

The Hyphen Goes Where?

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Four Stories of the Dual-Culture Experience in the Art Classroom

BY VANESSA LÓPEZ

I am Dominican-American. This may sound like a straightforward, simple statement but I spent much of my adolescence struggling with my cultural identity. I knew where I was born, where my family came from, and how and why we had arrived in the United States of America. Yet, somehow it felt much more complicated. Despite knowing my family's history, I did not know who I was. As an art educator, I see many first-generation American students struggle with similar multiple personal and cultural identities. Being born in the United States of America, they rightfully refer to themselves as "Americans" yet possess an awareness of and affinity for their parents' cultural origins. I frequently hear students negating their cultural heritage to "fit in" or expressing the need to choose between their dual cultural identities. They are, like I was, unable to comfortably define themselves.

I learned to bridge my cultural identities. I arrived at this understanding through much self-reflection and with little formal guidance. As a result, I constantly question how the choices I make as an art educator contribute to the ways in which my students construct their sense of identity and worth. How do dual-culture students identify themselves? Do they feel the need to belong to a certain group? Or do they resist the need to choose between groups? How can art education challenge hegemony? How can art education empower students to reconcile their multi-layered identities?

With these questions in mind, I conducted a descriptive case study that used artmaking to investigate the phenomenon of representation of personal and cultural identities. The study was conducted within the visual arts classroom of a large urban, public school in Baltimore, Maryland. At the middle school level, the school houses two city-wide programs for academically advanced children as well as an in-zone academic program that

draws from students who reside in the neighborhood, and a remedial program. Middle school class sizes average 27 students from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. There are approximately 750 middle school students. Seventy percent (70%) of students are African American, 24% are Caucasian, 5% are Asian, and 1% are Hispanic. Thirty-five percent (35%) of students come from "low-income" households.

Set within the middle school visual arts classroom, the study focused on three female, dual-culture 6th-grade students. *Dual-culture* is defined in this context as a person born in the United States of America whose parents were born elsewhere, i.e. first-generation children. I observed and interviewed the students, and analyzed their artwork¹ in order to describe how they defined, characterized, and represented aspects of their American culture and their own families' native culture. I hoped that through this investigation, I would better understand how

adolescents thought about and discussed culture and created identity, so as to implement lessons that would offer fuller opportunities for the exploration of identity. Furthermore, I hoped through the study to better understand my own process of acculturation and identity formation as a dual-culture individual and educator. **In this article, I highlight the stories of the three students and my own story, as we shift and adapt to different cultures.**

Identity and Culture

“Recent literature has exposed educators’ confusion about the various lenses through which we may consider the intersection of education and culture” (Davenport, 2000, p. 361). For first-generation students born in the USA to parents of non-American backgrounds, a certain level of assimilation is expected and crucial for survival. However, the need to maintain a sense of one’s cultural heritage is also vital. Unaware of the struggles their students are facing, educators often do not address how to adapt to a new culture. This involves understanding different systems of thought, beliefs, emotions, and communication. These students face the challenge of balancing multiple cultural identities with little or no guidance, often resulting “in unequal outcomes of schooling” (Davenport, 2000, p. 367).

Several scholars address the issues of acculturation and the construction of identity in general education (Clark, 1996; Fendler, 2006; Gjerde, 2004; Tadmor & Tetlock, 2006). While much has been written about multicultural education in the broad sense (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Bastos, 2006; Cahan & Kocur, 1996; Chalmers, 2002; Delacruz, 1995; Olson & Richard, 2006; Stuhr, 2003), there exists little research into the role art education plays in the process of acculturation. According to Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001), culture is often “the most misunderstood concept” and is thought to be “static” and “outside of an individual’s lived experience” (p. 7). Acknowledging that various aspects of a person’s cultural identity are in a constant, dynamic state of “transition” may provide a framework for developing curricula more in tune with dual-culture students’ characteristics and needs (p. 7).

The Process of Acculturation

“Demographics alone demand that a society changes as its cultural makeup changes” (Lippard 1990, p. 5). With exposure to multiple cultures becoming a reality of modern times and the assumptions that people have complex, spontaneously reconstructed identities, the process of acculturation is now more widely discussed. The work of Tadmor and Tetlock (2006), discussed below, examines multiple strategies for acculturation and the effects of acculturation choice on individual cognition and coping skills.

