Teaching and Leading to Transgress:

A Transformative Art Education Odyssey

By Wanda B. Knight

Many Black women in the United States feel pressure to lead double lives to cope with racial and gender discrimination. African American feminists Charisse Jones (a journalist) and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (a psychologist) found that to survive, Black women must learn to "shift" between various worlds.[i] Some do it by altering their appearance, behavior, or speech. Many shift *White* when they enter schools and work spaces and *Black* when they get back home.[ii] My hope in describing my experiences and the various forms of "shifting" I have used to transgress oppressive boundaries is that any insights gleaned from them will spur action that leads to substantive educational reform.

Born and reared in a somewhat isolated, rural, segregated community in Reidsville, North Carolina (without running water for a portion of my life), I do not recall having to contend with issues of class, race, and gender until our schools became desegregated. My father achieved only a grade school education, and my mother was a high school dropout, yet I am currently a senior administrator and full professor of Art Education, African American Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Bioethics at a predominantly White research-oriented university. I hold a Ph.D. in art education, a master's degree in educational leadership, supervision, and administration,

and a bachelor's degree in art education. How did I get to where I am today? How have I resisted and responded to racism, sexism, and classism? More importantly, how have my lived experiences of race, gender, and class structured my transgressive teaching, leadership, and coping strategies? According to renowned author Maya Angelou, "We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty." This quote suggests that we often look at people we perceive to be successful and do not think of their hard work and struggles to get there.

Black people's struggle for educational parity with Whites has a long history in the United States. Thus, it is imperative to review Black peoples' historic quest for equal education opportunities to comprehend better how Blacks, "through forced illiteracy," arrived at this inequitable stage [of education].[iii] Nevertheless, education (still) appears to be the best hope for us by reducing the profound disparities in wealth and opportunity that characterize the United States.

We each have had experiences that are unique to us. My quest is an ongoing odyssey in "a contact zone" where "safe spaces" must be created despite educational inequities. Using the spatial metaphors of different feminist scholar-activists, I describe how Black people, especially Black women, shift from one space to another in our efforts to survive, thrive, belong, and feel at home wherever we go.

Contact Zones and Safe Spaces

Mary Louise Pratt (influential scholar and theorist) defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often

in contexts of highly asymmetrical power." [i] The contact zone is an unsafe

location filled with many emotions (e.g., rage, incomprehension, and pain), where

people often misunderstand and hurt each other.[ii] Because such emotional

turmoil and pain occurs in the contact zone, "groups need places [safe houses]

for hearing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared

understandings, knowledge claims on the world that they can then bring into the

contact zone." [iii]

Various scholars of color have expressed a need for places of shared

understanding and the complexities surrounding what is safe for some but not for

others. Contemporary scholars of color often discuss their ongoing search for

"home" while simultaneously contending with the contact zone. "Home" and "safe

spaces" are synonymous locations where women of color can express

themselves without feeling threatened, censored, judged, or shamed. Safe

spaces are sites where they can share their difficult and painful experiences in

the contact zone with others who have had similar experiences. Moreover, safe

spaces are metaphors for "home" because home is where one can find empathy,

relax, and "be" unapologetically.

African American poet June Jordan wrote about needing "*a living room*

where the talk will take place in my language/ I need to talk about living room

where I can sit without grief without wailing aloud for my loved ones/I need to talk

about living room because I need to talk about home." [iv] Chicana feminist

Gloria Anzaldúa describes creating safe spaces for "borderland" identities, "*I*

want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face/ And if going home is denied

me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new cultura--una

cultura mestiza--with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own

feminist architecture." [v] Asian American scholar Nellie Wong visualizes what it

means for Asian American women "*to live in our own skin and not only peel our*

own layers/ in love we work to live in America under our own wings." [vi] When

we live in our own living room built with our own bricks designed according to our

architecture and under our roof, we can be pulled back from the edge of the

proverbial cliff where we are often pushed while in the contact zone. In one of

internationally renowned Native American performer and writer Joy Harjo's

poems, a "*woman hangs from the 13th floor window crying for the lost beauty of*

her own life/ She sees the sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago/ She

thinks she remembers listening to her own life break loose, as she falls from the

13th floor window on the east side of Chicago, or as she climbs back up to claim

herself again." [vii] How many of us have hung from that window in our efforts to

pursue our education? How many of us chose to climb back up and inside that

window, and how many women do we know who decided to jump?

Women of color are beginning to propose the idea of a "safe

space" *within* the contact zone, to move beyond jumping from the cliff (or from a

window) in the contact zone or backing from the edge into a safe house inside,

Destroying the binary thinking that often forces us to live in a contact zone *or* a

safe space allows us to redefine narratives of displacement, creating dynamic,

dialectical narratives of resistance and co-existence. Destroying the binary

thinking that often forces us to live in *either* a contact zone *or* a safe space allows

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of resistance and co-existence.

