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CLASS OF BEAUTY:  
SCHOOLED IN THE CULTURE

2023

by

AZYA LASHELLE MOORE

Under the Direction of Jill Frank MFA

ABSTRACT

Black students confront racism every time we step into the classroom or set foot on a college campus as whiteness influences Amerika's educational systems. Whether this racism takes the form of a micro-aggression or blatant white supremacist statements, we are often at our most vulnerable in the setting that holds the most promise for our liberation. By combining ideologies from influential Black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, James Baldwin, and bell hooks, this thesis examines the ways that race, and school intersect. These ideas manifest in photographic works that visually emulate the American yearbook. I challenge the cultural narrative of schools as a safe, nurturing space as I ask viewers is lifting the veil enough?

INDEX WORDS: Black education, Amerika, Photography, Paradox, James Baldwin, Booker T. Washington, bell hooks, Yearbooks, Dawoud Bey

CLASS OF BEAUTY:  
SCHOOLED IN THE CULTURE

2023

by

AZYA LASHELLE MOORE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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Azya Lashelle Moore  
2023

CLASS OF BEAUTY:  
SCHOOLED IN THE CULTURE

2023

by

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Georgia State University

May 2023

**DEDICATION**

it takes a village to raise a child,  
it takes the mother who gets you to every art class,  
it takes the father who reminds you to follow your dreams,  
it takes the God - parents cheering for you,  
it takes the siblings who look up to you,  
it takes the ancestors looking down on you,  
it takes the teachers who believe in you,  
it takes the therapist who doesn't give up on you,  
it takes every *yes*, and it takes every *no*,  
it takes the ups and downs and the lows of lows,  
it takes the battles some may never know,  
it takes the courage to grow.

it takes strength,  
it takes love,  
it takes prayer,  
in Jesus Name  
Amen.

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Thank you to my thesis committee, Jill Frank, Jeremy Bolen, Jamaal Barber, Kate Cunningham, and Scarlett Peterson for helping me get through this last year of graduate school. Thank you to all the educators and teachers who have been a part of my learning experience. Those who taught me skills that could be applied in and out of the classroom. Those that saw my potential before I could even see it in myself. And those who encouraged me to keep going, keep trying, and to keep doing my best.

Thank you to my family and friends, who have been an incredible support system for me while on this journey. From being there for my decision making of a graduate school, to being an ear to listen when I needed to vent, to long hours setting up the gallery for my exhibition, and so much more. I could not have come this far without you.

*Look Momma! I made it!*



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## 1 LESSON I: CULTURE SHOCK

“It isn’t long—in fact, it begins when he [Black people] is in school—before he discovers the shape of his oppression.”<sup>1</sup>

James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”

At Michigan State University (MSU) in 2015, I started my undergraduate career, where I was suddenly immersed in a large population of people that didn’t look anything like me. For the first time, I would be the only Black person within the classroom. I was isolated in a sense, while at the same time feeling like all eyes were on me as a representation of the Black race. My white classmates and professors lacked awareness to their whiteness and how much space they took up. This would leave me feeling alone and misunderstood in the classroom. During this time, I was angry at the bigotry I faced on a regular basis, all while in pursuit of an education. I was also internalizing that anger, as I feared falling into the stereotypes that are placed on Black women. It was because of this that my work, which hadn’t always been about race, began to address Black identity, and changed from a tone that was passive to inherently confrontational. It was as if something unlocked in me, as I began to use my work to express all my frustrations.

Throughout my academic career I have had very few Black teachers. In elementary school, I had three Black teachers, and it wouldn’t be until my junior year at MSU that I would have another one. This learning environment impacted not only *what* I learned, but *how* I learned, as information about Black history and culture was often delivered to me by white teachers. When I began college and found myself in classrooms filled predominately by white professors *and* white

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 680. In reference to Black children growing up.

students, I felt burdened with the role of having to educate everyone on what Blackness was and could be. The responsibility weighed heavily on me, I felt as if the white gaze was always on me.

As time went on, I began making work that looked at Amerika's many flaws.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, I entered my junior year of college and was challenged by several instances of racism in the classroom. These encounters resulted in a depression that left me barely passing a required photography class. One incident occurred during a class critique on a project I had created about women's identity for my analog (film and darkroom) photography class. My theme for the semester was "Black Women" and I spent the semester photographing Black women to show the range of identity that we carry. With excitement, I pinned my work up on the critique walls, feeling proud of myself, as I had taken a pretty damn good image using a view camera, which had been a huge learning curve for me. My professor walked up to the image and took a short look.

"But she doesn't look Black." He spoke. In that moment I found myself immediately confronted with what Blackness was and what it could be. Stunned, I did my best to challenge his assertion and defend not only my model and her Blackness, but my own Blackness as a darker skin woman, as we both are Black women. I was forced to argue my choice to include her into my project in front of my all-white class. No one stood up for me or argued in my favor.

This incident is one of many that, over the span of the semester, caused feelings of anger and isolation. Each time I went to class I felt sick to my stomach; it was hard to retain the material I was being taught, and my grade suffered. To this day I sometimes associate film and darkroom photography with racist bigotry, along with a legacy to white male dominance. I reported the incident to several people in the all-white administration, but their sympathy only extended so far. Some expressed regret that I had been treated differently from the other (white) students, one

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<sup>2</sup> Amerika, a way of spelling Amerika that recognizes the country as oppressive.

professor explained how they were grateful that I didn't out the professor or the university as I could have. Ultimately, their silence on the matter was a form of complicity with the racist professor. The administration ensured that I passed the class, but never acknowledged the professor's impact on my learning and in an act of "fairness", my final grade suffered significantly. It was as if their whiteness blinded them; they could not see my side of the situation. Perhaps they weren't blind, though. Perhaps my Blackness rendered my feelings and perspectives invisible. This period of my life inspired much of the work I now make, as I have dedicated myself to creating work that speaks to the Black experience.

## 2 LESSON II: AN UPHILL BATLLE

I cannot write about education and its importance to liberation and the Black community without acknowledging the history of how we got to where we are today. When people from Africa were first brought over to Amerika and forced into slavery, there were debates about whether slaves should be educated. According to historian Carter G. Woodson, some white people believed that enslaved people should be 'trained', but were conflicted about how much learning was appropriate, "...believing that slaves could not be enlightened without developing in them a longing for liberty...." Slaveholders knew it would be easier to exploit enslaved people who remained uneducated, and this argument won over most Southern slave owners.<sup>3</sup> The withholding of education to maintain control over enslaved Black people is one of the first ways that white people withheld education as a tool for oppression.

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<sup>3</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861* (New Hampshire: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc., 1991) 2.

In 1829, southern states like Georgia passed laws that prohibited educating Black people who were free or enslaved. Anyone caught doing so was punished by fine or by whip.<sup>4</sup> Despite these rules, many Black people were still determined to learn. Many learned by teaching themselves, or through slaveholders who were willing to teach them. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln began the process of freeing all enslaved people in his Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>5</sup> It would take years before the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, which officially made slave-owning illegal in the United States. The battle for the education of Black people, however, remained as schools were segregated. Schools that served students of color received significantly less funding, inadequate supplies, were overcrowded, and insufficiently paid teachers.<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) found that racial segregation was constitutional, so states were allowed to uphold “separate but equal” schools. It would not be until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, in 1954, when the historic Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* finally outlawed segregation in public schools throughout the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Despite an onslaught of white rage at this decision, Black people remained dedicated to seeking a fair education. In 1957, a group of teens known as the Little Rock 9, were the first Black students to attend Central High School, located in Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>8</sup> In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges desegregated William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>9</sup> In both instances, the Black students were met with anger, harassment, and threats to their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> William C. Dawson, *Compilation of the Laws of the State of Georgia, Passed by the General Assembly, since the Year 1819 to the Year 1829, Inclusive* (Milledgeville: Grantland and Orme. 1831), 413.

<sup>5</sup> “The Emancipation Proclamation.” National Archives and Records Administration, Accessed October 24, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “Classroom Segregation: History and Current Impact on Student Education,” American University of Education, last modified August 19, 2020, <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/classroom-segregation/>.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Reams, *Segregation, and the Fourteenth Amendment in the States: A Survey of State Segregation Laws 1865-1953; Prepared for United States Supreme Court in re: Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (Buffalo: W.S. Hein. 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Duchess Harris and Tom Head, *Ruby Bridges and the Desegregation of American Schools*. (Minnesota: Core Library. 2018) 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

These young people found liberation in education, and it is because of their acknowledgment of the power of education that they were able to demonstrate how even our youngest, most vulnerable citizens can erect social change through dedication and bravery.

Although my parents held opposing views on schooling, it was always assumed that I would go to college directly after graduating high school. My dad went to college but never graduated. His position on higher education was relaxed-- he always told me that if I followed my passion, the rest would come. My mom, on the other hand, graduated from college, and while raising three children went back to school and earned her master's degree in social work. She believed deeply that getting a good education was the first stepping-stone on the path to success. After completing my undergraduate education, I took only seven months off before starting my graduate degree. In other words, I have spent most of my life in school. Inspired by my mother's success in school, I never considered a path other than going to college, getting a "good" job, and thus being successful. My father's guidance to follow my passions also informed my academic career which blended both of my parents' values: I have pursued an education that channels and homes in on my passion for the visual arts.