According to Bourhis, Moise, Perreault and Senecal (1997), four acculturation strategies exist: (a) assimilation, (b) separation, (c) marginalization, and (d) integration. *Assimilation* involves abandoning all past cultural heritage and adopting the beliefs and behaviors of the new culture. *Separation* involves maintaining only the cultural heritage without interacting with the cultural group. *Marginalization* involves deviation from both the old and new culture. *Integration* or *biculturalism* involves maintaining one’s cultural heritage and adopting a new cultural identity; identities remain independent of each other and are activated as needed (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez, 2000).

In Tadmor and Tetlock’s (2006) discussion of acculturation choices, individuals who choose biculturalism are described as possessing the highest level of cognition and coping skills, and hence maintain a healthier, more coherent, holistic mental representation of self. When identifying with more than one cultural group, bicultural individuals experience “higher levels of dissonance and in turn, complexity” (p. 185). In what follows, I tell the stories of Lunelle, Gift, and Najmah,² as well as my own story of acculturation and situate these narratives within the strategies discussed above. These narratives are derived from individual interviews and classroom observations.

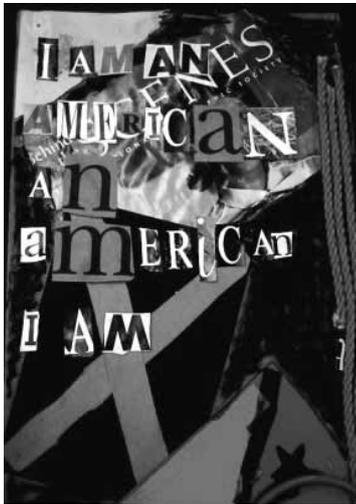
A Whole New World: Lunelle

Lunelle is 11 years old and appears to be extremely intelligent and shy. Lunelle walked into the art room alone. She sat, looked down at her paper, and immediately began her writing assignment. Her English is very proper, void of any slang, and she prides herself on working hard and finishing first. For a self-portrait project, I gave students a template to write poems about themselves. Lunelle jumped right in, choosing to write a poem without using the template. She wrote a two-page reflection paper on who she is, how she sees herself, and how she believes others see her. In moments like those, she is not shy. She chose to share her writing piece with the class, stood up, and looked everyone square in the eye.

Lunelle is first-generation Jamaican-American. She tells me that she’s “from America” and would call herself American, “but my mom would probably call me a JaMerican.” “A JaMerican?” I ask. “That’s what they call it,” she says. “It’s an American who has family from Jamaica but is still born in the US.”

Lunelle characterized America as a place of opportunity. Her mother, she says, “came here for a better education. She wanted to go to college and she wanted her children born here. America gave my mother a successful job, an education and what she wanted.” Lunelle’s definition of America emphasized the mixed heritage of America. She writes, “America and Americans are mixed and proud of their mixtures,” and in reference to herself, “I am an American—a mixture of people and proud of that mixture.” In contrast, Lunelle’s characterizations of Jamaica are superficial. She refers to Jamaica as a “cool” and “fun” place.

Lunelle’s visual representations of America follow her previous characterization of it as a place of mixed heritage. In her collage, flags from various countries fill the entire composition. They are layered one on another, her attempt to convey feelings of fusion. “The collage I did has flags from all the places I am from. I am trying to say and let people know who I am and how proud I am to be American. And everyone should be proud of where they came from no matter the skin color, culture, talking or how you



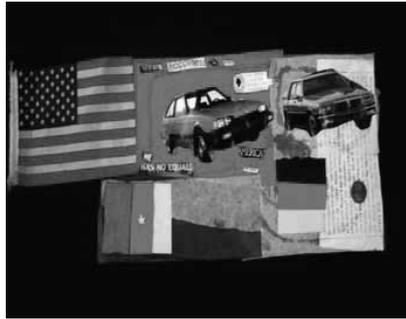
Lunelle's Culture Collage.

act. We are all American." Lunelle used text to create a dialogue. Text made from magazine letters were layered over an image of a young woman of color. The text reads, "I am an American/ An American I am." Jamaica is represented only by its flag.