Defining "third spaces" expresses the resilient strategies we use to address how race, class, and gender converge in our lives. Contextualizing this "space within a space" sheds light on narratives of resistance. Although safe spaces will also be needed *outside* the contact zone, our transgressive narratives bridge the dualistic experiences of physical isolation and psychological pain (in the contact zone) and physical and mental solace (in the safe space). This third, in-between space allows contradictions to coexist. It will enable the multiple identities we experience--combining race, gender, and class in various ways--to flourish, despite systemic oppression.

I created a third space for myself, in the contact zone, because of my art

education odyssey. That space became a transgressive, African American,

feminist, and class-conscious home for all my selves to gather and feel

empowered. As Anzaldúa wrote:

This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come

together.   Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out

a synthesis,   the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of

its severed   parts. That third element is a new consciousness…"[1]

From an African American feminist perspective, I contend this new

consciousness can be brought into the contact zone (the oppressive society) in

which we live.

At the Margins: Shifting Through Triple Threats

As a woman of African descent born and reared in the United States, I

have spent much of my life examining and challenging structures of inequality

that characterize public schools in the United States. As one who cares deeply

about social justice, my quest for a cure for social inequalities continues to

dominate my intellectual life. Racism, sexism, and classism are pervasive

systems of advantage that adversely impact those judged as having the "wrong"

race, social class, and gender.[i] Overt racism, classism, or sexism refers to open

or unconcealed attitudes and acts of oppression that subordinate those who fall

into the categories of being Black, female, and poor.[ii] These triple threats can

be overt or covert, deliberate or unintentional. Whichever they are, the harmful

outcomes are the same.

Race and poverty operate simultaneously with gender, making it difficult to

live in an oppressive society (the contact zone) that has historically devalued

people of color, women, and poor people. Moreover, "American schooling is

representative and simultaneously constitutive of the race, class, and gender

disparities illustrative of the larger American society."[iii] These triple threats to

academic achievement reflect how Black females inherit entangled social

identities the larger society assesses negatively.

Higher-achieving groups of Black women tend to be absent from

discussions of racism, classism, and sexism, as people take for granted that the

combined effects of gender, race and class do not matter. Many educators

assume that we do not experience significant challenges that warrant any special

considerations or resources.[iv] To the contrary, the entangled effects of classist,

racist, and sexist acts are pervasive in many U.S. schools and classrooms and

must be studied, and corrected. Despite the lack of research on the combined

effects of oppressive systems, current research, although limited, demonstrates

the negative impact of institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism as separate

systems, offering us the opportunity to speculate regarding the adverse effects of

all three systems on the educational achievement of Black girls and women.[v]

Teachers' interactions with Black students, poor students, and female

students differ from their interactions with White students, male students, and

students from more affluent backgrounds:

Students of color, especially those who are poor and live in urban areas,

get less total instructional attention; are called on less frequently; are

encouraged to develop intellectual thinking less often; are criticized more

and praised less; receive fewer direct responses to their questions and

comments; and are reprimanded more often and disciplined more

severely. Frequently, the praise given is terse, ritualistic, procedural, and

social rather than elaborate, substantive, and academic. General praise of

personal attributes is less effective than that which is related to task-

specific performance in improving the learning efforts and outcomes of

students.[2]

Studies on the education of girls and young women also indicate that teachers

interact differently with males and females. To no one's surprise, men and boys

receive preferential treatment. They have more interactions with teachers, and

they often dominate the classroom. One educational researcher notes:

European American males also ... receive more encouragement,

feedback, and

> praise, are cued, prompted, and probed more; are rewarded more for
>
> major   accomplishments; are asked more complex, abstract, and open-
>
> ended questions; and are taught how to become independent thinkers and
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> problem solvers. By comparison, females … receive less academic
>
> encouragement, praise, prompts, rewards, and expectations for success;
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> have less total interactional time with teachers; are asked more simple
>
> questions that require descriptive and concrete answers; are disciplined
>
> less frequently and less severely; and are rewarded more for social than
>
> for academic accomplishments.[3]

Teacher interactions with Black females paralleled their interactions with Black

males but were more negative than those with White males and White females.

Even when Black females' performance is equivalent to or greater than Black

males, they still get "less and lower-quality opportunities to engage in

instructional interactions." [i] The disparities in Black girls' education associated

with the intersectionality of race create a triple threat to the academic

achievement of Black women. My personal stories call attention to the

intersectionality (entanglement) of the three central inequities in educational

institutions: race, gender, and class status,[ii] illuminating my academic struggles.

I share these examples to liberate myself from the grips of the elusive,

oppressive creature that imposes its crushing weight on me. My goal is not to

sensationalize painful events of the past but to show the tensions associated with

being a *shifting series of Others* grappling with complex prejudices in

conventional educational settings across the age spectrum from pre-kindergarten

to university level, are harmful to everyone who experiences them.

