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James Haywood Rolling

Syracuse University

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James Haywood Rolling, Jr
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Secular Blasphemy
Utter(ed) Transgressions Against Names and Fathers in the Postmodern Era

James Haywood Rolling, Jr.
Syracuse University

Unnaming the axiomatic constructs of a named identity—that which is thought to be fitting within a given regime of definition—becomes then an act of secular blasphemy, a performance of decanonizing translation that discursively relocates and reinscribes communicated meaning from power, prefix, and prefigurement to perpetual movement. Departing from Homi Bhabha’s description of blasphemy as a transgressive act, this article blasphemes the certainty of definition in research writing, illuminating the performance of blasphemy as a source of new social names and the migration of norms and meaning. This article is the third in a trilogy of research forays exploring the intersection of autoethnography, critical race theory, and performance studies. This new research, written to follow up Rolling (2004a, 2004b), is a continuation of the author’s effort to establish the efficacy of a poststructural and poetic aesthetic in qualitative research writing.

Keywords: autoethnography; critical race theory; performance studies; arts-based educational research; poetics

Notes To Myself

In the theater of multiple selves and simultaneous possibilities, in the gallery of reinscribed discourses, images become the ground for newly enunciated complexities of identity. “So what?” says the Black man. What good does this do for we who apparently remain too darkly caricatured to be reinscribed with the plainer characters of social justice, and too intransigently typed to be held self-evident? Postmodern ambiguities challenge the validity of Western norms and sires that have consigned non-Western bodies and unmanly signs to their margins. But for those just too dark skinned to be accepted as a normal or even somewhat marginal Western body, it seems that the only ground left on which to make a stand for theoretical relevancy...
is that of theoretical illegitimacy—“I am not what you think me to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I once was; I am delimited by what you have left behind after the plunder of my origins.” And yet, although it seems I am syntactically defined by the negative, I am much more; in keeping with themes that have emerged from my previous writing, I will argue that the enactment of heretical performatives redeem the possibilities inherent in the unknown, unrepresented, unthought identity from “the pathos of cultural confusion” and theoretical illegitimacy, “into a strategy of political subversion” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 62). To be critical is to be political.

The consideration of how we are “to rethink ourselves” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 65) is dangerous to the sustainability of the state and status quo, to the permanence of a tainting authority. To rethink self is to unname self, to un-ink, to unstick self. To unname self is to blaspheme the origin of the name; to unname self is to unravel threads of nomenclatural heresy in a denouement of the lineage of the dictatorial meme.

Junior

My father wanted me to be just like him, or an extension of him, or the as-yet-unrealized possibility of him, hence the replication of his name in full on my birth certificate, with the minor appellation of Junior to contextualize me. He called himself “Jim,” so I was nicknamed “Jim-Jim,” and each time I was so called, I was indeed nicked. I was the determinable scion. My father often said, “I know you better than you know yourself.” Nicked again in spirit, diminished in independence, I always bled when he repeated this. He did not know my friends, my loves, my failures, my aspirations, the intimate places I had discovered on my body; therefore, he did not know me. Of course, I was afraid to tell him this directly. My body was smaller than his and, while growing up, I was used to the unexpected flash of his hard hand to my belly or head when I had committed some unknowable offense to his unwavering common sense. I was no stranger to being doubled over in pain; I was accustomed to being struck dizzy. One day he became aware that I had developed an automatic response, a duck of the head, a bob, a weave, a twist of the body when his hand moved unexpectedly within my peripheral sight—even if he was just reaching for a cup from the dish rack. He stopped striking me so often, which had the strangely adverse effect of diminishing our physical contact in the home.

I have very specific early bodily/spatial memories of my father—it usually involved being hit, slapped, poked, prodded, spanked or stood up against a
wall and lectured to at length, ad nauseam. Never hugging, never holding hands, never a piggy back ride, never a pat on the back declaiming, “well done, my good boy.” (Rolling, 2004a, p. 549)

As far as I can tell, my father, an artist, did no self-portraits that were completed in full narrative bloom, only some pen-and-ink likenesses that appeared on business cards and at least one trade magazine cover (see Figure 1).

He did, however, do a portrait of me when I was a child, although it was never given to me while I was still a child. My father possessed and hoarded;
he did not give easily. That portrait, in a white file drawer for most of my life until it was revisited at some point in the last years of his life, was finally given to me. My hair, originally painted solid black, was revised for reasons never expressed to me. In its place, something rhizomatic was attempted. Perhaps it is a crown to my insufferable difference from his expectations for his firstborn son—perhaps a relenting, an acknowledgement of the failure of his first draft of my biography (see Figure 2).