Lunelle is at the *assimilated* strategy of acculturation. Her articulations of Jamaica speak very little of Jamaican culture. Her view of America is of a grand melting pot in which all differences are lost. Lunelle has distanced herself from her family's past cultural heritage and has instead chosen to be solely American. Lunelle's collage represents the 'null model' or the notion of cultural determinism (Gjerde, 2004, p. 139). In this model, mental representations are minimized to be reflective of and isomorphic with public representation (p. 139). Lunelle uses codified symbols such as flags to represent her various aspects.

When I Was Lunelle

As a child, I was "Lunelle." In kindergarten, although I did not speak a word of English, my mother put me in regular classes. With the help of Ms. Sanchez, I struggled but quickly learned the language. My mother encouraged this process. She said, "*Vete, aprende, para que no luches como yo*" (Go, learn, so you will not have to struggle like me). I was rewarded for my efforts, gained new *gringa* friends and began to speak Spanish only at home. However, unlike Lunelle, as I grew older I began to feel embarrassed by my Dominican-ness, by my mother and the *platanos y salchichon* lunches she packed. I wanted to be an American.



Gifty's Culture Collage.

Two Worlds, One Child: Gifty

Gifty is 11 years old, loquacious, and independent. In conversations, she informed me that she had begun to feel pressure from her family to succeed. She quoted her parents about the importance of education and apologized for being irritated and short tempered. At times she is engaged and inquisitive. Other times, she entirely shuts herself off from her peers and withdraws from conversations.

**Gifty is first-generation
Cameroonian-American. She wore
a set of Cameroonian beads
hidden beneath her shirt and
played with them as we spoke of
her experience traveling to visit
family in Cameroon, what being
American means, and what we call
ourselves. When I asked her where
she was from, she told me: "Well,
I was born [in] Baltimore but my
parents are from Cameroon." She
refers to herself as "A Cameroonian."
"Do you consider yourself
American?" I asked. "Sort of," she
said. "I was born in America, but
sort of not because my family is
from Cameroon."**

In interviews, Gifty characterized America and Americans as aggressive and materialistic. She views America's role in the world as an aggressor country and potentially unsafe:

America these days is really ... I mean, if I were coming from another country to come here I don't think I'd want to be

here at this time. Because right now, at any moment, someone can bomb us just because of a misunderstanding. We are in an unnecessary war, and America made it happen.

Gifty defines Americans as materialistic because they are overly saturated with "fashion and money." In an informal classroom discussion, she said: "Money makes people crazy. Have you seen people in this country during Christmas?"

In contrast, Gifty defines Cameroonians as different and spiritually grounded. In an interview, she said: "My family and relatives are unique, and we are different than an average American family because of our culture, traditions and a lot more." Her definitions of "different" and "unique" are largely based on traditions, food, and the celebration of holidays. In her descriptions of Cameroon, she uses existential terms. In an interview, she said: "It is a very beautiful place and I like going there and it teaches you a lot. I mean it's like one of those things, the physical strength and the mental strength... it's like one of those challenges so you can learn how to be a stronger person." Gifty speaks of Cameroon with a certain level of pride:

...you like have to think, like, really hard to do stuff. Like, you have to take care of different animals. Like a farm but it's not exactly a farm because it's a much drier place. They built but where I went they built like little brick houses but they didn't really have doors. So everyone was a neighbor and we all helped each other out.

Gifty's representations of American culture build on her previous characterizations. In her culture collage, the American flag is prominent and hangs off the left-hand side. She used the image of two American-made cars in the colors of the American flag. An American coin appears isolated on the lower right corner. Lastly, her use of phrases such as "America falls behind" and "Neither happiness nor wisdom" amplifies her views. In comparison, her representation of Cameroon is limited to one codified symbol: the Cameroonian flag. While both Gifty and Lunelle used flags, Gifty's flags do not touch. The American flag appears to dominate and overbear the Cameroonian flag. It is almost as if her two worlds must live separately and must never mix.

Gifty's strategy of acculturation can be considered *separation*. She maintains her Cameroonian cultural heritage through the celebration of holidays and traditions, but maintains no ties to a local Cameroonian community. Her Cameroonian self is activated only among her family. Gifty's American self is in conflict and is also isolated. She views Americans as aggressive and materialistic, so has trouble owning her American identity. Gifty's collage represents the 'choice model' in which public symbols, such as flags, are afforded substantial influence, but other available public representations are purposefully selected, added and mixed. Subconsciously Gifty selects from two available but separate sets of symbols.