The Integrative Ideal--Yes, No, or Maybe So

In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* (1954), the U.S. Supreme

Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional,

overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*(1896), which had legalized segregation in schools and

other public spaces as long as they provided "separate but equal"

facilities.[i] The *Brown* decision sparked historic legislation, which should have resulted

in equal resources, equal opportunities, and racial justice.

Before *Brown*, separate schools for Blacks and Whites in southern states were the

norm. My early schooling in segregated schools in the South mirrored that of other Black

youth attending public schools. Our Black schools had Black administrators, teachers,

and staff in pre-desegregation days. Arguably, student excellence was better served (in

the Black community) by those professionals who looked like, cared about, and was

committed to preparing Black youth to achieve at high levels. According to some

scholars, "[t]he expectations of the Black community and the shared culture of segregated

schools supported the women's racial identity and encouraged them to achieve." [ii]

If academic achievement and success are ultimately influenced by how a student

interacts with their surroundings and how their environment values them, following

desegregation, Black youth entered hostile and devaluing environments where subtle and,

in most cases, overt messages told us we were inferior, not valued human beings.

Furthermore, gifted, and talented Black teachers and administrators were

disproportionately reassigned to less academically influential positions or transferred to

predominantly White schools and replaced in many classrooms with inexperienced White

teachers who had no particular affinity for Black students. White teachers were often

uncomfortable in their new (Black) surroundings and "felt deep resentment" about being

forced into this new arrangement; as a result, many acted out "their resentment and

frustration against the very children, the [B]lack children, whom this entire desegregation

movement was supposed to help." [iii]

Segregated and Desegregated: Elementary School and Junior High

In my pre-desegregation days, I had a Black male principal and Black female teachers who nourished my intellect and valued me as a person. My teachers considered me a model student because I made "good" grades and never was subjected to the corporal punishment that students received in those days. When my school became desegregated in 1969, approximately 15 years after the enforcement of school desegregation regulations in North Carolina, I started to experience in 7th grade the emotional turmoil and discomfort of being in the "contact zone." At the outset, there was no bussing of White students to our school; however, we did get a White teacher, Mrs. Schalanski, who cried upon meeting us and cried every day after that. She lasted only a week before Mr. Bland, a large, bald White male, replaced her. He grabbed, hit, and shoved perceived misbehaving students and slammed them into their desks or against bulletin boards. Mr. Bland would yell so loudly and forcefully that he would turn beet red, and the veins in his neck would bulge. He rarely missed an opportunity to let us Black kids know how stupid he thought we were, calling us "brain-stripped morons," "lame-brains," and "knuckleheads."

Before Mr. Bland's arrival, I was always excited about taking my report card home to my parents, as I had always made straight As. However, in 7th grade, Mr. Bland shattered my dream when he gave me an A minus. I questioned the grade on my report card since I had gotten As and A-pluses on all my assigned work. To my chagrin, Mr. Bland said I must have cheated, as "There is no way that [I] could be *that* smart." I was

devastated. I had worked extra hard to get all As. And to me, an A minus signified a deficiency, not in my work but within myself.

My family and Black teachers had consistently reinforced the idea that I was intelligent, or "apt," as my grandpa, Joe Neal, would say. My Black third-grade teacher, Mrs. Akan, even entered me in a spelling bee against 8th graders because she believed I was super-smart. I was the first runner-up in that spelling bee. Mrs. Akan, unlike Mr. Bland, believed in me and had very high expectations for her students. At times it appeared that for me, she had even higher expectations than usual, giving me ongoing extra classwork and homework assignments. Mrs. Akan also required me, and no other pupil in the class, to memorize a song that made no sense to me at the time called "The Army Goes Rolling Along." [i] I recall feeling frustrated by the whole situation, thinking she was punishing me for some reason; however, Mrs. Akan reassured me that she wasn't and that in "due time," I would understand the song's significance. The lyrics said that a group (or army) must keep rolling along despite adversity and casualties. Little did I know how powerful that song's message would become for me as I continued my educational odyssey.

Integrated Spaces: High School

I have always loved learning, and I have always loved school. So, I

was eager to enroll in Reidsville Senior High, the only high school in my

hometown. There, I asked Mr. Clark, my White, male 9th-grade geometry

teacher, to explain a particular mathematical concept. But rather than assist

me, as he should have done, he said instead, "Didn't they teach you

anything at that old school where you came from?" After that, I never asked

Mr. Clark for help again.

At that point, it dawned on me that I would have to work extra hard

to achieve academically. Unfortunately, unlike my White classmates, my

parents could not assist me with my homework and other academic

assignments because of their limited formal education. Nor did my parents

have the monetary means to provide a tutor for me or cover expensive test

preparation courses.