But my father did attempt an autobiography. I found it in the form of an unfinished children’s picture book as I was filtering through his studio after his death in 2002. I was re-searching, trying to make sense of this man, of my
intent to blaspheme, of my irreverent effort to transpose subservience and agency within the delimiting space of my given names. In taking a distinctly autobiographical stance to the writing of this research, I am in accord with Michael Humphreys in his intent “to interweave an autoethnographic . . . story with methodological theory and to ‘draw an audience into a collective experience in which a version of truth is demonstrated for the collective to judge’” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 855, citing Butler, 1997). Sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997) describes “a collective story” (p. 32) as that which gives voice to those marginalized or silenced, to those sired and sociologically constructed either in the house where I grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, or in the prevailing Western Enlightenment and hegemonic narrative where I have also grown up. I give voice to myself. I give voice to the collective.

**Subtext**

I am careful here . . . I do not want to overthink this discursive exercise. I’ve been scribbling along the margins all of my life, building up my faith, similar I think to the ancient Israelites as they circled Jericho, before the name came down. Here, I transcribe some notes to myself, handwritten on a piece of scrap paper sometime earlier this year:

I live a faith-based life. To commit blasphemy is to profane the name. What’s in a name? Everything. The ancient Hebrew Abram lived with a name that meant “high” or “exalted father” until he physically picked up his tent and left behind a life of unspoken pain and was given the name Abraham, which means “father of multitudes.” Jabez, described in the Old Testament as the head of a clan within the tribe of Judah, had a name that actually meant “pain;” until he transcended his name with a prayer that has become enduringly associated with blessing. Jabez cried out to his God: “Oh that you would bless me, and enlarge my territory. Let your hand be with me and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” Free from his name. Jabez collaborated then with the Namer of names, with the Authority of authorities, with the King of kings, to resist the meaning of the name, while still within the context of the name. We still remember him as Jabez, but his name now signifies blessing rather than pain. Jabez un-named himself.

A traditionally assigned name is a template then, a high-walled city erected to prevent the dissipation of a pattern of origin, a representation of permanence to protect against infiltration of rogue meanings and desires. But in order to maintain its integrity as a representation, a name cannot be subject to shaking, to slippage, to any form of decontextualization from its foundational placement. For instance, a flag is a representation of a nation. When a
flag is taken off of its pole and placed on the floor to tread upon—when a flag is burned—when a flag is painted over, a discourse in blasphemy is entered, albeit secular in form.

There are consequences if one chooses to utter blasphemy. There are consequences even if one is merely charged with blasphemy, even if the charges are more perceived than factual.

Throughout the stations of my life, I have shared my father’s name. He was the impenetrable city. But in the article *Messing with Identity Constructs* (Rolling, 2004a), I desecrated his title as my sire by rewriting him, usurping the position he once claimed for himself when he asserted that he knew me better than I knew myself. On poetic reflection and research reflexivity, I discovered that I knew him better than I ever thought I did.

**Eulogy and Ambiguity**

After opening my dad’s armoire
the art studio in the back of the house
and upon discovery of his updated resume
hidden in his last portfolio
out of circulation
a decade after he was downsized

after compiling dates stamped into peeling metal
labels at the bases of shiny tournament trophies
with armless men that once held paddles
and broken chess pieces that once held crowns

and after examining 30 years
packed into two drawers
records and receipts, stack against stack
composed with the same care as his color palette

I have evidence to write in praise of
a typographer awarded for the tight curves of his letters
an illustrator whose children’s books were read in China
an author whose children’s books were never published
a poet honorably mentioned by Reader’s Digest

an architect of sandcastles
blown across the wreckage of two households
where firstborn sons were not allowed to speak
their daily love and hate

In the end he said he was proud of me
went back into his art studio
and tried to unpack 30 years
into his portrait of me as his creation.

Monsters

As I wrote an article titled Searching Self-Image, I was still looking for a face that I recognized among a multiple of possible identities. Possessing—and presenting—an African American body to the reader means that, in terms of the prevailing modernist normative discourse, I am supposedly presenting an ugly body; a pathological body; an exploitable body; an obsequious body; a primitive body; a binary body invisible unless viewed in subservience to White positional and institutional power.