Accomplishing this level of education as a Black woman means I've endured numerous incidents of racism both blatant and subtle. I remember being in a fifth-grade history lesson, when my white teacher made two Black students, a boy and a girl, stand up in the front of the class and used the two students as a visual aid to explain to us how, in the days of enslavement, married Black men and women were separated and sold. At the time, I remember feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed for my peers who were made to play the role of enslaved people, but I was unable to comprehend the full extent to why it was wrong. I just knew that it was. This wasn't the first or last time that I would be made to feel uncomfortable by white educators, who were not sufficiently



equipped to discuss slavery. Consequently, these educators were then culturally insensitive and taught from a perspective that didn't have the Black student in mind. Years later, I am still troubled by that moment. I spoke with a friend of mine, who is white and attended elementary school with me and asked if she remembered this moment. She said she didn't. It didn't stand out in her head as a significant event, while I remained impacted.

Recently, I was flipping through an old U.S. history textbook from my high school. I had planned to use it for a college art project. As I was flipping through the pages, I noticed that in a chapter about the First Amendment the authors included an image of a Ku Klux Klan poster and discussed it as an example of free speech. I was outraged that white supremacist hate speech was being taught as a legitimate, protected form of free speech. I thought about how many students, particularly students of color, used this high school textbook and had to look at that image full of hate. What does it mean *for* them and *to* them, if KKK propaganda is the leading representation of free speech within their schools? For students who uphold racist beliefs, the textbook serves as a visual and textual affirmation of their beliefs. For students who are marginalized, the same textbook serves as a visual and textual reminder that hateful propaganda and ideals are prioritized over their safety.

During my sophomore year at MSU, a white college student posed at a local high school football game with someone dressed in a gorilla suit and captioned the photo: "got a picture with Dows Kicker."<sup>10</sup> The image mocked a Black high school girl who was the star kicker on her high school football team.<sup>11</sup> This incident set campus ablaze with raw emotions and public demands for the name-calling student to be held accountable for their hateful act. Like most instances of racism

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<sup>10</sup> The Herbert Henry Dow High School is a high school located in Michigan.

<sup>11</sup> "Many Calling for MSU Student to Be Expelled After Instagram Post About African American Football Kicker" WILX 10 online, last modified October 27, 2016, <https://www.wilx.com/content/news/Many-calling-for-MSU-student-to-be-expelled-398867631.html>.

on campus, the incident was handled privately, and to this day it is still unclear whether the student faced consequences for their actions.

In the 2016 homecoming parade, a few other students and I marched in protest of the administration's inaction to the many university incidents and nationwide racially charged events. For example, the lack of police accountability for the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling and the steadily rising tensions within the student body following the election of Donald Trump caused social unrest. We requested that MSU make a statement that showed their support for the "Black Lives Matter" movement, holding signs that asked, "Which side are you on?" I vividly recall reading annoyance on the former MSU president's face as she quietly and impatiently waited, for the police countdown before arrests were made (see fig 2.1). She couldn't or *wouldn't* comprehend why it was important for MSU to be a safe space that respected and protected students of color. Students who were tired of seeing the word "nigger" scratched onto bathroom door stalls. Students who were tired of the dismissive looks they got from their white peers. Students who just wanted to learn and achieve success.



*Figure 2.1 Azya Lashelle (pictured left) at a Which Side Are You on Protest in 2016, written by Olivia Dimmer.*

The racism I experienced didn't stop after I left Michigan. Even once I moved to Atlanta, to pursue my graduate studies, I continued to be the only Black person in a majority white classroom, despite Georgia State's incredibly diverse undergraduate student body and location in the densely Black populated city of Atlanta. I also continued to face ignorance and privilege-based discrimination and the years of creating work around educating my white peers was starting to wear down on me. I experienced heightened anxiety and found much difficulty in producing work about the Black experience. I also found myself growing tired of displaying work that would be presented to a white majority.

My 20+ years in the American educational system has exhausted me. Constantly trying to prove my worth, my value, and fighting for my right to learn in an atmosphere of respect has brought me to a state of near burnout. As I began talking about my experiences with Black peers, I learned that the things I had witnessed were not unique to me; everyone had comparable stories.

As it turned out we were all facing burnout in some form. These discussions about our shared experiences made me wonder how students of color can ever learn to value ourselves when even in educational settings we are made to feel inferior?

Black people continue to struggle to obtain educational rights. Legal segregation may be outdated, but white supremacists have found insidious ways to continue oppressing people of color. In general, Black history and culture are often not covered in standard K-12 curriculums.<sup>12</sup> However, these gaps are widely recognized, and some communities are attempting to diversify and bring more intersectional voices into classrooms. At Georgia State University in 1992, students had to stage sit-ins to convince the administration to form an African American Studies department.<sup>13</sup> This example shows a call for inclusion by students. Another strategy used in efforts to discourage anti-racist ideologies is to avoid or ban subject matter deemed too subversive or “Un-American.” In Texas and other conservative states, legislatures are currently banning critical race theory from K-12 and college curriculums.<sup>14</sup> The *cause* of these strategies is rooted in the fact that education leads to critical thinking, and critical thinking leads to people demanding their liberty. The *result* of these strategies is that Black students aren’t learning about themselves, and white students aren’t learning to be better. Black people being liberated worries many white Americans, and this fear controls what is taught in our educational institutions. There is a concept of “Sankofa,” in the Black Community, which is from the Akan tribe in Ghana, and translates to

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<sup>12</sup> Cathy Rainone, “‘The Humanity of Blackness’ Missing from History Classes: How to Transform Black History Education in Schools,” NBC10 Philadelphia, last modified June 29, 2020, <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/how-to-transform-black-history-education-in-schools/2450465/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Georgia State University’s Department of Africana Studies Commemorates 1992 Sit-in That Led to the Department’s Creation,” Georgia State News Hub, last modified October 24, 2022, <https://news.gsu.edu/2022/10/24/georgia-state-universitys-department-of-africana-studies-commemorates-1992-sit-in-that-led-to-the-departments-creation/>.

<sup>14</sup> Kate McGee, “Texas ‘Critical Race Theory’ Bill Limiting Teaching of Current Events Signed into Law,” *The Texas Tribune*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/15/abbott-critical-race-theory-law/>.

“go back and get it.” It is used to express the idea that one must learn about the past to move through the present and into the future.<sup>15</sup> Not educating Black people on their past not only relinquishes their power in the present but consequently maintains white superiority in their future.

### 3 LESSON III: EDUCATION IS LIBERATION

Leading up to the decision of choosing a college, I went on a tour of HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). On that tour, I saw a variety of HBCUs located in the South. One that stood out to me was Tuskegee University in Alabama. The campus was beautiful and well-kept with waving flags bearing the school colors of crimson and old gold from the light poles. Campus life seemed to be thriving and there was an abundance of students walking the grounds. As our tour guide spoke, I was taking everything in when something caught my eye: a statue of Booker T. Washington, created in 1922, by Charles Keck (see fig 3.1).<sup>16</sup> The statue depicts Washington lifting the veil of ignorance from the eyes of a formerly enslaved man. In the man's hands rests a book and both men look outward, as if to the future. Engraved at the bottom of the statue is a quote that reads, “He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry.”<sup>17</sup> This would be my first introduction to Booker T. Washington, as I wasn't taught about him in school. Although, I couldn't quite understand the importance of the statue at the time, I never forgot about it.

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<sup>15</sup> Carter G. Woodson Center, “The Power of Sankofa: Know History,” Berea College, last modified November 20, 2017, <https://www.berea.edu/cgwc/the-power-of-sankofa/>.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Keck, *Lifted the Veil of Ignorance*, 1922, Tuskegee Institute.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



*Figure 3.1. Charles Keck, Lifted the Veil of Ignorance, 1922, Tuskegee Institute.*

In his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, Washington writes about being born into slavery. This meant it was illegal for him to be educated, Washington, however still yearned for knowledge: “There was never a time in my youth, no matter how dark and discouraging the days might be, when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost.”<sup>18</sup> Even after slavery was abolished, Black people were violently prevented from seeking an education. Despite these challenges, Washington, through unwavering ambition and deep determination, worked his way through school. In 1872, he attended Hampton Normal

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<sup>18</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: Harper Torch, 2014) 27. iBooks.

Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University).<sup>19</sup> It was at Hampton that Washington discovered the meaning of education for the individual. He writes:

To secure an education meant to have a good, easy time, free from all necessities for manual labor. At Hampton, I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labor, but learned to love labor, not alone for its financial value, but for labor's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings.<sup>20</sup>

Through his education, Washington found pleasure in being able to help the people in his community reach higher education.<sup>21</sup> In 1881, Washington was named the first leader of Tuskegee Institute, a newly founded HBCU. He led the school until his death in 1915.<sup>22</sup> Washington believed that if Black people learned useful skills, then they could “play their part” in society, which would lead to white acceptance. He also noticed that ignorance was a tool used to keep Black people under the thumb of white people.<sup>23</sup> This observation led to critiques from other Black academics, like W.E.B. Du Bois, who held the opposing view that activism, not education, was the key to achieving civil rights. Washington argued that confrontation would lead to more destruction within the Black community. Du Bois, along with many others, believed that Washington was “too accommodating to white interests.”<sup>24</sup> Even with these criticisms, Washington remains a pillar in the Black community as is his belief in education as the path to advancement for Black Americans.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 163 - 165.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 237.