My resolve to work hard has undoubtedly paid off in terms of my

academic achievement and professional career goals. However…

this does not absolve society from addressing the unequal

conditions that necessitate…young people from having to work

"extra" hard. Indeed, we might read the requirement of having to work extra hard as a form of injustice, highlighting the lack of a level playing field in education and employment."[4]

During my junior year in high school, a Black male teacher who taught advanced algebra required us to show our work on a worksheet, then transfer our answers to an answer sheet. We had to turn in both sheets. One day, upon receiving results from a test, I discovered that I had not included a negative sign on my answer sheet, despite having solved the problem correctly on the worksheet. I approached the teacher's desk and brought this matter to his attention, asking him to reconsider my grade and give me full or partial credit for getting the correct answer, as demonstrated on the worksheet. Mr. Thomason refused: "Because you neglected to add the negative sign, the number is positive. Therefore, I cannot give you credit for the problem." Minutes later, Missy, a tall, thin, blonde, White cheerleader and daughter of a wealthy physician

approached Mr. Thomason's desk with the same request. She also neglected to

transfer her negative sign from the worksheet to the answer sheet. Mr.

Thomason changed her grade on her answer sheet readily and corrected the

score in his grade book. I sat only one row away from the teacher's desk, so I

witnessed the entire exchange. My feelings must have shown on my face

because when Mr. Thomason's eyes met mine, he asked me to bring my paper

to his desk so he could also change my grade. I told him it was okay, "I don't

want you to change my grade." I hope he got the point, though I am not sure

what the point was. Did he change Missy's grade because she was White, rich,

beautiful, or any combination of these, or because it was a second request?

While I cannot say for sure, this incident signified how some Black people

internalize racism and classism because of growing up under these oppressive

systems. In my experience, White people typically are given the benefit of the

doubt, and Missy was given this benefit in ways that I was not.

During that same year, Mr. Coy, my White male sociology teacher,

allowed students to play cards, sleep in class, and do crossword puzzles. I used

his class time as a study hall. On one occasion, when Mr. Coy asked the class

what we wanted to do that day, instead of being silent and allowing the more

vocal students to encourage the teacher to let them "goof off," I said I wanted him

to teach sociology, since "one day I intend to go to college." Mr. Coy stood up

from behind his desk in a very intimidating manner and announced to the class

(in a very sarcastic tone), "I guess I have to teach you sociology today because

somebody in here plans to go to college." Wow, did I feel small. I seemed to have

committed the primary sin of asking my teacher to teach me.

Throughout my high school years, I continued to work extra hard. I took

College Parallel (CP) courses--the equivalent of Advanced Placement (AP)

courses offered in many high schools today--not just the courses offered in our

regular high school curriculum. In most instances, I would be the only Black

person in each CP class. My White teachers asked me consistently, "Do you

understand, Wanda?" They did not ask the White students repeatedly whether

they understood. Their assumptions of my inferiority, although a psychological

burden, motivated me to try harder and to prove them wrong. I understood and

demonstrated my knowledge by graduating in the top five percent of my class.

College: Back to Safe Space

Although the doors of traditional all-White schools had legally opened to all (one

of the provisions of *Brown*), after graduating from predominantly White Reidsville

Senior High, I chose to go to a historically Black institution, North Carolina Central

University (NCCU) and major in art education.

Before college, I had never taken an art education course or visited an art

museum. Even so, I was drawn to art at a very early age. I perceive my family as makers,

even though none had formal artmaking courses. For example, my father had unusual

visual acuity, and my mother, a great seamstress and home decorator produced excellent

pencil sketches and drawings. My grandmothers guilted and made clothing, my maternal

grandfather crafted furniture and whittled (carved artifacts from wood), and my paternal

grandfather worked in construction.

My family, peers, and teachers praised me consistently for my creative abilities, artistic productions, and realistic drawings. I won a high school drawing contest, had a charcoal picture chosen for publication in the high school yearbook, and designed and painted a mural for my senior prom.

Reminiscent of my early years in segregated elementary schools, attending North Carolina Central allowed me to return to an academic environment where I would be valued. N.C. Central was a last-minute decision since the predominantly White university of my choice had already accepted me.

At North Carolina Central University, the student body, in general, and I shared similar cultural backgrounds. Also, most of my teachers looked like me. I remember two Black female art education professors who took extraordinary measures to nurture my intellect. Dr. Anderson and Dr. Simpson lovingly mentored me in my quest for academic excellence. They provided financial support for me to attend the National Art Education Association conferences in both Philadelphia and Houston. They consistently wrote letters of recommendation on my behalf and nominated me for academic awards throughout my undergraduate years. My experiences confirm research that suggests many top Black students "choose traditional Black colleges because they find them more hospitable, caring, and nurturing [than traditional White colleges and universities]." [i]

As Pratt reminds us, being in a safe house can reaffirm who you are, so you have the strength to go back into the contact zone, confident of who you are and what you represent.[ii] Or in the words of June Jordan, I needed to find "a living room where the talk" would "take place in my language." The historically Black college I attended became a safe house/living room concerning race, gender, and class. These factors,

experienced as a triple threat in the contact zone of historically White educational institutions, had become a triple blessing for me in the safe space of the NCCU. I am not implying that a historically Black institution would be a safe space for *every* Black student. Nonetheless, it was a safe space for me. I graduated *magna cum laude* from North Carolina Central.