As I child, I was simply an artist and a student. I had no name of my own, but I had my father’s art supplies. I had my honor roll certificates, awarded regularly to me each term. But I was not an athlete; I was not popular. So when my classmates and peers finally tagged me with a name, it alternated between Professor and Poindexter. Now, having chosen a return to earlier simplicity, I move toward renaming myself as “artist/researcher/teacher,” a blending suggested by art educator Rita L. Irwin (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004).

1/30/06

It has occurred to me this morning that I am on a hero’s quest. I have long been confused/caught up in my drivenness. What impels me? I believe I understand now. I have been on a quest. A pilgrimage. I have no roots. I am not tied to a nationality, to a popular ideal, to a common creed. I am a post-modern man; a pioneer trolling the margins of a 21st century post-Western, post-scientific post-colonial identity. Utter(ed) blasphemies will leave a string of knotted utterances along my journey, marking my way, unmarking me. These utterances will shatter walled cities that deny my entrance, my egress. These utterances will rebuke the gods that do not count me significant, that signify me impotent. These utterances will war against the darkness. My invisibility is my cloak of protection; my mask is my magic. I have and I will encounter monsters along the way. I will—and I have—transformed monsters along the way. Ugly, fearful things.
Premonition

My first uttered blasphemy issued forth as silence in the midst of the daily rehearsal of this nation’s indoctrinating catechism. At some point during my elementary schooling, I became convinced that the Pledge of Allegiance we were expected to recite every morning became a lie as it passed through my thick lips. I suppose I thought I was being a hero. I did not believe I lived in such a nation. Rather, I lived in two nations.

Our father/I pledge allegiance
Who art in heaven/to this flag
Hallowed be thy name/of the United States of America
Thy kingdom come/and to this republic
Thy will be done/for which it stands
On earth/one nation
As it is in heaven/under God
Indivisible/invisible
With liberty and justice for all
who have been redeemed from unholy lands
without a sponsored democracy.

In my nation there was invisibility. My ancestors were shipped to this and numerous other territories in bondage; their passage was one of carnage, unseen and unspoken. My mother’s direct ancestors were shipped to the Caribbean; my father’s ancestors were shipped to the continental United States. Such events are not rescriptable; they can only be overwritten. In my neighborhood, bondage continued incarnate; the block we grew up on was in the middle of a ghetto hiding us from the sight of gods and overseers. We were tenants there; landlocked by the brick and the mortar, by the chipped concrete treeless backyards. We were tenants in 1260 Lincoln Place, the house we grew up in. It was years before I understood how greatly my father/our foster forefathers had harmed us.

Rear Projection

In a patriarchal lineage, where children take on their father’s surname, a father is one who gives his son significance. So does a hegemonic sire. There is nothing more sacred than origins. In a name, those origins may be reconstituted. In a name, I am presented as James, son of Rolling, a proud father’s procreation. In that same name, without a trace of the African names that once existed in my lineage, I am also presented as African, scion of America,
a beneficent patriarch’s appropriation. The sacral nature of origins suggests that I can do nothing to change either lineage. However, the appearance that the positionality of my identity derives linearly from either point of origin does not hold under critical scrutiny. Each lineage is marked by absences. Abscesses. Blind spots.

These absences are the result of intersecting burrows of anomalous internal movement—personal inquiries, disturbing lineage, undermining patriarchy. These absences are also the encroachments of anomalous external movement—the intertextualities of unnamings burrowing into my head. To unname is to undermine purported origins, to burrow between the archaeologies that constrain, to initiate and inaugurate anomalous genealogies that thrive and proliferate and die and leach new life between the layers. To unname is to give light to discursive ephemeralities that may live for just a day, but whose names are no less alive, no less legitimate in quality than the vast tectonic ecologies of foundational and constrictive archaeologies. Much of the scholarship and poetics of the postmodern era unnames me.

My own autobiography interacts with particular archaeologies—specifically, the multiformational arrangement of positions in the discourse of fathers and their relationships with their sons—as perpetuated in the autobiography of the familial sire, the narrative that was found in my eulogized father’s art studio. My autobiography also interacts with the multiformational arrangement of positions in the discourse of conquerors and their relationships with their human capital, their investment progeny—as perpetuated in the autobiography of the hegemonic sire, the narrative that is found in the messy tracts of race negotiation in the United States. Both narratives have been conserved for my hand to overwrite, to unname. In this overwriting, the first narrative—my father’s narrative—is framed as a children’s story, yet works simultaneously to hide and reveal a lifetime. The second narrative—my nation’s narrative—was formed into the comic song “Ten Little Indians” in 1868 by Philadelphia songwriter Septimus Winner; reframed as the nursery rhyme and popular children’s song “Ten Little Niggers” in 1939 by Frank Green, and it perpetuates an outright erasure of the value of little Black boys who might grow up to be Black men.

