

“Oh no, it’s not like that...”: A Portrait Series

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Mariann Fant

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Kristen McCauliff

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

May 2018

Expected Graduation

May 2018

SP Coll
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.24
2018
.F36

Abstract

Bodies outside of or between a perceived monolithic identity are understood and coded by others differently compared to those within them. Individuals with middle identities such as those who are mixed race, bisexual, and gender nonconforming exist at a unique site of identity negotiation and policing. This portrait series is of three individuals with middle identities. Using an artistic approach, I explore how three of these individuals perceive, construct, and exist in the everyday. Through interviewing them about their experiences and then producing a drawn translation of their faces, I seek to celebrate and find a coherence between myself as the artist and the bodies I research.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Kristen McCauliff for graciously taking on the role of advisor for this project. Though this type of research was a bit out of her arena, she did not falter in providing me with invaluable resources and patient guidance. I am so fortunate to have worked with her on this project and throughout my college career.

I would also like to thank Khanya, Michael, and GPat for being so willing to share their stories with me. I am grateful to have left this project inspired by their bravery and in awe of their unique, middle beauty.

Finally, I would like to thank my high school art teacher Denise Kocur. While I did not pursue art as my degree, she gave me a timeless, invaluable skill that I am so happy I use in this project. She also showed me the power in bringing humans to life on paper; yes, for the audience, but perhaps far more importantly for the artist.

Process Analysis Statement

Identity is complicated. Any one person can fall into a variety of identity “boxes,” ranging from sexuality and disability to race and gender. Considering the complexity of the human experience, it is not surprising that many people find themselves falling in multiple boxes, in between boxes, or not in a box at all. Mixed-race, bisexual, and gender non-binary individuals are just three examples of such people. In the United States, approximately 22.5 million adults identify as mixed race, yet the U.S. census only started allowing individuals to check more than one box in the year 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Additionally, 24.4 million Americans identify as bisexual and while there has been next to no research on the non-binary population, researchers estimate that there are at least 420,000 Americans who claim this identity (Storrs, 2016; Cummings, 2017).

The size of this “middle” population is already significant and studies show that with higher percentages of interracial marriage in the United States and the increasing acceptance of complex queer identities, this population is rapidly increasing (Pew Research, 2015). Middle identities not only make the process of filling out a census difficult, but create a complex lived experience as others, institutions and even the individuals themselves grapple, police, and dissect these identities. Additionally, my own experiences as both a biracial and bisexual individual has provided me with an intimate look into just how complex middle identities tend to be. I have constantly felt like I was stuck in an invisible intersection of an intersection; not quite white, not quite Latina, not quite straight, not quite gay. Yet others have had no difficulty deciding those things for me, incorrect or otherwise.

In an effort to explore these intersecting intersections and to illuminate their everyday experiences, I offer a portrait series of three such individuals. After identifying, interviewing and

taking photos, I listened to their stories and drew each person. While this thesis project strays from traditional communication research methods, as a research tool, art is a critical method for providing both the artist and viewers with new perspectives that uniquely contribute to qualitative research (Jongeward, 2015). Additionally, as a Communication Studies major who has not had many opportunities to explore topics through my artistic inclinations, I wanted to create a project that allowed me to fully immerse myself in the people I seek to study and produce a portrait series celebrating the beauty and complexity of middle identity.

Embarking on this project, I kept Carolyn Joneward's (2015) visual approach to qualitative research at its center. She says,

An artist seeks to understand something about the world... Engaging with materials, thoughts, and feelings, an artist participates in a search. This search to bring something into being requires attention to details, a sense of relatedness among all parts within a whole, and tolerance for the tension of not knowing what will emerge. (Jongeward, 2015, p. 263)

Personal experience with middle identity has provided me a plethora of information that I have struggled to comprehend in a meaningful way. Through dialogue and observation, I have noticed that identities outside monolithic categories are frequently policed, interpreted and erased in interesting ways, on both an internal and external level. The moving parts that surround identity such as biology, skin tone, aesthetics, culture, and social power has made pinpointing a single aspect of this topic next to impossible and frankly, doing so would defeat the purpose. As Jongeward argues, the artistic search requires a connection "among all parts within a whole" (2015, p. 263). I want to understand how individuals experience their middle identities in their

entirety and while artistic representation produces research that is more ambiguous in nature, it also provides the flexibility needed for this thesis' "search" for knowledge.

To begin my project, I narrowed down three specific middle identities that I wanted to research and portray. This choice was difficult because I felt as though I was valuing certain middle identities over others. Who am I to say that someone who exists in the middle of the sexuality spectrum is "more" middle or worthy of study than someone existing in the middle of the autism spectrum? There are so many different areas of personal identification, but I ultimately chose the three areas of race, sexuality, and gender because I not only have personal ties with these intersections, but felt like I could rely on a larger body of existing scholarly research to guide me in unpacking them. As a result, I chose three individuals who publicly identified as a middle identity in these three areas.