In considering the 60-plus years since *Brown*, it is worth noting the numerous advancements in the legal system toward combating racial discrimination. However, Court-ordered integration, desegregation policies, and other instances of forced justice have hardly been the panacea for what ails Black America in its quest for parity in education. Further, we must remember that the legal system can legislate actions, not attitudes. As we know, legal victories do not automatically translate into wins for social justice. There must be Law enforcement.

An accurate barometer for gauging whether we have realized the vision of *Brown* is the quality of education provided to poor students, African American students, and other non-dominant cultural groups trapped in urban schools.[iii] In this case, the so-called "*Brown* victory" casts a shadow of defeat in that, over sixty years later, arguments like those advanced in Brown are no less relevant in many of our public schools today. Over the past two decades, schools in the United States have increasingly become re-segregated for Black and Latinx student populations, making today's classrooms almost as racially separated as they were in the early 1970s. In some situations, conditions may have eroded from the times that predated *Brown*.

Given that legal barriers and White flight from specific neighborhoods and public schools have thwarted desegregation plans and made integration nearly impossible to

achieve, those who still view the goals of *Brown* as critical find themselves in a quandary as to how to revive its legacy. Should we continue to push for integration? Even if such a drive means that Black children may continue to risk not reaching their full potential in hostile environments? Or should we push for equity in the contexts in which children best learn? If so, it might signal taking several leaps backward to reclaim the unfulfilled promise of *Plessy's* "separate but equal" doctrine. For example, does it matter where children attend schools or with whom if they have opportunities to obtain an education that will help maximize their intellectual and creative potential?

W. E. B. Du Bois insisted upon excellence for all Black children's education. In a famous article published in 1935, he stated, "The Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What [they need] is education." [iv]

However, in trying to obtain a high-quality education, Black America has paid, in some instances, a "high price for desegregation," a view prevalent among scholars who have investigated the cultural, academic, behavioral, and psychological consequences of the *Brown* ruling and its progeny.[v] In the words of bell hooks:

> Desegregation was about information only. It had no
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> relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer
>
> connected to antiracist struggle. That shift from beloved, all-
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> black schools to white schools where black students were
>
> always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught

me the difference between education as a practice of

freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce

domination.[5]

Who knows what the real extent of this damage is and will be for generations

upon generations of Black youth?

Teaching in the Contact Zone

I took my first job as an art teacher in Stafford County Schools in northern

Virginia. In the mornings, I taught 7th and 8th-grade art classes at Garrisonville Middle

School, and in the afternoons, I taught 6th-grade art classes at Stafford Middle School.

Most of the students were White and had parents or guardians affiliated with the military.

I was one of three Black female teachers at Garrisonville Middle and one of three Black

teachers (one man and two women) at Stafford Middle. My principal at Garrisonville was

a Black man, and his assistant principal was a White man. At Stafford, both the principal

and assistant principal were White men.

The assistant principal of Stafford had an authentic six-foot Confederate flag

displayed on the wall in his office directly behind his desk. In my first year of teaching

there, the school's guidance counselor (a White woman) dressed up like Aunt Jemima for

Halloween. She smeared a black substance on her face and body (which looked like shoe

polish), and she exaggerated the size of her lips by painting them bright red. She also tied

a white scarf around her head with the bow in front. And she wore an apron and baggy clothes, with big "boobs" to match. Most of the White teachers and students found her act amusing as the principal paraded her through the hallways from classroom to classroom, but the few Black students and Black teachers failed to see the humor in her racist shenanigans. Following that incident, I wondered how many Black students in our school (or any students, for that matter) would feel comfortable going to the guidance counselor for assistance. Also, I wondered how many students felt safe going to the principal or the assistant principal about a racial matter. The White teachers and the White school secretary at Stafford reminded me frequently that "[I] don't talk and act like other Black people." When I hear such remarks from White people, I think they have a preconceived notion of how Black people talk and behave.

After having taught in two other school districts, I landed a job as an elementary art teacher in an overwhelmingly White, upper-middle-class school district in Michigan. What I will never forget about Erie Elementary School is that when I first introduced myself to my primarily White students as the new art teacher, some of them started to cry. Others expressed their fears by not talking to me and avoiding eye contact; some left the room complaining that they felt sick. Several students asked me to leave the door open, suggesting that I might harm them somehow if the door closed.