On browning layers of superimposed tracing paper, edges torn and brittle, my mother, Sylvia, is recreated in black fine point marker schematic; it is my mother in the beauty of her youth (see Figure 3). Above her head float her four children in order of birth, James Haywood, Dwayne Christopher, Angela Evette, and Mark Edward. Apparently intended to be page 1 of the narrative, this initial discovery was followed by 40 pages on cheap copy paper, alternating between text and full-page image blocks. Within the image blocks are 20 absences, images unrecorded. Jim Rolling begins with his
mother, who shared the same first name as his grandmother on his father’s side and was therefore distinguished as “Little Eva.” My great-grandmother Eva outlived my grandmother, Little Eva, by nearly 20 years. A small scrap of handwritten notes, perhaps intended to accompany the first drawing in my father’s unfinished picture book, is attached to the second page by a bit of transparent tape. My father writes,

Little Eva, my mother, one of the first women to drive a trolley. Sometimes I would meet her as she drove past our building on Rockaway Avenue. “Here’
your lunch Gram made for you,” I would say as I handed her a brown paper bag. She was twice a heroine. Had write-ups in the *Amsterdam News*. Black Woman Driver Saves Passengers When Trolley Catches On Fire.

Writing between my father’s lines and pages, I insinuate my own autobiography and my own memories of my father’s shielded childhood, too rarely shared with me. In doing so, my own anomalous autobiography revisits, completes, argues, contradicts, and collaborates with the archaeologies of my father’s autobiography. My father’s text begins on page 2, some of the words written in bold typeface for reasons I cannot entirely discern beyond the fact that some of them rhyme. As I respond, hegemony’s script imposes itself anew:

**Big** brown mama ain’t what she used to be. She’s *changed*. Doesn’t love me anymore. Rearranged. Dancing. **Prancing**. No more *romancing*.

My tall brown grandma, barely remembered
dying behind embroidered curtains
away from light and child’s-eye view
lung cancer ate her
before I was two
I did not know he loved her so
I did not know she hurt him so
loving an abusive boyfriend more than her only son.

*Ten little nigger boys went out to dine;*

Hey **cityboy**, it’s easy to have fun. Stay out of the **sun**. Carry a **gun**. Drugs for sale. Learn to run.

Cityboy writing himself incompletely,
sire of the last James Haywood Rolling,
raised without his greater James Haywood Rolling,
a tubercular trumpet player gone by twenty-one;
leaving little Brownsville cityboy, having some kinds of fun
avoiding the guns, the kindling urban sun
running small-time numbers, outrunning big-time drugs.

*One choked his little self, and then there were nine.*

Gram *taught* me a lot. How to read. What to *put* in a **pot**. Respect your brother and every body’s **mother**.

Eva, mother of my father’s dead father,
outlived Little Eva, my father’s mother,
outlived Uncle Elmo, her own one-eyed son
until she died downstairs on the musty first floor
of 1260 Lincoln Place, the house we grew up in,
Gram’s home, passed on to my father, my father’s house, not ours.

*Nine little nigger boys sat up very late;*

Start a **new** job, can’t bask in the sun. Working’s no **fun**. There won’t be a **loss**, just impress the boss.

Stubbornly an artist while other colored men sought jobs with pensions and pay grades, he toiled at J. C. Penney’s product displays for too little pay, a former army illustrator and his first son on the way.

*One overslept himself, and then there were eight.*

Ma **loved** me, and gave me full support. She **hurried** and **scurried**, worked and praised, and worried **until** I was raised.

Rising at the end of cityboyhood was there finally a return of the love so long deprived administered in her helpless attentions as he in turn nursed her into oblivion?

*Eight little nigger boys traveling in Devon;*

My wife, **Syl**, a wonderful gal. Loving, silly, what a **pal**. We raised **four** kids, that was tough. Results . . . good enough. 