If we accept Washington's belief that education has the power to liberate, then we need not wonder why it is often inaccessible and used to perpetuate racial superiority. We can see evidence of systemic racism in the form of disadvantaged public K-12 schools, where the majority of students are people of color.<sup>25</sup> We also know of exclusionary tactics utilized in academic articles and books that are written to be incomprehensible to anyone without a PhD. These are subtle methods used to undercut education's liberatory power and cause many to overlook the very power of education itself.

There is a great push in schools nowadays toward career readiness. Education is being used to produce good *workers*, not good *thinkers*. I once believed that school was a path to achievement and status rather than a way to gain wisdom and freedom. Get good grades in high school, attend a renowned college, secure my lucrative dream job, and thus be successful. I didn't see the larger purpose; I believed the messages society told me--that school was about how well you memorized the information you were given and how well you could regurgitate said information. This way of thinking about school is what Paulo Freire discusses in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as the "banking concept."

"In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing," Freire writes.<sup>26</sup> He argues that there is a level of assumed ignorance that is imposed by the teacher onto the students. Freire describes the students as depositories and the teachers as depositors. The teacher deposits the information, and the student files the deposits to store them for later use.<sup>27</sup> White teachers

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, "Inequality in Teaching and Schooling: How Opportunity Is Rationed to Students of Color in America," in *The Right Thing to Do, The Smart Thing to Do: Enhancing Diversity in the Health Professions: Summary of the Symposium on Diversity in Health Professions in Honor of Herbert W. Nickens, M.D.*, ed. B.D Smedley, A.Y. Stith, and L. Colburn (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2001), 208-210. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK223640/>.

<sup>26</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), 136. iBook.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 110.



nationwide are making deposits into Black students. I began to ask myself, what does it mean that Black children aren't being taught the truth about themselves? What does it mean if the deposits are dishonest about America's past or reinforce white superiority?

In 1963, writer James Baldwin gave a talk to a group of teachers where he explained that the responsibility of ending injustice within society belongs to the institution of education. In this speech (titled *A Talk to Teachers*), Baldwin reminds us that education isn't about making straight A's, getting a good job, or making a lot of money: "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, [and] to make his own decisions...."<sup>28</sup> In Baldwin's view, education has the power to create independent-thinking individuals who can step out into society and make choices for themselves. Being able to think critically about the world empowers us to make necessary changes in society.<sup>29</sup> Here enters the paradox of education. Baldwin explains:

The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black, or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, (New York: Library of America, 1998), 678.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 679.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 678.

Now, in my final year of graduate school, I am living proof of Baldwin's paradox: my education enables me to more consciously and critically examine the institutions that have educated me.

bell hooks, a Black intellectual, who focused on education from a feminist point of view, shared her views on education in the book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. Throughout the book, hooks explains the different approaches to teaching and how teaching can be transgressive from the perspective of a Black woman. hooks begins the book by examining her own primary education during the time of racial integration. It was through this experience that hooks noticed a difference between the teaching methods of her Black and white teachers. When she had Black teachers, she noticed more interest and value for her life both inside and outside of the classroom. As hooks puts it, "For Black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle."<sup>31</sup> To educate Black children took a "political commitment." One that hooks believed her Black teachers were aware of at the time.<sup>32</sup> With the desegregation of schools, hooks had white teachers that would perpetuate racist stereotypes. hooks writes, "School was a political place, since we were always having to counter white racist assumptions that we were genetically inferior...."<sup>33</sup> What hooks came to learn from this experience was the difference between education as a form of liberation and education being used to reinforce domination.

I have reaped the benefits of being educated through primary and secondary education, I have graduated with a bachelor's, and I am on my way to graduate with a master's at the age of 26. I have seen firsthand the great things that education can do, especially for people of color.

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<sup>31</sup> bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 4.

Similarly, I have also seen how these spaces are often traumatizing. I have witnessed and personally experienced how oppressive educational spaces have negatively impacted Black people. Therefore, while I believe Washington's statement that we need to lift the veil of ignorance, I believe that it is no longer *our* veil that needs lifting, but the veil of ignorance that covers white perceptions. I agree with Baldwin's assertions that we must critique our educational systems. We need to ask the hard questions and challenge the answers we are given. We need to demand more than just subject-based knowledge from our educators. We must require that our educators be committed to "engaged pedagogy," as bell hooks writes, and in doing so, we may reach liberation.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4 LESSON IV: A CRITIQUE OF THE SYSTEM

It was in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of graduate school, after yet another frustrating class experience, that I spoke into existence the idea of creating an all-Black yearbook. At the time I was speaking with a colleague of mine about how I wanted to create a book, but not just any book, a yearbook that would showcase the highs and lows of being in Amerika's education system as a Black person. However, I was nervous to set out on such a big project. I was also intimidated by the magnitude of possibilities that existed and found myself facing a lot of imposter syndrome which was a feeling created by the white spaces I was navigating in. Spaces where I would learn to doubt my creative ability. I still had the weight of the white gaze on my shoulders, and it was starting to convince me that I wasn't good enough. It convinced me that all my accolades happened because of tokenism and white people's reluctance to take the time to understand my perspective. I knew that creating such a project meant facing these anxieties. A passage from Baldwin's "A Talk to Teachers"

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 26.

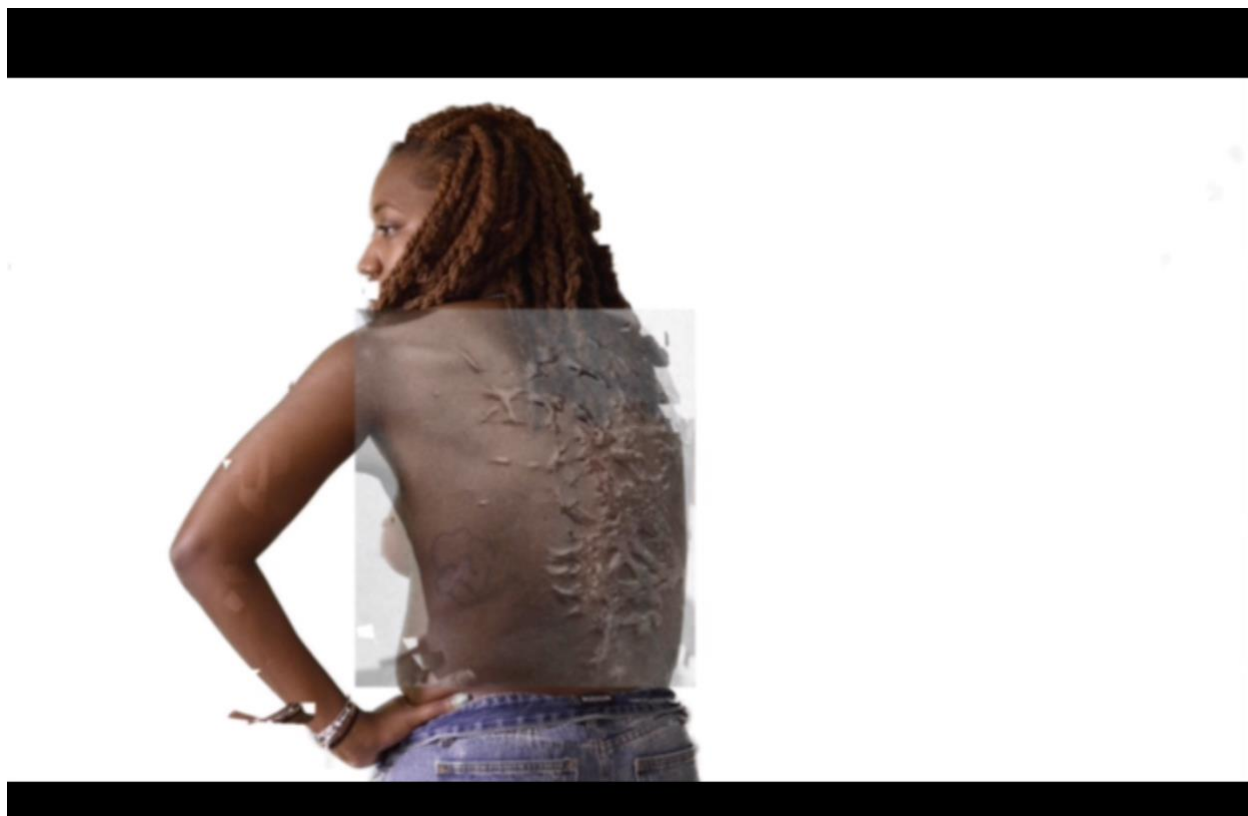
echoed back in my ears: “It becomes thoroughly clear, at least to me, that any Negro who is born in this country and undergoes the American educational system runs the risk of becoming schizophrenic.”<sup>35</sup> Making work became unfulfilling and I found myself in a deep depression. A depression that I might have stayed in if it wasn’t for a disappointing critique in which my work about my lived Black experience was questioned by a majority white audience; this critique pushed me to elevate my work.

Before my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of graduate school, I had been creating work about my personal experiences with mental illness. For my next critique I had prepared a video piece, where I overlaid an image of the once enslaved Gordon, also known as “Whipped Peter,” displaying scars that cover most of his back (see fig 4.1). The scars are indicative of the hardships experienced by Black people in slavery. In my piece, titled *An Ode to Gordon*, I place myself in Gordon’s contorted position so that most of my back shows, I hold his stance, every so often readjusting myself and then settling back into place. Using self-portraiture, I talk about the ways generational traumas impact us, and how we carry the unknown scars of ancestors. Parts of the video glitches, as a nod to Legacy Russel’s, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. At the time I was also exploring what it meant to be Black, queer, and a woman with a mental disability, what Russel considers to be a glitched *body*: “those that do not align with the canon of white cisgender heteronormativity.”<sup>36</sup> During the critique I played the video, and after many ignorant racial comments, I was asked by one of my classmates, what if the image of Gordon is not recognizable by a large audience.