I recognized that if my students did not feel psychologically and physically safe in my classroom, I could not teach them about art or anything else. To allay my White students' fears, I allowed them to spend as much time as necessary getting to know me. I let them ask questions and express any concerns that they might have about me. Their White parents and guardians also had to know that their children were safe with me. To

that end, I made my classroom accessible to the parents and caregivers, encouraging them to volunteer or visit at their convenience. No one took me up on my offer. Instead, nearly every parent showed up the first year of my employment for "Meet the Teacher Night," which occurred a few weeks after school had started. The interested ones hoped to "see" me and hear about my vision for the art program. I found out from the principal (Dr. Brun, a White woman whom I respected and admired for her positive, fair, and competent leadership) that when the school district hired me, several parents had questioned whether I might be "articulate enough" and "intelligent enough" to teach "[their] kinds of kids." On "Meet the Teacher Night," I was engulfed by students, their parents, and relatives. This precarious-looking situation prompted Dr. Brun to push through the crowd to ensure I was okay. While from the outset, I had spent a disproportionate amount of time trying to make students, parents, and the community feel comfortable and safe with me, in retrospect, I wonder whether, perhaps, I should have spent more time attending to my physical, and psychological well-being in the contact zone. Women must recognize that caring for ourselves is good not just for us but for those to whom we provide service and care.[i]

In predominantly White and affluent Chippewa Valley, security frequently stopped me when I tried to gain access to functions or entrances to buildings within my school district. The security officers assumed I was from nearby Detroit (a primarily Black urban area), implying that I did not belong in this White, privileged space.

I worked extra hard to let the students know that I was not a person to be feared and that I genuinely cared about them. As time passed, the students became more comfortable with me and shared their excitement about what they were learning in my art

classes. However, just when I thought all was going well, my principal summoned me to her office and told me a White male parent had started a rumor in the community. The story was that I was "using mind-altering drugs on the children" because his son had suddenly grown excited about coming to school and talked about how he "just loved his new art teacher." Indeed, I could not be *that* good. Yet, my principal never questioned my character or the rumor's validity. Instead, we both recognized that the talk was grounded in fear and fueled by the racist and classist assumption that all Black people use or distribute illicit drugs and talented people in the arts must be hooked on them.

When I became a principal in Ohio, not one of the three schools I served had a female principal, and two had never had a person of color. Throughout my leadership in these schools, I frequently heard comments from parents, teachers, and community members, questioning whether a woman could handle day-to-day school affairs and discipline. Moreover, some teachers criticized me for not being as harsh a disciplinarian as my male predecessors because the students liked me and did not fear me. In Elyria, Ohio, on occasions when I found myself in the main office with my White male assistant principal, parents and most visitors to the school assumed that my White assistant was the principal. I attribute this bias to the fact that educational institutions reflect societal norms; the norms are that White men are usually in charge and women, particularly Black women, are often subordinates.

Seeking Safe Space in Academe

When I started my journey as a university professor in a predominantly White research-oriented institution, I believed (perhaps naively) that the academy would judge me as a legitimate scholar and value my hard work and scholarship. However, race, gender, class stereotypes, and expectations impede overcoming interrelated injustices in academia. My path continues to be bumpy, filled with twists and turns and uneven slopes.

The literature on the experiences of female faculty of color in predominantly White colleges and universities reveal pervasive entangled social realities.[i] However, as in the literature on Black female students, the complexities of these entangled social realities are rarely studied by researchers.

As one scholar laments:

Unfortunately, the lives of faculty women of color are often invisible,

hidden within studies that look at the experiences of women faculty and

within studies that examine the lives of faculty of color. Women of color fit

both categories, experience multiple marginality, and [our] stories are

often masked within these contexts.[6]

Institutions of higher learning in the United States examine race, gender, and class through a standard academic lens, that of White, male, and middle-class culture, which posits an adversarial stance toward those perceived as not being of the "right" race, gender, or class. Far too often, when I have critiqued racist, classist, and sexist systems of oppression and their impediments to social mobility, access, and choice or rebelled

against reactionary stereotypes regarding my body, I have been further marginalized, alienated, and labeled as "ungrateful." Moreover, when I have challenged racist, classist, and sexist practices, I have been silenced and denied the privilege of academic discourse for fear of reprisal.