When I Was Gifty

As an adolescent, I was "Gifty." I traveled daily to New York City's posh Upper West Side, to attend a specialized high school for gifted and talented youth. I struggled to fit in. I realized that growing up in a predominantly Dominican enclave made me different from my friends from in other parts of the city. In my neighborhood, people spoke Spanish, ate *platanos* and *frijoles*, and danced to music called *merengue*. But I was also different from the *Dominican-Yos*³ uptown. I read books like *Crime and Punishment* and enjoyed hiking. I was stuck between identities—neither fully Dominican, nor fully American. I had my uptown friends and my downtown friends. They never mixed. I never mixed.

Two Worlds in One: Najmah

Najmah is 11 years old. She is happy, yet quiet and withdrawn at times. She is liked by most of her peers and has genuine friendships with a selected few. One day she walked into class, wearing a hand-knit beige skirt, blue cap-sleeved t-shirt and clogs. When I asked her who made her beautiful skirt, she smiled and said, "My grandma and I knitted it together."

One afternoon in class, as I played an old cassette tape made for me by a close friend, her eyes lit up and she asked, "Is that from Iran?" I replied "Yes." Again, she smiled and said, "It sounds like the music my grandma listens to." From that day forward, Najmah wrote her name in Farsi on all of her papers.

Najmah is first-generation Iranian-American. On the day of our first interview, she came in with a calligraphy note card. Written in Farsi, it quoted Rumi, "If you are irritated by every rub, how will you be polished?" She told me she was from Iran and would call herself Iranian-American. She explained, "Well, I was born here, but since my parents are from Iran, I'm sort of Iranian-American."

Najmah characterizes America as a place of opportunity and safety. When Najmah speaks of the reasons her parents immigrated, she refers to the educational opportunities: "My family came to America

so that my mother could go to school." In informal discussions, she refers to America (in comparison to Iran) as a place with "better jobs and more money." To Najmah America is also a place of physical safety:

America is a lot more safe than other countries and one reason why that is, is because they do have security more than any other [country] and they don't have much war and stuff. So it's a characteristic that is different from any other country.

Even though Najmah views America as a place of opportunity and safety, she also voices a level of hostility when she speaks of Americans. "The people from the United States were mad at my parents, and people did not treat them nicely when they arrived because they were from Iran and they thought they were terrorists."

Although Najmah characterized Iran as a different and dangerous place, she was unable to articulate fully in what ways Iran was different. She identified differences in religion, but did not focus on any other specific differences. In an interview, she told me it was important to stay connect with her Iranian culture because "...the Iranian culture is not very ordinary in the United States and by learning more, I get to tell it to all my friends. Then they won't think it is so different." She also spoke about the "civil war all around there. So it's not very safe."

Najmah's representations of American culture reflect her previously articulated characterizations of America as a safe and free place. By appropriating icons and symbols such as the American flag and a lock, she represents "freedom" and "safety." Different references to the American flag appear multiple times throughout her collage. She uses the colors of the American flag in the upper left-hand corner, and then includes a flag within her scene of a rainbow, trees, and grass. The American flag appears again in the Polaroid affixed to her collage. Najmah represents the American flag differently than both Lunelle and Gifty. In her collage Najmah deconstructed the flag to colors fields that are integrated throughout the artwork. She also reconstructed the flag in the Polaroid. In addition Najmah used dark colors surrounding the lock to represent "the dark times" and hostility. Her transitions into brighter colors, with trees and rainbows, represent opportunity and times when

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Najmah's Culture Collage.

"America is semi-good." Najmah used text, put together from magazines, to reinforce her definitions of America. The word "safe" appears within the darkness and articulates her definitions of America both as a safe place and a dark, hostile place.

Najmah's representations of her Iranian culture depict Iran as "dangerous" and "different." She used the lock, set within the darkness, to represent the safety of America but also the danger of Iran. The icon, like her sense of self, is dualistic. Finally, she signed the collage in Farsi, emphasizing her differences through the use of a foreign language.

Najmah is at the *integration or bicultural* strategy of acculturation. She critically examines both her American and Iranian identities, and finds positives and negatives in both. She manages to maintain her Iranian culture as well as adopt aspects of American culture, and shifts between these identities as needed. In her collage, Najmah used the 'consciousness (individuality) model' which comes closest to representing the notion of personal agency. In this model, personal subjectivity cannot be reduced to public representation or other external factors; the self is viewed as creative, reflective, and introspective (Gjerde, 2004, p. 139). By utilizing the flag and the lock to represent multiple and, at times, opposing views points, Najmah is creating her own visual language.