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<sup>35</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*. (New York: Library of America, 1998), 679.

<sup>36</sup> Legacy Russell. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. (London: Verso, 2020), 29. iBooks.



*Figure 4.1. Azya Lashelle, Ode to Gordon, 2022*

“If you don’t recognize this image, then the work is not for you”, I said in an unwavering tone and as politely as possible. I was met with silence, and later after class was told by a classmate that I had seemed angry when I spoke. I felt conflicted. On one hand, I was angry because when a white student presents a historical white image no one is ever asking what happens if the image isn’t recognizable. We are taught about historic white figures throughout history, yet this image of Gordon, somehow slipped through the cracks within my classmates’ education. This historic image was important in the abolition movement and inspired lots of change and is one that I had become so familiar with. Instead of critiquing my video piece we were critiquing the validity of the image. Again, here I was face to face with the white gaze. On the other hand, I was afraid of being viewed as the stereotype of the angry Black woman, so I kept my cool. I left class that day filled with a

rage that would inspire me to create change. So, I made a huge shift in my work’s focus on mental health to Black education being a means to reach liberation, as I felt a necessity to begin making my yearbook.

*Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture* is a yearbook that was made from the “privileged standpoint, of experience.”<sup>37</sup> A particular place of privilege that bell hooks recognized as just as valid as analytical forms of knowing. Combining many of my experiences from different moments in my life while in school, I created a body of work that uses the aesthetics and structures of an object that symbolizes American K-12 education, such as the yearbook, to visually critique majority-white educational institutions. Drawing from the 1920s adaptation of the American yearbook, which included themes centered around a variety of ideas and concepts, mostly relating apolitical place or popular culture, I gave my yearbook the theme of the Black experience within school.<sup>38</sup>

Yearbooks have been around since the 1600s and are unique to American schools.<sup>39</sup> During this time student yearbooks were scrapbooks, where students pasted “newspaper clippings, personal notes, and programs from school events, as well as items such as pressed flowers or corsages and locks of hair.”<sup>40</sup> It wouldn’t be until the 1880s with the invention of the letterpress process and halftoned printing where we would see the first yearbooks that were able to be mass produced.<sup>41</sup>

In the 1890s and early 1900s the American school system began changing, to be more “relevant” to the student’s needs, creating a curriculum that was gender specific. The students

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<sup>37</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Saracino, *History Worth Repeating: A Chronology of School Yearbooks*, (Minneapolis: Jostens, Inc., 1996), 39.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

learned skills that would help with the needs of the industrial society.<sup>42</sup> The girls learned things such as home economics, while the boys learned woodworking or manual trade. It is here that we see the yearbook reflect the growing changes that Amerika was going through. It is important for me to note this, as I wanted my yearbook to also reflect Amerika, particularly Amerika's schools.

In the 1950s, whole departments like English or Social studies began receiving more coverage in the yearbook.<sup>43</sup> This looked like many of the yearbooks I was seeing growing up, where there was a portrait grid of students that stretched across the pages. The portrait grid is the foundation and core of most yearbooks. Portrait grid pages are the typical yearbook pages filled with students' annual school photos arranged into rows and columns. The school photos within the grid follow a strict aesthetic within any one yearbook: every person is photographed against the same background, at the same angle, using the same lighting, and with a similar facial expression. Flipping through page after page of these grids, the sameness makes it impossible to distinguish one person from another. There isn't much evidence of anyone's individual personality; all the faces blend into one giant block.

A yearbook was something that I was accustomed to getting at the end of each school year growing up. As a child I loved flipping through the pages and reminiscing on the school years that had passed, as my mom kept each yearbook from every grade in school. There was something about the yearbook that always excited me. The many memories and old faces of people that I no longer was in contact with and those that I still talk to, to this day. The yearbook always stood as a reflection of the time that had passed, which made me nostalgic. During my senior year of high school, I was in the yearbook club. We took pictures of school organizations, students, faculty, and administered the annual vote on student superlatives. I remember the rush trying to get

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 6-7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 34.

everything in on time before the deadline. Not unlike the feeling that I am experiencing now, as I am trying to get my thesis yearbook completed. During my undergraduate years at MSU, the yearbook, known as the *MSU Red Cedar Log*, became unimportant, as I felt like a small fish in a very big pond. I believe I had only one copy from my whole four and half years there. I had taken the free yearbook partially out of obligation, and partially because I had heard I was featured on a page. Once in hand, I didn't flip through the pages as I had usually done with my previous yearbooks. Instead, I flipped past the grids of white faces, and skipped to where I had heard my feature was and although small, it was something that said I was here, and that within this large university I had existed.

In her MA thesis paper on student portraits in yearbooks, Christine Elliott discusses the lack of individuality commonly seen in school pictures. Elliott categorizes these types of portraiture into two groups: honorific and repressive. Honorific portraiture, Elliot explains, “attempts to achieve esthetic beauty, and convey status, importance and prestige.”<sup>44</sup> In these images both the photographer and the subject use the cannon of the camera to exercise freedom within the image. While repressive portrait photography can be characterized by its uniformity. The model sits against a plain background, facing the camera, there is a lack of depth within the image, with the sitter taking up most of the image's space.<sup>45</sup>

For the portrait grids in my yearbook, I pushed the boundaries of the established portrait format. I followed a strict aesthetic to visually reference the idea of educational institutions, but I allowed my models to exercise a little more freedom than the standard annual school photo. I wanted to produce portraits that could be interpreted as repressive, as well as honorific by

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<sup>44</sup> Christine Elliott, “*Situating Student Portraits: An Analysis of High School Yearbook Photography in Bloomington, Illinois*” (master's thesis, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 21.



maintaining my model's identity. To accomplish these portraits, I created a typology, a system of rules and guidelines to follow as I photographed each subject. I gathered technical inspiration from the photographs of Richard Avedon and Martin Scholler, whose portraits both follow strict aesthetic guidelines (typologies). In the case of Avedon's portraits, his subjects' personalities are shown as he captures their full body in most images. This along with props used in some images allows us as the viewer to see a difference in style and personality between each model. In Scholler's photographs, the typology is so rigidly enforced that the images together have an interesting juxtaposition. In one instance they are repressive photos that show the subjects against a uniformed background, the lighting is all remarkably similar, and the only control that the subject seems to have is over their facial expression. While in another instance these images are all famous people, who despite being photographed in a uniformed repressive way, do in fact have an important status within society. I would interpret my images as repressive and honorific as there was a level of expected participation from both me and my models. When beginning this project, I focused my efforts on the Black students at Georgia State University.<sup>46</sup> My typology included these four rules:

1. Photograph each subject against a white background:
2. Portrait includes full face and should be shot from the shoulders up
3. All portraits must be taken outside
4. Models MUST be Black

Being that I wanted to photograph the widest variety of GSU students, I placed my white backdrop in one of the busiest areas on the Atlanta campus. The Greenway is the grassy lawn

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<sup>46</sup> Nick Chiles, "At Georgia State, More Black Students Graduate Each Year than at Any U.S. College," *The Hechinger Report*, April 8, 2021, <https://hechingerreport.org/at-georgia-state-black-students-find-comfort-and-academic-success/>.

located between many of the main classroom buildings. By setting up here, I could talk to and photograph students from all age groups, majors, and backgrounds. I conducted this set up a few times throughout the fall and spring semester for about 2 hours each time and photographed as many students as I possible. For the most part, I didn't advertise that I would be taking photos in The Greenway, rather I just set up my backdrop and left it all up to chance. I also didn't force anyone to have their photo taken and allowed them to choose whether they would like to participate. This gave me the outcomes of both repressive and honorific images as the portraits were products of the willingness of my models, who came to school that day not knowing that they would be photographed. As I took the photos, I was allowed to see a variety of different personalities that came through despite photographing with such tight parameters. I didn't dictate their facial expressions or change their clothes, but instead I simply captured them existing as they were.

The only direction I did give my subjects when taking their photos was to look straight at the lens, look up, look left, look right, and look down (see fig. 4.2). From the five different angles, I chose the best one and paired it with another student's image in the grid layouts of my yearbook. I constructed these portrait pairs within the grid to create a *Brady Bunch* effect: although the portraits are separated by the grid's white borders and white squares the models interact with one another by directing their gaze at each other.