Having found my way into academia, despite not conforming to racial, gender, and class stereotypes, I am acknowledged as an "exception to the rule." However, interestingly enough, "no modifications are made to the rule itself. "[i] People measure me against the "Other," that is, those who are male, White, and from economically privileged backgrounds. Also, I find that many of my White students and colleagues are on their guard, watching how I will perform. Rarely am I given the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me that many of my colleagues tolerate or put up with me because they know or think it is the collegial thing to do. I know I am being merely accepted when I do not get critical feedback or support from people in positions of power since they do not expect me to be successful in the first place.[ii]

In most simplistic terms, *affirmative action* is the United States' attempt to redress by legislation its long history of discrimination based on race and gender. However, race complicated by gender affect assumptions about skills and ability.[iii] In almost every educational context, White people assume that I have achieved my positions through affirmative action and that, through some legal mandate, the hiring agency or educational institution had to fill a quota when they hired me. Due to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of how affirmative action operates, people more often assume I am less qualified than a White person. Thus, I must resist dominant and narrow explanations of my positions and social location and prove myself as Other(wise).

Teaching and Leading to Transgress

My experiences at the major research university from which I received my Ph.D. in art education were no exception. During a class discussion in a teacher-education course in the College of Education, a White male student made a statement about affirmative action directed toward me. He said, "I am not saying that you are not qualified to be here; however, my best friend [a White male] did not get into 'Somewhere University' because they have to let 'minorities' fill so many slots."

Such an assertion presumes that had the White male's best friend been Black, he would have been able to attend the college or university of his choice. Whites are more likely than Blacks and people from other cultural minoritized groups—even with affirmative action in place—to get into their first-choice colleges and universities. Moreover, when people characterize achievement as being tainted by an institution giving a "leg up" to Black people, whoever says so is forgetting the long history of informal and entrenched forms of affirmative action on behalf of Whites--in other words, racial privilege--in business and employment, promotion, education, and academic admissions, politics, criminal justice, and housing, among other things.[iv]

Making Space Safe for Our Children

I eventually married and had two children. When my daughter,

Franchesca, was

in fifth grade in a primarily White elementary school in Michigan, a White male

student called her a "Black monkey" and told her to "go back to Africa, climb a

tree, and eat a banana." The boy's racist remarks hurt Franchesca terribly. When

she reported the incident to her White female teacher, the teacher told her to

ignore the comments because the student "probably didn't understand what he

was saying." The following day, I asked Franchesca to report the incident to her

White female principal. The principal also told her to ignore it and exclaimed,

"What do you want me to do, have him jump off a bridge or step in front of a

semi-truck?"

No doubt, one way of dealing with racism in the educational system is to

"ignore it." However… advocating that racism is 'ignored' can leave

inequalities protected and unchallenged. Moreover, it relies upon the

individual or collectivity experiencing racism(s) to 'deal with it' themselves–

–as opposed, for example, to requiring the culprits to acknowledge and

change their discourse and behaviors. The 'ignore it' response may also

hint at the potential fruitlessness of complaining about racism(s).

Furthermore … the requirement for [an individual] to 'ignore' racism can

generate a level of psychic stress, as it requires considerable suppression

and control of the emotions and demands a high degree of work on the

self.[7]

Reflecting upon my resistance to racist, classist, and sexist "practices that

operate to restrict [life] choices, [civil] rights, [social] mobility, and access," [i], I

recognize my daughter's transgressive journey. Like me, she has been

negotiating oppressive systems that pose triple threats to her academic

achievement. Despite a lifetime of hidden and overtly racist, sexist, and classist

messages of inferiority and being told by her White female high-school guidance

counselor that she was not "four-year college material," Franchesca has obtained

a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and a master's in educational

administration. She serves as a credentialed elementary school resource teacher

for English language learners in an overwhelmingly White, affluent school district

in central Ohio. Franchesca and her spouse (Leland) have two daughters, Leila

and Alyssa, two future Black women, and my son (Mark) and his wife (Angela, an

art teacher) have two daughters, Sienna and Maia, two future women of color.

We are preparing Leila, Alyssa, Sienna, and Maia for their transgressive journeys

by trying to create safe spaces for them wherever they are.

Working for Equality and Equity in Art Education: Transgressive Teaching and

Leadership Approaches

In my examples of grappling with those in the contact zone while still achieving

academic success, I see three ways that oppressed people may respond. They can try to

ignore oppression, work extra hard to overcome it, or be "otherwise" rather than

"othered." As a perceived "other," I have been forced to acquire wisdom and knowledge,

conduct, habits, and ways of being that challenge the assumptions of those in dominant

positions of power in the contact zone. This coping mode places the onus of

responsibility for dealing with racism, classism, and sexism on the oppressed individual.

We often must create safe spaces for ourselves by drawing from our inner resources, such

as our faith and being self-determined rather than being "other" determined. My odyssey has taught me that I do not always need outside inspiration or physical space to feel safe. However, a more effective way to diminish the effects of institutional racism, classism, and sexism on those societies have disenfranchised historically is for art educators to focus on organizational and structural impediments in schools and other teaching contexts that result in poor academic performance. Art educators must expose inequalities inherent within our educational organizations and our teaching contexts, thus shifting the responsibility for responding to racism, classism, and sexism away from the oppressed and onto the institutions and structures that perpetuate oppression. Art educators can achieve these objectives by creating "safe houses" (safe spaces) within our teaching contexts, among other areas.

