What shall I teach today? I am a deviant. Artists and other anomalies have long been called so. I accept my framework and from within it, it is safe to transgress. I am a postmodern man. I am a postscientific researcher. I am comfortable in this skin. I can play this game. A self (normal and/or stigmatized) and its oppositional other engage in a form of play, a theater of simultaneity, of mutual clarification, of social performativity. The management of a spoiled identity is effected with the presentation of extra-normative figures of self, self outside the boundaries of a normalizing frame, the self less traveled. The representation of the extra-normative self is a Trickster image that cannot be trapped or labeled or relegated to ancillary display because such images are always more than they appear to be and most often appear to be quite normal:

> The stigmatized and the normal are part of each other; if one can prove vulnerable, it must be expected that the other can, too. For in imputing identities to individuals, discreditable or not, the wider social setting and its inhabitants have in a way compromised themselves; they have set themselves up to be proven as fool. (Goffman, 1963, p. 135)

The viewing of images presented as self-evidence, thusly, wrenches us across the surface of the familiar and uncommon experience, across wisdom and folly, like a precipitous act of collective memory. My own attempts to define myself are as foolish as the attempt of history to do so. I am in motion, a blur of light across the celluloid negative. The immediacy of imagery has a gravity that draws both the expected and the unexpected to mind, convincing us of "reality." However, all images are efficacious retrieval cues for the memory, merely imagined. And in our present recollection, past and present, near and far, melt and blend together in a "transcognitive" (Sullivan, 2002) alchemy that produces whole new corporeal shapings, unforeseeable alloys, molten and fluid identities. It is through the arts that our angry hordes of stereotypes may be broken down into their innumerable possibilities:

> Because artists [and artist-researchers] are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations. (van Manen, 1990, p. 74)

The artist as researcher is also the artist as viewer. What is in view is humanity and identity in its glorious vagary. Within my own ongoing experience of normalizing and stigmatizing representations, Western visual culture says both that "I am a man" and that "I am an African American." Conventional and historical representations notwithstanding, the two positions are not mutually exclusive and swim in tandem. There are no essentials of normal and deviant identity; utter normality and utter deviance are unattainable exemplars in Western society. Both stereotypes have too much humanly in common. In proximity, they transfigure one another's purported strictures:

> In the nonessentialist notion of identity . . . the self is fluid and in process, but determinate at any particular moment; it is not necessarily hybrid but always complex, determined by its experiences to a certain extent but still also constructed or chosen with varying degrees of awareness; and it defines itself not in opposition to others or to its community but in relation to others. A nonessentialist identity (self) is (to reverse the order) relational, complex, and in process. (Cooper, n.d., p. 7)

Normal individuals do fail. Stigmatized individuals rise to the unattainable, stigmata in hand, to "extra-normative" self-representations, namely, the representation of personal identity as liberated from language confinements. We are each more than we appear to be; we rewrite ourselves as we restate the case. Language predicates a democracy of (re)positionings, allowing momentary releases from our everyday descriptors. Allowing movement into new territories of identity.

Visual forms, signs, symbols, types, and icons all lend themselves to discursive, language-bound (re)positionings. Identity is in the mix; artist-researchers dive headlong into the mix to suss out those identities, critique them, reconstitute them. It is a messy business; we get our bodies dirty. We experience our research in a way that reveals something of ourselves within

each foray; we surrender a response that reveals our own (re)positioning. As we reconstitute ourselves within intermingled discourses—renaming, removing, reinstating, researching—we find that action supercedes all stasis and ideology, allowing new identity to churn upwards and be made self-evident in the process.

## NOTES

1. A sentiment repeated endlessly by well-meaning family members.

2. This command has been repeated several times in my life, usually when visiting an individual in an office building dressed down in jeans and sneakers, a backpack, and my skin.

3. Although Simi Linton's (1998) reference here is specific to disabled people, her comments lend themselves to the wider parameters and discussion of social norms and stigmatization central to this article.

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