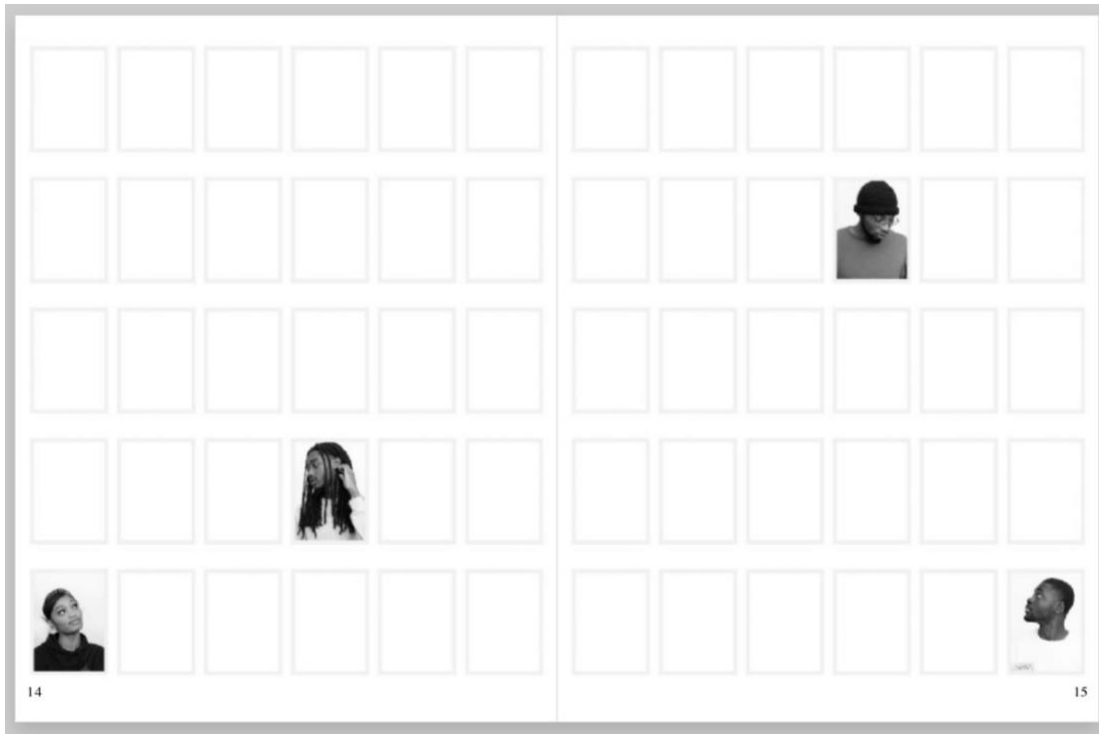


Figure 4.2. Azya Lashelle, *Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture*, Yearbook Page 14-15, 2023

This act of acknowledgment references a particular situation I experienced in an art class. The professor asked us why Kerry James Marshall had included the figure of a distorted white Sleeping Beauty in his painting *School of Beauty, School of Culture*. A white student responded, “Maybe it was because of the way that Black people aspire to be white.” In that moment, all the Black students in the room (although there were few of us), exchanged looks of disbelief and frustration: the student sitting in front of me turned around and looked up at me and the student to the left of me looked at other student across the room. There was a shared moment of empathy between each of us Black students, that seemed to say, “You exist, and I see you.” It was important for me to include a representation of this moment in my book, as it was the inspiration point for the white squares and the portraits looking at one another (see appendix A). I wanted to capture the precise moment when you walk into a given space and you look for someone who shares similarities with you. Using the portrait grid but playing with the expectations of its form and

function, allowed me to highlight the Black student's experience and critique the racism we face in the classroom. I titled the yearbook and my exhibition, *Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture*, after this class experience, but also because in this project I wanted to highlight the many beautiful Black faces that are in the school and have been schooled in American culture.

Following the class pages in my yearbook is the "Faculty & Staff" page, a compilation of larger white squares with school subjects written underneath. Each subject is written where the names of the faculty would traditionally be. One square, however, is not white, but instead pictures a Black woman and reads "Africana Studies" (see fig 4.3). This is a representation of my experience in having mostly white educators throughout my schooling. Even subjects where I expected to see diversity, I was often let down. I remember assuming that my "Black Lives Matter" course would be taught by a Black professor, but in fact it was taught by a white man; or the many African Art History courses that I took which would be taught by white women.

When in search for Black faculty, even at GSU I was often surprised to see that there was still a lack of representation in professors. That in pursuit of finding Black professors, I would be told numerous times that the best locations to look were Africana Studies. To make the most of the circumstances I was in, I would stray away from my course requirements and take classes in the African American studies department, just to try and build a connection with Black professors. I also sought feedback from Black artists outside of school. Both of these instances serve as examples of the many ways that as a Black student in a majority white institution, I needed to advocate for myself in ways that white students did not.

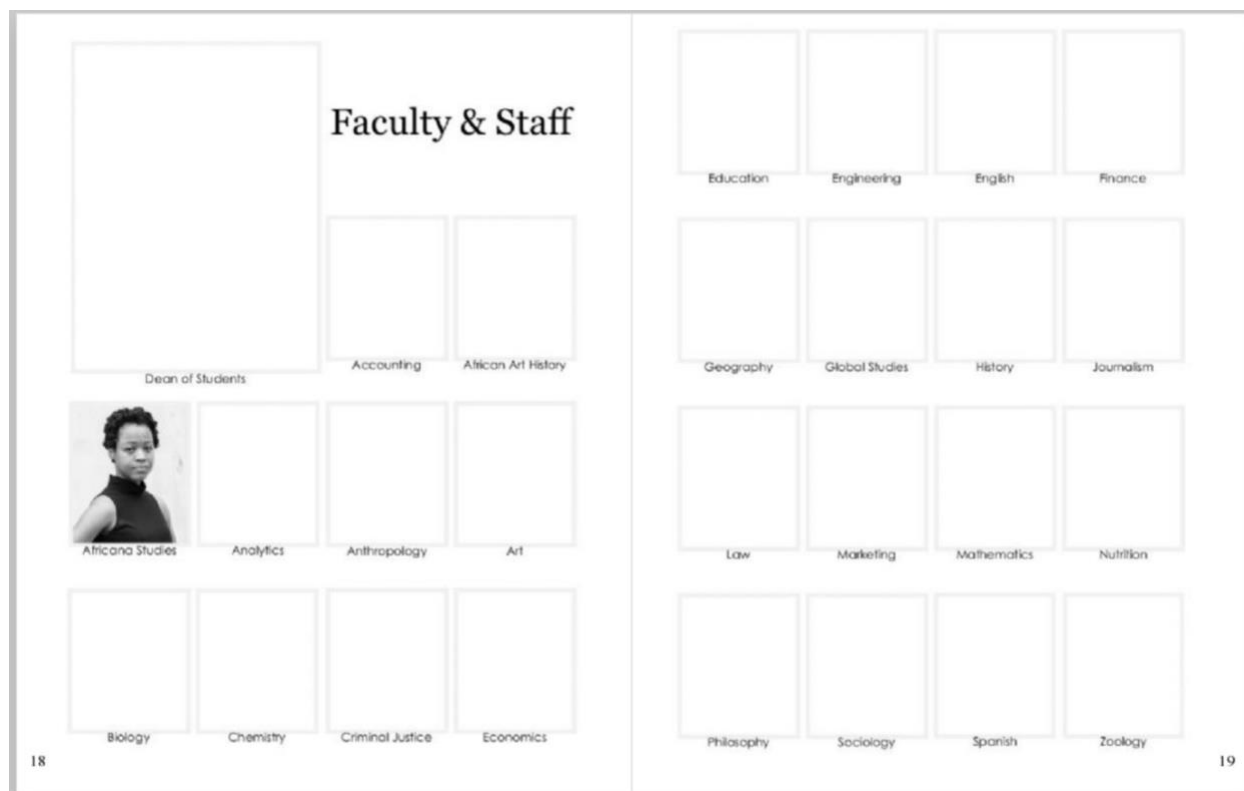


Figure 4.3. Azya Lashelle, *Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture*, Yearbook pages 18-19, 2023

Superlatives are another yearbook essential. Growing up, there was always an excitement I would get when flipping to the superlative section to see who was voted what. Some “classic” superlatives were: Biggest Flirt, Cutest Couple, and Most Likely to Succeed. I was voted “Most Outgoing” in my freshman year of high school. In my yearbook I wanted to take something that is apolitical, like superlatives, and make it political. This was done by using personal stories from my own experiences, as well as gathering stories from other students. The superlatives I chose to highlight were Best Hair, Best in Show, and Most Vulnerable.

For the image Best Hair, my model, Kyle, is seen with seven braids coming from his head, with most of them being held by white hands (see fig 4.4). The white hands represent the European standards for good hair and the fetishization that Black people sometimes encounter when it comes

to our hair. Some of the white hands hold the hair in a tight grip while others are more delicate. Kyle stares directly at the viewer with a blank facial expression on his face. There isn't much of a definitive answer to what is considered best hair, but a much-needed conversation is finally being started about why we consider only some as having the "best hair" or "good hair" and others as not. I want my viewers to consider, who gets to decide who has the best hair? And what does best hair look like?



## BEST HAIR

*Figure 4.4. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Yearbook Page "Best Hair," 2023*

For the superlative Best in Show, I created an image that conceptualizes Black woman as a prize. After speaking with a young woman about her experiences in school, she described a time when she was once told by a Black man school administrator that, “No one sees Black women as a prize.” The person who shared this story with me didn’t realize how much this statement impacted her at the time, but each rejection she experienced later in life, whether professional, platonic, or romantic, reminded her of these harsh words. She was heartbroken at hearing this proclamation, particularly because it came from the mouth of a person widely perceived to be intelligent and open-minded. Creating “Best in Show,” by parodying the yearbook’s superlatives and expanding their meaning, I reclaim this story and show the Black woman as the prize that she is (see fig 4.5). For this image, we dressed my model in gold which plays off the concept of the trophy wife. She holds in her hand white roses, as if after a show performance.