Safe spaces within our teaching contexts could entail incorporating in lessons honest discussions of gender, class, and race issues, particularly Whiteness and the role of Whiteness in the re/production of educational privilege. I have used storytelling, which offers opportunities for reflection on shared experiences or upon one's schooling, how they differ from others, and how elements of race, gender, and socio-economic status have affected students' achievement and educational outcomes.

Moreover, I have mentored and advised preservice and practicing art teachers to develop a more critical awareness of race, class, gender, and other social issues and their impact on teaching and learning. Further, I have worked with preservice and practicing teachers to respond competently when individuals observe and report racist behaviors in schools and other educational contexts.

Safe spaces within art education programs could involve an increase in the amount of time we devote to discussing inequalities inherent in educational institutions. Ideally, that would entail mainstreaming and embedding throughout coursework topics related to social justice and equity, racism, sexism, classism, and other "isms."

Given the current over-emphasis on "higher standards" and "personal achievement" in art/education, it is crucial to advocate an educational policy that attends to social justice and equity issues. Safe spaces in art education could promote scholarship that values learning from lived experiences, with further emphasis on critically examining discourse that privileges White, middle-class values--and thus the achievement of White middle-class learners.

For the well-being of current students and future generations, it is crucial that education engage more meaningfully "with the complexity of racialized identities and inequities and the ways in which these are bound up with axes of gender (and class). Educators may unwittingly reinforce oppressive relationships without more complex understandings of these intersections." [i]

The encounters I shared have been transformative, so I would not change any of those experiences. I wanted to be a butterfly, so I had to give up being a caterpillar. I had to grow and change to find my true colors in art-making, teaching, leadership, and life. Consequently, I am a more informed teacher and leader who can confront new challenges and seize new opportunities that come my way.

In addition to university-level teaching and leadership, I have taught grade levels Pre-K through 12 throughout the United States and abroad. I have also served as a

principal of both elementary and secondary public schools and as an art museum educator.

I have authored more than 50 publications, including books, peer-reviewed articles and book chapters in edited books, anthologies, monographs, encyclopedias, conference proceedings, commentaries, and non-print/multimedia that focus on equity, diversity, inclusion, access, and related issues.

I chaired the National Art Education Association (NAEA) Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and now serve as an inaugural at-large commissioner on the NAEA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commission. Additionally, I serve on the National Art Education Council for Policy Studies, am past president of the United States Society for Education through Art (USSEA), and am a past chair of the National Art Education Association Committee on Multiethnic Concerns (COMC). A previous editor of the Journal of Social Theory in Art Education, co-editor of a special issue of School Arts Magazine, and guest editor of Visual Arts Research, my work concerning teacher education, culturally competent teaching, diversity and inclusion, social justice, and educational equity is published broadly. My extensive presentations span national and international locations, incorporating keynote presentations sponsored by universities, cultural institutions, and national and international associations. So, too, I am the first woman of color to be nominated and elected by the National Art Education Association membership to serve as president of the association.

My scholarly work has garnered international, national, state, and university recognition. Her honors include the NAEA Distinguished Fellows Award, The NAEA Women's Caucus June King McFee Award, The NAEA Women's Caucus Maryl

Fletcher DeJong Award, the Pennsylvania Art Education Association Outstanding Higher

Education Art Educator Award, the NAEA J. Eugene Grigsby Jr. Award for outstanding

contributions to the field of art education, and the Kenneth Marantz Distinguished

Alumni Award from The Ohio State University, where I earned my Ph.D.

In sum, I believe change is possible. Moreover, I believe art educators can be

agents of change for social justice. Therefore, I hope my stories inspire art educators to

work for equality and equity while challenging oppressive systems and that the

transgressive steps I have taken in my life will serve as a catalyst from which others,

especially other Black women, can start their journey.

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[1] Anzaldúa, 1999, pp.101-102.

[2] Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice* (p. 63).

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(1994). *Gender issues in education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon; and, U.S. Civil Rights

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teacher interaction with Mexican American and Anglo students. Washington, DC: U.S.

Civil Rights Commission.

[3] See Gay, 2000, pp. 65-55. See also: AAUW (1995). *AAUW report: How schools*

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[4] Archer, L., & Francis, B. (2007). *Understanding Minority Ethnic Achievement: Race,

Gender, Class, and Success* (p. 159) New York: Routledge.

[5] hooks, b. (1994). Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom (p. 4).

New York: Routledge.

[6] Turner, C. S. V. (2002, January). Women of color in academe: Living with multiple

marginality. *Journal of Higher Education, 73*(1), 74-93.

[7] Archer & Francis, 2006, p. 159.