Wasn’t Ma wife enough to also put her name on the lease? Couldn’t four kids meet the measure of your trust to have a single friend over when you were not home? Did I ever evolve beyond a mere “bird brain,” as you put it, develop enough warrant to be called by your name?

*One said he’d stay there, and then there were seven.*

My wife **bought** a car, now it’s her turn. Insurance. **Repair**. Bills. **Scratches**. Dents. Parking. She pays out. Now she’ll **care**. Always teaching lessons to your wife To all the lesser beings in your life To the lesser minds, the lesser bodies that disturbed your reign of common sense.

*Seven little nigger boys chopping up sticks;*

Used to be **nice**. Don’t think twice. Walk day or **night**. Nice **neighbors**. Lots of ice cream flavors. Gone **forever**.

I try to remember the ice cream parlors you took us to. Sometimes you did, you would say.
I wish I remembered it so every day.
We were so young when you took us to the circus,
or smuggled us in to Saturday movie matinees,
at the price of kids younger than we were until we grew up and spoiled all our fun.

One chopped himself in half, and then there were six.

Cheapest, best game in town. Hit the ball against the wall. Who’s the champ? Beat the rest. The best player wins.

Didn’t you know I played handball too?
How come you never came to see one of my games?
I played them right here on under the tall white turrets of the urine-stained schoolyard walls.

Six little nigger boys playing with a hive;

Use a paddle. Don’t hurt your hand. Hit the ball hard. Put your name on the card. Four on. Winners next.

I remember you inviting me once to play, but you were more interested in winning that day than in helping me develop my game.
Did you know I used to beat men old enough to be my father?
Did you know that your paddleball trophies are in a box I carried with me to Happy Valley, PA?

A bumble-bee stung one, and then there were five.


High flaming barbecues on steel and concrete public grills; family outings to the Long Island state park eating my Ma’s potato salad and Aunt Ernestine’s fried chicken from Tupperware bins, Koolaid dripping in the grass from the broken thermos spout inciting bees to drunken violence.

Five little nigger boys going in for law;


Raising a family of six on an art director’s salary, your insecurity must have overwhelmed you, whenever you shielded the combination to the safe in your dark closet from strangers you kept inside your home, peeping over your wide shoulders for some demonstration of love.
I never really knew that man at the end of his life
hoarding lottery tickets organized in white plastic grocery bags
discovered as we emptied the house from room to room.
Thousands of dollars that failed to yield that storied payout
that Gram first used to buy the house on Lincoln Place.

*One got in chancery, and then there were four.*

Pray for us, through the times we’ve had, **good** and bad. Sad. Be glad. Deliver us from **evil**. Thy **kingdom** comes.

People hand in hand
I’m not one who make believes
Today’s not yesterday
And all things have an ending
Could a place like this exist so beautiful
Or were the friendly neighbors of old Crown Heights
just an inner vision of Stevie Wonder’s mind?

*Four little nigger boys going out to sea;*

Our **dog**. Home alone. Family at work . . . school. **Coco** was her name.

**Chewing** furniture was her game. No more loco Coco.
I could not bear the inapplicability of the name;
my second uttered blasphemy was told
when the family decided they would call the new dog Coco,
and I decided to call her Sandy,
calling her by her color, or not at all.
Sandy’s senses shattered slowly over three years,
from too many firecrackers, too many sharp noises
in overly sensitive ears
until we put her out of her misery and out of our minds.

*A red herring swallowed one, and then there were three.*

We **played**. We stayed. Together. Fun. Sun. Study **buddy**. Old friends **yesterday**. Court. Marry. **Divorce**. Don’t speak to each other today.

Our godfathers disappeared one by one,
after each fallout with their buddy, Jim.
My father had a way of drawing lines
and in spite of the changes in people or time,
retracing those lines daily on the ground
in an array of colored chalks.

*Three little nigger boys walking in the zoo;*

**Tough** games on the handball court. Killer Ron. **Roadrunner** Mel. **Play** all day. Who doesn’t give up? Mel **wins** going away.
But you left the chess out of the story, Da . . . !
(I could never bring myself to affectionately utter “Dad”)
Men came to your funeral
who played chess in the park with you for 15 years,
men who did not know your given name
men the family never knew,
men who knew only the nickname they awarded you
warranted by the style and strength of your game,
men who mourned and said they called you “Nemesis.”

A big bear hugged one, and then there were two.