*Figure 4.5. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, "Best in Show," 2023*

Another component that I saw as being integral to the creation of my yearbook was the senior photo. This was when seniors would be photographed, in unique styles that was personal to them. Senior photos are important because they show a transition period, when young people are entering adulthood. Including the senior photo in my project allowed me to show a transition between when Black people transition from unaware to aware of their oppression. In the research phase of creating this work, I did a Google search for “senior photos.” What came up was a variety of white girls standing in picturesque locations or natural landscapes. What I didn’t see was Black people, or anyone of color for that matter. I wanted my senior photos to not only show Black people, but to complicate the format of the senior photo as I use them to make commentary on racial experiences. One problem Black students face is constantly having to suppress our identities



in the classroom; to fit in, we must conform to societal expectations of how we talk, dress, look, and behave. The photograph, *Untitled* (see fig 4.6), shows a Black model, being controlled by strings like a puppet. The puppeteer controlling him is a white person. This photograph expresses my feelings about the white gaze that I felt was always weighing on my shoulders, as I often felt I needed to perform or conform my Blackness for white people. This image represents how the Black person's movements are guided by the choices of white society.



*Figure 4.6. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Untitled, 2023*

Outside of the class pictures, senior photos, and writings are a variety of images that I included to highlight the Black experience in and out of school. For example, the inclusion of the image *Prom Night*, serves as an example of school activities outside of the classroom (see fig 4.7). Being that I am a queer Black woman, I found it important to create an image that portrays my identity, and which is an identity that is often underrepresented and shamed.



*Figure 4.7. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Prom Night, 2023*

Have you ever flipped through a yearbook or school handout and seen majority white faces, except for in the athletic departments? Its always disappointing to see how Black people are excluded from the intellectual side of a school advertisement, but heavily included in the athletic department (mostly basketball, football, or track). For my yearbook, when it came down to

highlighting the athletic department, I photographed my friend, holding a rugby ball (see fig 4.8). My friend played rugby in college and is still playing on a local team in Atlanta. Accompanied next to the photo was a line that read “My friend plays rugby and I thought that was cool.” I don’t know many Black people playing a sport like rugby and I thought it was exciting that she played a sport that defies the stereotype of what is or isn’t considered to be a sport for Black people.



*Figure 4.8. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Rugby, 2023*

Dawoud Bey is another artist who studied high school students and their experiences. In his book *Class Pictures*, he captures high school students and displays their images with their own writing about an event or feeling that they have experienced while in school. It was interesting

reading the stories from each person and seeing what they thought was relevant to be included with their portrait. When creating my book, writing was also important in my work because it gave me the space to talk about the many experiences I had while in school that impacted me. In my own prose writing I describe the moments of being called the name of the other Black person in a class (see Appendix A.1). My professor at the time, seemed to be able to get everyone's name correct but the two Black girls in the class she always mixed up. I also wrote about the noticeable racial divide between Black and white students at Michigan State University when attending a Board of Trustees meeting and seeing people of color go up to the stand to argue for the need to feel safe on campus, while the white students went up and spoke about how MSU needed better lightbulbs, to help save energy (see Appendix A.2). It was interesting to me to see what students of color would ask for in comparison to what the white students chose to ask for, and the differences between the requests. This moment was a harsh lesson for me, as I learned that white people are often oblivious to the experiences of those who are not white. Each piece of writing in my book explores the many racial incidents that I have experienced. It was here, in my writing, where I would go to express the challenges faced while pursuing my education. Writing was a form of catch and release for me, as I was able to let go of a lot of the anger and hurt after completing the written works.

The last page of my yearbook deviates significantly from the standard yearbook. In this section, I break the yearbook's tight aesthetics and structures to reflect the struggles we face in educational systems and to represent the problems endemic within these systems. I also subvert the structure of the yearbook to celebrate our resilience and to symbolize education's power to liberate. Years since I have been back on Tuskegee's campus, I still think about that statute of Booker T. Washington. I think about the concept of "lifting the veil of ignorance from his people."

The words created a hundred years ago, no longer ring true. As I look around me, I see Black people getting an education, searching for truth and knowledge, fulfilling dreams of becoming artists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers. I see that the veil has been lifted. Yet, in these educational spaces, we are still confronted with moments of oppression that make getting an education hard. I wonder if it was *our* veil that needed lifting. An image that I took, but didn't make it into the book, was a veil placed over a white man's head, standing next to a Black man (see fig 4.9). The white man has a veil over his head as a representation of whiteness, in his hands are an open bible. I used this image to make the argument that it is now the veil of white people that needs lifting. The decision in rather or not to include the image in the book was a complex one, but after speaking to other Black artist and really sitting with the image, I was able to reconsider my why of the project which was to hold space for Black people, so I took the image out, and replaced it with an image of two Black men.

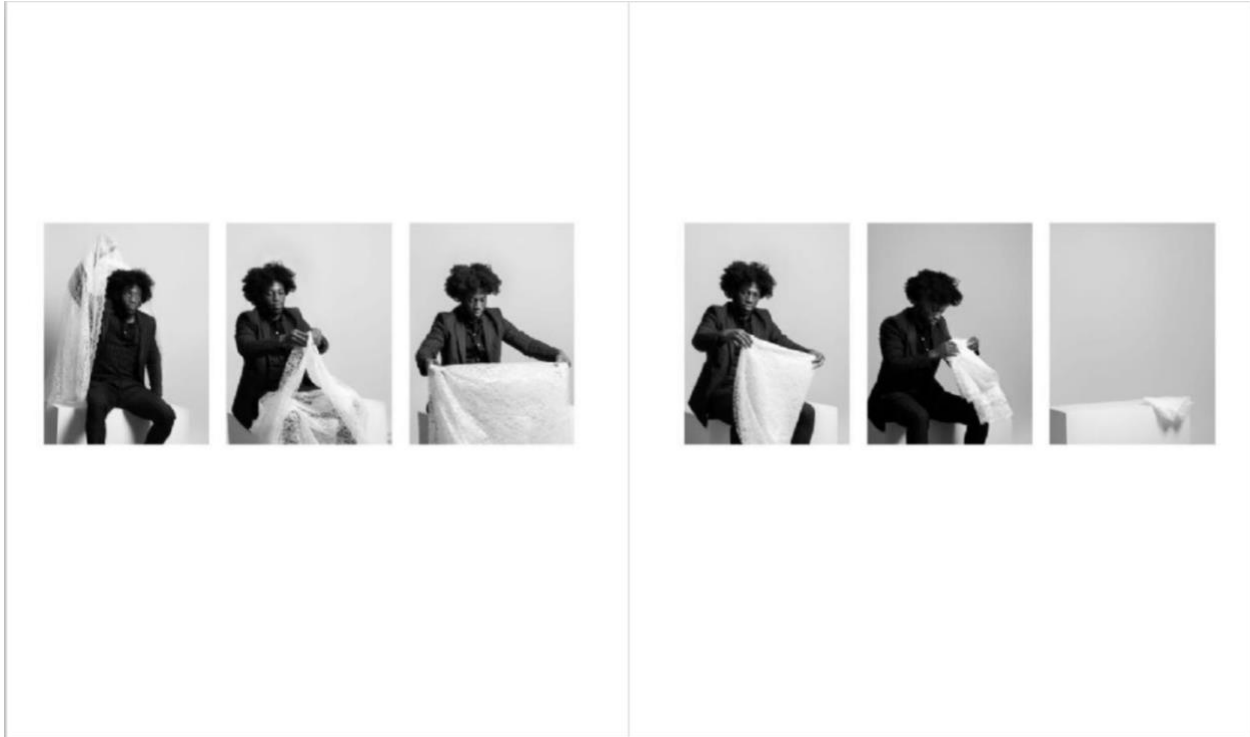


*Figure 4.9. Azya Lashelle Photograph, The White Man's Veil, After Booker T. Washington, 2022*

In my recreation of the statue of Washington lifting the veil, I had both my models wear suits (see fig 4.10). I wanted to get away from the narrative of the uneducated man being represented as an enslaved person. I also wanted to show how we have come so far from the moment captured by the statue. The veil is lifted from the model's face and he stares forward at the viewer. It was important to include this image in my work, as it was one of the many inspirations for why I began this project in the first place.



*Figure 4.10. Azya Lashelle Photograph, After Booker T. Washington, 2022*



*Figure 4.11. Azya Lashelle Photograph, Untitled, 2022*

The last few images of the book are a series of the veil being taken off a Black man. Between each shot he removes the veil and folds it up neatly (see fig 4.11). This served as a representation of ignorance being removed and walked away from. A portrayal of the moment when I became more conscious and was able to then critique the system of schools that had raised me. My yearbook expands upon the idea of Black people existing in educational spaces and reminds viewers of the importance of education as a form of liberation—not just for Black students, but for all people.

As James Baldwin states:

If, for example, one managed to change the curriculum in all the schools so that Negroes learned more about themselves and their real contributions to this culture, you would be

liberating not only Negroes, you'd be liberating white people who know nothing about their own history.<sup>47</sup>

## 5 LESSON V: TRUSTING THE VISION

I had taken over fifty portraits; I had created the yearbook. The next obstacle I would face would be the exhibition. For my exhibition, I wanted to create an installation that would fill the galleries to make a commentary on the lack of diversity that I experienced while in school. I knew instinctively that I wanted to use white rectangles as a representation of whiteness. The installation appeared to me as if it was a dream. White paper, white walls, white faces, white school. Thinking about white spaces in the sense of the classroom, of the university, of the institution. I also thought about the phrase “Black faces, White spaces,” written about by author Carolyn Finny.<sup>48</sup> In the book, Finny focuses on the great outdoors and Black people’s relationship with nature. For my exhibition however, I turned my focus on white places, such as the classroom, a microcosm exemplifying the institution. Whiteness pervades US educational institutions and is inescapable and oppressive to Black students. While Amerika’s education system was built with the white student in mind; knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge is not white.