I decided to conduct informal interviews so that I could enter the artistic process with the individual's unique story in mind. While the interviews were helpful in making connections between the similarities and differences of various middle identities, they ultimately served as a basis for my interpretation and representation of the consequent portraits. After all, as Jongeward (2015) puts it, "Creative process...emerges from a coherence between the person creating and what is being created" (p. 263). In the interviews, I asked questions about how the subject's self-identifies, how they are coded by others, how they participate in multiple communities and in what ways they consider their identity to be complex or problematized both on an internal and external level. The interviews painted a personalized experience of each subject that I then had the pleasure of listening to and internalizing through my artistic method of research.

What I discovered from drawing these portraits is difficult to articulate. On an explicit level, the information I gained from the interviews confirmed many of my ideas about middle

identities. All three participants' stories contained similar elements such as rejection from both monolithic communities they identify with, balancing simultaneous privilege and oppression, and miscoding and policing from others. However, my project was not the interviews, but the process of creating three portraits. While Jongeward (2015) eloquently explains the importance and unique process of artistic qualitative research, the process itself was much messier.

Initially, the act of representing three non-normative identities was a powerful experience for me. When I took Ball State's introductory art history class, I was taught to memorize European artists and their sculptures and paintings depicting overwhelmingly white, heteronormative and cisnormative portrayals of life. This series is a direct contrast as the audience of my work can observe the beauty and mystery of three middle identifying human beings. My finished portrait series gives three identities a moment of importance that are typically overlooked in fine arts. Additionally, my 2D portrayals of these individuals displays the finer details of physical features existing in between race, sexuality, and gender.

Finding empowerment and inspiration from creating these portraits was a beneficial experience, but I encountered limitations and obstacles in the process as well. One major obstacle was coming to terms with my own artistic limitations and the subsequent effects on my thesis. The entirety of my formal art education took place in high school. As such, I recognize that I am slow drawer and I find myself to be limited to certain artistic avenues, namely, graphite pencil and portraiture. This was difficult for me to accept because the basis of this project lies on the freeing ambiguity that artistic methodology is supposed to provide. I found myself questioning the validity of my research. Perhaps the portraits would be more meaningful if they were in color, but I do not know how to use colored pencils for portraits. Perhaps the process would have produced a better understanding if I had taken an abstract style and given myself

more room to interpret their stories visually, but again, I have no experience with abstract drawing. This project forced me to link my artistic ability to my scholastic research and I found that limits in one area, unfortunately extended into the other.

With these limitations in mind, I still consider the portrait series to be both an artistic *and* an academic success. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, “Within the naturalistic paradigm of qualitative research, the knower is inseparable from the known” (p. 37). Simply put, the process of creating this portrait series made me a better “knower.” Due to the ambiguous nature of middle identities, I have found it difficult to find security in my own experiences and this portrait series has undoubtedly secured me. Drawing each portrait was a labor of love. In part because of my artistic limitations, each time I sat down to draw, I had to make the intentional decision to be fully present. In part because of my personal identity, each time I sat down to draw, I completely committed myself to bringing their artistic representations to life. Through the drawing process I am linked to the stories and pursuit of understanding of individuals with middle identities. With my signature on each work of art that I brought into existence, I now feel personally responsible to uncover the wealth of knowledge that I know lies beneath each face. While the academic results from my project remain admittedly ambiguous, I am confident that it has resulted in creating a better academic.

When I started this project, I was still searching for my drawings’ subjects. An organization that I am a part of had just gained a new freshman and I asked him, “Do you mind if I ask how you identify racially or ethnically?” He replied, “Oh yes, my dad is white and my mom is from Costa Rica.” I replied, “Oh great, I’m doing a project about middle identities and since you’re mixed race I was just wondering...” I did not get to finish my sentence because he interrupted me and said, “Oh no, it’s not like that... I just like to think of myself as really tan.” I

try not to judge, but I was speechless as this man had just equated his racial identity to a skin tone. I stood there for a few moments trying to understand how someone so similar to me on paper could conceptualize their identity so differently internally.

But, maybe, that is the point. In part due to the lack of research, individuals with middle identities are forced to figure out where they are, when they are, and how they are entirely on their own. More dialogue and research must take place on middle identities, this project gave me a small peek into the vast potential of future research. There is so much that has yet to be discovered and understood and after going through this process, I am exceedingly satisfied with the drawing series and my shifting perspective on middle identity.

References

- Cummings, W. (2017). *When asked their sex, some are going with option 'X'*. Retrieved on April 27, 2018 from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/06/21/third-gender-option-non-binary/359260001/>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Jongeward, C. (2015). Visual portraits: Integrating artistic process into qualitative research. In Leavy, P. (Ed.), *Method meets art* (pp. 253-265). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *Multiracial in America: Proud, diverse and growing in numbers*. Retrieved on April 27, 2018 from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america/>
- Storrs, C. (2016). *Bisexuality on the rise, says new U.S. survey*. Retrieved on April 27, 2018 from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/health/bisexuality-on-the-rise/index.html>