The loss of the local block association in which you served
to the pace of the city, the pace of the sameness,
the loss of the street to anonymous neighbors,
to 6-foot outdoor speakers rattling beats all night
against our neighbors’ windows,
the loss of your family to misdeeds and mistrust.
It could not have escaped your attention
that once the kids grow up and flee the house,
one Ma leaves to buy a co-op in her name,
it’s too late to start again.

Two little nigger boys sitting in the sun;

children. What a life. Living . . . existing on Fulton Street.
Was this a children’s book you ever planned to sell?
Was this a cautionary tale? Was this your way of reaching the lost?
Like you did at the Harlem youth center,
doing public penance for a lifetime of reserve?

One got frizzled up, and then there was one.

The scars must have been deeper than anyone knew
What did Uncle Ed do to you
that forever kept you from wooden pews?

One little nigger boy living all alone;

I watched you fall half asleep on the couch
I watched you fall asleep half awake
I saw the fear of facing the sum of your life
“Was I one of the bad guys?” I heard you ask
as the TV blared in the a.m. hours
while the radio droned at the highest volume
until your voice that final day home alone
could no longer be raised at anyone.

_He got married, and then there were none._

I am the last James Haywood Rolling. Perhaps, as written by Western
hegemony, all Black men are discursively self-destructing boys, each a
Junior, a minor appellation, a given name, a little nigger, awaiting their role
in the quantitative countdown, the call to perform the existential escape
clause, to self-correct the mistake of being born Black. Perhaps all Black
men are James Haywood Rolling, Jr., just as my father and I have been.
Perhaps my father, who always signed his name Jim Rolling, was the strong
one, long ago overthrowing his patriarchal sires, never adhering to the name
James Haywood Rolling, Jr. Or perhaps my father was the weak one, succ-
cumbing to accumulated inabilities to produce all that he had desired—
including a firstborn son who was just like him; if so, these were not
inabilities stemming from lack of desire, but perhaps for lack of desire for
an unnamed life. In this research, I act to unname all other Juniors in the act
This is, after all, a collective story.

In the first article of this trilogy, I mentioned that I found primary source
documentation that my father was the first James Haywood Rolling, Jr.
(Rolling, 2004a, p. 550). I am actually James Haywood Rolling, III. My father
writes of his family lineage from his grandmother Eva, as legally required for
a property settlement about 6 months after her death on January 11, 1983. He
writes:

_Eva Haywood [Rolling] had one other son, James Haywood Rolling. He and
his wife, Eva (Hart) Rolling had one child, me, James H. Rolling Jr. My father,
James senior died when I was very young and my mother passed away in
1965. I reside at 1260 Lincoln Place, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11213. (James Haywood
Rolling, Jr., personal communication, July 13, 1983)_

I have recently been told that etiquette allows that because I am the last
and there is no longer a living James Haywood Rolling senior to me, I can
drop the Junior appellation; I can officially rename myself James Haywood
Rolling, III (Kip Jones, personal communication, March 7, 2006). I may
formally change one day, but I have _already_ renamed myself and have done
so collaboratively. Collaboration is the theme of this autoethnographic in-
filtration, this jazz cutting contest. Mary Louise Pratt defines the autoethno-
graphic text as:
a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. . . . Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous or “authentic” forms of self-representation. . . . Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding. (Pratt, 1992, p. 28)

In the beginning, my father was one conqueror among others. And as with all conquerors, I was left with the marks to prove with all certainty that my identity was subject to control. To those who claim the rights of conquerors, I am a threat not because of any offense, but because of my resistance to assimilation within a Junior appellation. No matter how much I achieved, my thinking was not in accord with my father’s/our foster forefather’s expectations. I was told that I had no common sense. No common blood.

For the remainder of childhood, my self-image was institutionalized, “held captive to the shadows of the dim hallways in 1260 Lincoln Place” (Rolling, 2004b, p. 872). Once again, I have moved in selective collaboration with the idioms of my father’s life, the idioms of my conquering nations’ life—meanings not entirely deducible from those of the individual words of a children’s picture book without imagery, by the words that constituted me as three-fifths of a man in the national psyche. Perhaps in engaging a surreptitiously resistant collaboration with those who have sired me, I have manifested what Jacques Derrida describes as an agency of blindness, a “writing without seeing,” writing without certainty, blasphemous of all borders and predetermination, a sort of self-portrait, “a sort of re-drawing, a with-drawing, or retreat [re-trait], at once the interposition of a mirror, an impossible reappropriation or mourning, the intervention of a paradoxical Narcissus” (Derrida, 1993, p. 3). A paradoxical Narcissus, in that my gaze is enthralled not in my presence in the mirroring waters that dis/course alongside me, but in the fluid absences in my reflection, the dark wavelets empty of detail, rippling, contiguous with blinding white darts of reflected sun.