The white rectangles would be something that I would receive the most pushback on when presenting the work to a white audience. I would get responses and suggestions from white people like what if you placed the silhouettes of someone, what if there was a question mark in place of people, or what if you just photographed white people. It felt as if the exclusion of whiteness had to be substituted in some form of representation. I chose the white blank pieces of paper because

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<sup>47</sup> Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, 683.

<sup>48</sup> Carolyn Finny’s book *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, focuses on African American’s relationship with the outdoors and the underrepresentation of Black people in these spaces.



I had spent so many years thinking about the white person and how they fit into my work, for this project I wanted to pour into Black people and give as little of energy to whiteness as possible. A reason the white rectangles were perfect as is.

With the white rectangles in place, I set out to make the portraits for the installation and yearbook. When I first began this process, I photographed family members, who had just recently graduated from a college or university. Standing about six feet away, I took wide shots from the waist up against a white background. The white backdrop is different from the blue or grey backdrop that are typically used in school yearbook pictures for many reasons. First, I knew that the white backdrop would complement the white rectangles visually, and secondly, I wanted to emphasize my models' Blackness by being set against a white background. By the end of the second semester, I had photographed one-hundred students. It was exciting watching many of the students that I had photograph come and see their portraits in the exhibition. It was a reminder of why this work was so important.

After gathering all my portraits, I printed them 4 x 6 inches, smaller than the planned 8.5 x 11 size to sketch which photos would be used for the actual installation. The next step I then took was pairing the faces. Each person I photographed had about five images each. This meant that I had to pick through the images to find the model's best image and the best image to pair it with. During this process, I would pick an image, and then find the best image where the eyes of each model lined up. This wasn't an easy task. Some of the images held models that were looking to the corner of the papers, or sometimes the models would look more outwardly and distant, than the rest. I did my best to pick pairs where the models looked like they were looking as close as possible to each other. After I gathered all the pairs, I numbered the backs of them, so I knew the pair that each belonged to. All together I had 73 pairs and single images. The goal of the installation

was to have a 1:10 ratio of Black students to white rectangles. I created the ratio by relating it to a personal experience, of when I was the one Black person in a classroom.

Once I had all the images printed and paired up, I set out to begin creating the installation. This was a lengthy process that entailed gridding out the gallery with blue painter's tape and using that as a guide for where we would place the white rectangles and the photographs (see fig 5.1). After completing the grid, we would place the white rectangles on the wall, and then peel the tape off.



*Figure 5.1. Installation Shot*

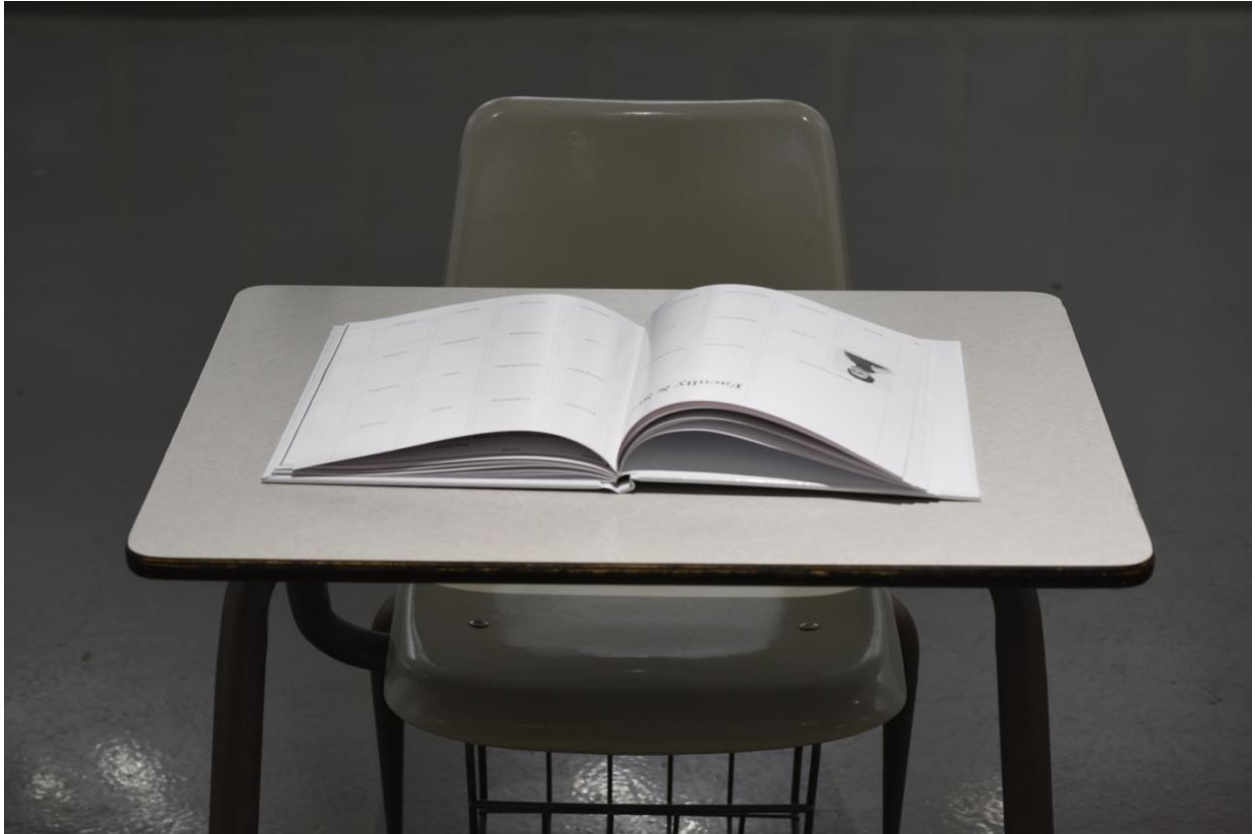
After all the white rectangles were placed on the wall, I began placing the portrait pairs. For the most part each pair had few white spaces between them. This would replicate a seating chart, or a lecture hall. I placed some of the students next to each other, some further apart. Some looking up at a student and some looking down. Some I paired by similarities such as the two

students who both wore camera straps in their picture (see fig 5.2). I recreated the moment of being in my lecture class surrounded by white people, and few Black people. There were 67 portraits of Black students, and all together there was about 767, white rectangles and portraits.

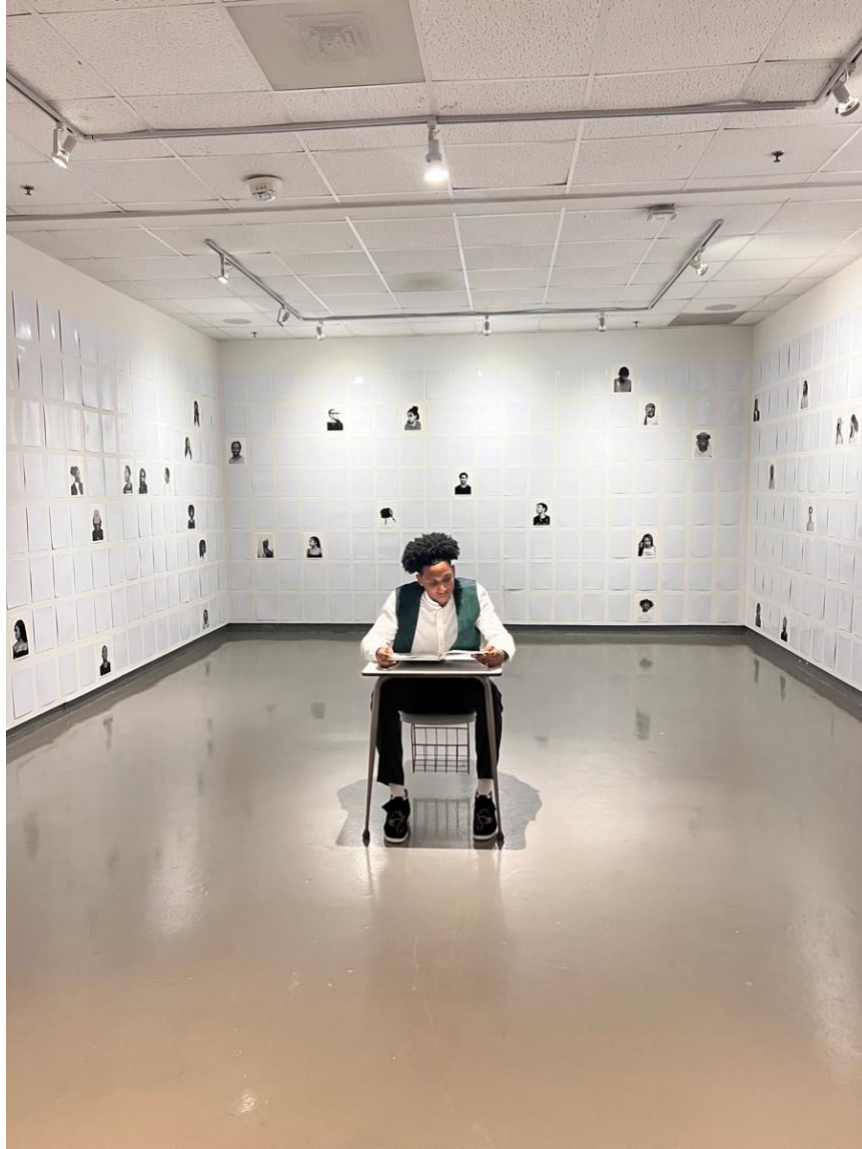


*Figure 5.2. Installation Detail*

In the center of the installation was a white desk and chair (see fig 5.3). On top of the desk sat my yearbook. This really made the installation come to life, as people would sit in the chair, and flip through the yearbook. Reading the book as they looked around the room (see fig 5.4). Surrounded by the many faces and the many representations of faces. The desk served to place viewers back into the school setting.