I Am Najmah

I am now "Najmah." In the words of Gustavo Perez Firmat, "I don't belong to English though I belong nowhere else."⁴ When visiting the Dominican Republic if a man whistles at me, I turn around, roll my eyes, ask him why he feels entitled to harass me, and move on. He knows, then and there, that I am American. In New York, the apartment door is propped open, neighbors come in and out, unannounced. They ask for

butter and money, invite themselves to dinner, and change the radio station. We sit with a plate of *moro y pernil*. I am Dominican. I now look at my two cultures, and consciously choose which aspects of my cultures I believe in. I know when to shift. I am comfortable choosing, shifting, meshing, and colliding. I am Dominican-American.

Where Does the Hyphen Go?

The process of acculturation makes evident that there are multiple ways to articulate identity. The implications for art education are broad. We must now consider in what ways our curriculum will embrace the changes in our society and what position our curriculum will take on acculturation and differences.

Clark (1996) writes that "art education should be geared to increasing students' knowledge and awareness of their own cultural backgrounds as well as of the multiplicity of diverse traditions which together constitute our society and our world" (p. 54). In recent years our field has instituted countless initiatives addressing the cultural development of our students but few truly align themselves with cultural development or take a stand on which way we should direct our students. As Tomhave (1992) observed, "[t]o examine multicultural education within art education literature is to confront a bewildering variety of conceptions" (p. 48).

I believe biculturalism—the ability to maintain one's cultural heritage and adopt a new cultural identity—is a healthier, fuller, more holistic way of functioning. Biculturalism allows the whole self to be exposed. We are pushed to critically examine who we are rather than negate parts of ourselves. Biculturalism gives students agency and encourages students to teach others through their lived experiences. With our society becoming more and more global, biculturalism becomes a necessary first step toward critical multiculturalism.

Critical multicultural education which acknowledges and embraces the transcultural experience has begun the discussion of aligning art education, artistic development and cultural development. By consciously integrating the processes of acculturation into our ways of thinking and teaching about art and culture, we can reach all of our students. For my students and me, this process began with an examination of

ourselves as Americans through personal artifacts, and then moved to an examination of our other selves again through the use of artifacts. The use of real tangible personal items made our discussions richer and more meaningful. These artifacts were then used in our culture collages. Art educators must begin with an assessment of their own cultural backgrounds and models of adopting. Art educators should then examine the cultural makeup of their classes and facilitate lessons geared toward those specific cultures. Whereas in most lessons, the educator stands as the authority on the subject, here by choosing to examine the diverse cultures of our students, we are required to relinquish authority and allow our students to teach us through their lived experiences. Students then become ambassadors of their personal culture. Furthermore through integration with the other curriculums such as social studies and language arts, educators could offer all students deeper exposure, understanding and relevance.

Some of my current lessons require students to investigate and research their ancestry as well as other cultures they feel an affinity to. Other lessons help students scaffold identity through open-ended questions and the use of metaphor. I have pushed my instruction and gaze from a modernist perspective, focused on fixed answers, to a postmodernist critical perspective, open to multiple perspectives. The cases in my study and my own experience teach that identity is not an either-or proposition, and is always shifting. I am aware that the hyphen does not belong in just one place, that there can be, and are, multiple hyphens and sometimes no hyphens at all. As a result when I ask my students to create work based on who they are, I am more open to their various answers and able to better understand their stories. In this way I value all aspects of my students' identities, encouraging them to examine themselves and their cultures critically. These shifting narratives and representations guide us all in the process of coming to terms with our own multi-layered identities.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Observations consisted of field notes gathered over an extended period of time during classroom conversations and group critiques. Two separate interviews were developed by the researcher. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Students, individually or collaboratively, created collages incorporating personal artifacts that represented America and their own families' native culture. Artwork was analyzed using the Feldman method.

² All participants have granted the researcher permission to conduct and publish this study. All names are pseudonyms.

³ Term used by Dominicans on the island to describe the children of Dominicans born in New York City.

⁴ This line is excerpted from Gustavo Perez Firmat, in Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1997):

“The fact that I
am writing to you
in English already falsifies what I
wanted to tell you.
My subject:
how to explain to you that I
don't belong to you that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else.”