I find myself a R/rolling surface of dark and bright moving blind spots. Yet as I trawl my finger lightly across the surface of swift discursive currents, I write myself at distances and depths that are yet too far, too close to see. Jacques Derrida describes “writing without seeing,” not as an eyes wide shut blindness, nor as an unconscious and twilight awareness, but in the following terms:

Not with my eyes closed, to be sure, but open and disoriented in the night; or else during the day, my eyes fixed on something else, while looking elsewhere,
in front of me, for example. . . . What happens when one writes without see-
ing? A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly
delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes,
trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. (Derrida, 1993, p. 3)

I have written without seeing. I have been blind all along, seeing things
that others did not realize I could see, and yet now I have suddenly learned
how to communicate what I see with my blindness. In this interwoven poetic
engagement with the written body of my father and the written corpus of
Black erasure, I have written myself without seeing. I have written my self-
portrait among ruins, a paradoxical and halting self-portrait allowing you—
the viewer—to maneuver, to see your own apparition in its poorly delimited
space.

Whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an unde-
cidable stroke . . . [this] double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of
truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its play as one of its
functions or parts. This displacement does not take place, has not taken place
once as an event. It does not occupy a simple place. It does not take place in
writing. This dis-location (is what) writes/is written. (Derrida, 1981, p. 193)

This collaboration with the conqueror, the unpredictable sire with a heavy
hand, holds a de/re/constructive intent, reminiscent of 1930s jazz “cutting con-
tests,” a form of competitive engagement where each musician would try to
top the other in a battle to shift local axes of power and prestige. But these
events did more than deconstruct and alternatively reconstruct musical texts—
they made the invisible and constitutive constraints of social forces and expec-
tations apparent, allowing the identities of musicians to be reconstituted as
new sounds, new voices, those who once carried the stigma of being untried
in battle, those who once carried only the stigma of being considered “boys”
among White men.

This is a collaboration that conspires not to violently overthrow conquerors
but to coexist and supplant, James itself being a name of Biblical derivation,
meaning “supplanter,” or to supercede and replace. As I write and breathe, all
previous James’s recede from the page, all preceding monsters and myths
withdraw from history, and I am left dripping in the thaw of the delimiting text.
In supplanting, I also take the role of blasphemer. I gladly do so. Secular blas-
phemy is “a transgressive act of cultural translation,” translation being “the
performative nature of cultural communication” consisting of [the principle
and practice of the] movement of meaning” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 226-228).
There is no ultimate end to translational and transposing communication, as it
“puts the original in motion to decanonicalise it, giving it the movement of
fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile” (de Man, 1986, p. 92). In my journey to exile, I have become possible once again.

**The Anti-Coloring Book**

In the canon of Western history, all of my multiple and extant identities have been incorporated in service of the greater delineation of Western normativity, either as foreground or the negative space that couches the foreground. This is the coloring book that has constituted me. In this research I have presented another body of evidence. I have found empty space within which to draw—on the unfinished panels of my father’s picture book, along the margins of the pages of my nation’s racial primer. And I have co-opted the opportunity all good anticoloring books offer—the opportunity to draw my own figures, the opportunity to color within and without the lines, the opportunity to strew fresh contour and color across the open page beneath my transgressing hand.

**A Trilogy’s Denouement in Three Parts**

2/17/06

One of my undergraduate students writes something that caught my attention in her Reading Log Journal #9, a reflection on a museum exhibition featuring the work of “outsider” artists. She made an unexpected connection between the exhibition and the rejection of her admissions application from a college for not having enough “academic” interests, although she carried a 3.8 GPA in high school and “sent them a portfolio full of my various musical, theatrical and artistic endeavors.” She writes:

Why can’t “outsider art” be “fine art”? Why can’t [I] be academic? These words seem to get more frivolous the more we involve ourselves in the system of academia, which seems counter to what I always thought it would do. Normally, the more one learns, the more blurred the lines become.