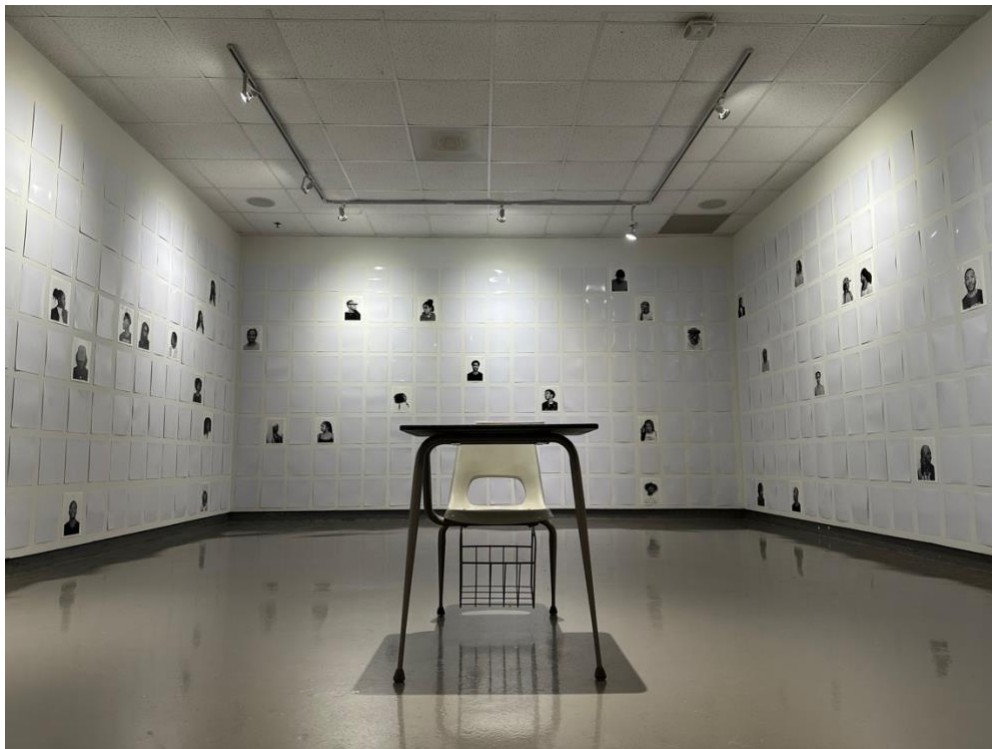
*Figure 5.3. Installation Detail: Desk View*



*Figure 5.4. Installation Image Interaction*

For my gallery signature exhibition book, I placed one of the yearbooks down, as a place where people could sign the back, like the typical yearbook. This was a decision I had gone back and forth on whether to allow all visitors to sign the book. I was worried about the idea that by allowing just anyone to sign the book, that it would take away from the space that I had created by only photographing and capturing the Black experience in school. In the end, I decided to include the participation of white signatures in the book, because although white people hadn't been

photographed, they were present in the work, as white spaces. For me the signatures of the white students and professors helped to bring to life the white squares. The signatures also made me feel nostalgic as I remembered being in school, and having my friends, family, and classmates write in the back of my yearbooks. Now as I wrap up my final year of graduate school, it felt like a final goodbye to the three trying years that I had spent in graduate school.



*Figure 5.5. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Exhibition Installation*



*Figure 5.6. Exhibition Detail*



*Figure 5.7. Azya Lashelle, Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture, Exhibition*

I see myself showing this work again, with even more wall space to fill. I see myself photographing more students at different universities and continuing my research on what it means to reach liberation through education. I learned a lot from this exhibition this work, and one thing that I learned was that there is a calling and a need for work like this. Work that highlights the



Black student while in education, work that talks about the ways that we have benefited from school and at the same time been oppressed in them. This is what I hope for the future of my work.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Black students' matter, Black faculty matter, Black education matters. When we view education as more than just the "banking system" we create space for liberation for those that are being taught. And although we have come far in our education system, we still have a way to go as more and more critical race classes are being taken out of educational spaces.

In the back of my exhibition yearbook someone wrote, "This feels like a love letter to the Black student population here..." Words I found to be the most accurate description of the exhibition and yearbook, as I did see this work as a love letter to all Black students as well as myself. A love letter that allowed me to release all the hurt and pain I had experienced in school. A love letter that reminded me of the community that I had been so blessed to be a part of. From the many that participated in the portraits, to the Black clubs and organizations that allowed me to photograph them, the students that shared their personal stories with me, the Black faculty that advised me about my project and research, and the faculty that allowed me to come to their class and speak. A community that included my family who helped me set up my installation. Friends that flew in from Detroit, Chicago, and Brooklyn to help see my exhibition through. *Class of Beauty: Schooled in the Culture*, couldn't have been possible without the many hands that helped to pour into it. So, in conclusion: when lifting the veil isn't enough, we must turn to each other, and remind ourselves of the community that has formed around us.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Faces Like Mine

I remember it was a Friday, sometime in the fall, my sophomore year of undergrad. We had just gotten back from the annual Chicago trip where we visited museums and such. This time we were required to see Kerry James Marshall's exhibition being held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. His work hung on the walls beautifully. They were large paintings of Black folks, who were each painted a deep dark Black. The size of the paintings took up so much wall space that they commanded their viewers' attention.

I remember sitting in the lecture for one of my studio classes, which usually ran small, however this one was filled with around a hundred or so students. I remember our professor projecting one of the paintings, *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* from the exhibition on the screen. This painting took place in a hair salon. Black women sat in chairs looking at their reflection and admiring their hair. At the bottom of the painting sat a distorted Sleeping Beauty.

*Why do you think Kerry James Marshall included a distorted Sleeping Beauty at the bottom of this painting?* Our professor asks.

I remember this white girl raising her hand with all the confides she could muster. And when our professor called on her, she doesn't hesitate to say...

*Maybe it's the way Black people aspire to be white.*

Silence follows this answer. Along with sharp *What the FUCK*, looks. I don't remember what my professor responded, for she too was white, and possibly couldn't even understand why these words were an attack. I do, however, remember looking around at the faces in this large lecture. I was surrounded by whiteness. I could count on two hands the number of Black faces that looked like mine. I remember making eye contact with one of the few Black girls sitting next to

me and shaking my head in disapproval of the comment. A Black boy in front of me turned his head and found my eyes. His look said, *could you believe she said that*. In return I made a face that said, *I am not surprised*. Some rolled their eyes at the comment, some shrugged it off and starred foreword, while the rest of us searched for each other as if to hold one another with our eyes, and say *I see you*.

**Appendix B: Dear Professor X,**

I know I ain't no Sarah, Becky, or Emily. I know it may seem like ah-z-ya or ah-zay-ya, but it's pronounced Asia. Like the continent. *Asia, like the continent*, I say each time I introduce myself. It's my way of getting rid of confusion and lowering the chances of error. I picked up this tactic as a kid. A kid that always searched for blinking keychains at the souvenir gas stations, never finding my name. My name is not complicated. It's Asia, but spelled A-z-y-a. Given to me by my parents who can never agree on who came up with this unique spelling, but that's beside the point. The point is that you with the fancy degree, and a multitude of awards, the authority figure in the classroom, can't recall my name for the life of you. And somehow you seem to get every Jake, Shelby, Vicky, Josh, Sam, Bradley, Rachel, Tori, and Charlie right but when it comes to me I am called the one other Black girl in the class. Who, I might add, I look nothing alike. You even go as far as to give me her graded papers. But let me also guess, "you don't see color," just like you don't see me or her as two different people. I do my best to sit far away from her. And you still seemed to be confused. And so instead of us finding similarities between us we stay separated by the wedge you shoved between us. All I know that we have in common is a white teacher who refuses to get our names right.

Sincerely,

Azya, A fed-up Black Student

### **Appendix C: A Board of Trustee Meeting**

October 28, 2016, some of the white students at Michigan State University went to the Board of Trustees meeting being held and asked for better campus light bulbs. One by one they went up to the podium and explained why MSU needed to save energy and that better light bulbs were the way to go. The Latinx students went up to the podium and cried for their own humanity. Someone earlier in the semester had written, “Build A Wall,” around the Spartan Statue. The Black students went up and talked about being made uncomfortable by their white peer who had called a Black kid a gorilla. The University failed to realize the impact that this incident was having on the student body. A Middle Eastern student stood up to the podium next, explaining how he remained silent for the Latinx students, was silent for the Black students, and now he was being targeted because of his racial identity and no one was left standing to help him. The white students asked for light bulbs.

One by one they asked for light bulbs.