In response, I wrote in the margins of her journal entry: “And the more blurred the lines, the easier we cross their boundaries and overwrite them.” And this gave me pause. As I paused, reflecting on my marginal notes and its implications regarding my teaching relationship with the learner, and on my subjectivity as a teacher learning from learners, I saw an image. A vision—now that I think of it. I was a cartoon in a coloring book. But the lines were eroding. Dashed. Blurred. Scumbled. Many children were coloring outside the lines. I, along with my name, was scribbled and spilled out across the page, slipping off of its edges.
Postscript

At the end of this article it has finally become clear to me that I am actually on an antihero’s quest, the kind of quest that becomes apparent when fathers/foster forefathers reveal themselves to be less heroic than fatherhood proclaims. In response, I have changed my given name. Renaming also refigures self-image. I have created many self-portraits but for the first time I have committed the blasphemy of creating a self-portrait that eschews drawing for the act of drawing on. Portraits are supposed to show evidence of artistic prowess; this self-portrait shows evidence of the messy collaboration between two Black men who were at times invisible, at times erased, as little Black boys growing up in the United States (see Figure 4).

Revelation

After completing this article, I was lying in bed with my wife one night as she was still sleeping, just before dawn as the first light became visible
through the window. And it also became clear to me that I desperately desire the intimacy my father/our foster forefathers have never shared, so greatly so that I became an artist. I write and draw my unformed intimacies so that I can further shape them and assign an unnamed value (see Figure 5).
Notes

1. The concept of heresy has both secular and nonsecular applications. Heresy refers to choosing a dissenting position against a reigning orthodoxy, a theory, doctrine or practice that is generally accepted. There are orthodoxies to be found in every religious belief, but there are also orthodoxies in every subculture large and small, from the corporate to the underground. Each such orthodoxy is a complex social pattern engaged in the struggle to preserve itself against any surreptitious evolution in the narrative.

2. Identity is not a given, although it presents itself in association with a given name; identity is an idea, subject to analysis and revision. Poetry and uncertainty became a tool for analysis, for tracing impressions back to causes, for attending to overlooked details, for narrowing the scope of my inquiry. For pushing myself to take an interpretive leap.

3. Self-image as a representative of identity is not always self-evident. We often require a cadre of images to see the shape of a single, fleeting, identifying reflection.

4. In citing the existence of hegemony, I do not believe I am perpetuating the power of hegemony, but rather, exposing its weakness in the face of an unnaming agency. In citing the existence of patriarchal stories of origin, I am not denying my matriarchal origins—my Caribbean bloodline. I will likely broach that subjectivity in a different research inquiry.

5. This blindness is not disability, but ability. On his review of my manuscript as it was still in preparation, a friend and expert in the field of disability studies was dubious about the stereotyping inherent in Derrida’s use of blindness as a metaphor. He admonished me to keep in mind that “for people who are congenitally blind, their sensory integration is not additive or predicated on memories before the loss, but rather a different way of coming to know and understand the world” (David J. Connor, personal communication, July 22, 2006). I thought about this a lot and I have concluded that my blindness is not predicated on loss, but was present from birth and the assignment of my given names.

6. “Unlike more commercial swing, Kansas City jazz was built upon head arrangements—musical ideas or riffs that were rarely written down, but provided the foundation for Kansas City musicians to improvise all night long. . . . There were informal cutting contests for high school kids, free-for-alls for professionals, and the equivalent of heavyweight championship contests between the top musicians in town, often held at the Sunset or the Subway, the Reno or the Cherry Blossom. Kansas City jazz rewarded both individualism and cooperation. In order to provide a pleasing background for a succession of soloists, those waiting to play were expected to master complex harmonized riffs: ‘It showed a young guy that came in there,’ the bassist Gene Ramey recalled, ‘that he didn’t just have to learn how to play a solo, he had to learn how to team . . . [how] to breathe at the same time.’ (Excerpt from Burns, 2001)

7. The Anti-Coloring Book (Striker & Kimmel, 1978/1984) is the first in a series of successful creative activity books designed to contend with “the mistake of trying to convince children that their drawings must look a certain way in order to be acceptable” (p. 1) inviting children to create their own lines.

References


**James Haywood Rolling, Jr.** earned his EdD and EdM in art education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and his MFA from Syracuse University. His research focuses on poststructuralist and poetic aesthetic interrogations of the certainties and norms of modernity, examining the archaeologies underlying the (re)constitution of stigmatized social identities from previous interpretations ensconced in Western visual culture. He is an associate professor and the chair of art education at Syracuse University.