Fragmented Bodies

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Fragmented Bodies

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an MFA

Committee Chair: Brian Molanphy
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By:
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Dallas, TX
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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Through *Memory Webs* and fragmented ceramic vessels, I express what it feels like to grow up living in a biracial body. I utilize mixed media to emulate a mixed-race experience. My *Memory Webs* are fashioned by painting on scraps of canvas and attaching them with crocheted wire and ribbon to speak to how my memory has impacted my identity. My fragmented ceramic vessels are cut up and stitched back together to represent disjointedness and un-belonging. All of my work is contextualized through the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and what the Monster may represent for people of color. I also discuss contemporary artist influences and a variety of childhood memories. My art serves as a vehicle both for understanding my struggles with identity and as a way to heal from my painful experiences. I have created a visual vocabulary over the last two years of artmaking and experimentation that stems from monstrosity, quilting, kintsugi, personal narration, and defining identity versus identifiers. I address how I begin with a struggle with identity, use art-making to address the issue, and what I have concluded as a result.
The Monster

I was immediately struck with two realizations while reading the story of Victor Frankenstein and his Monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The first is that the story of the Monster is deeply tragic, he is created for scientific discovery through questionably ethical practices then immediately rejected by his creator.¹ The second is that I deeply relate to the Monster. The Monster just wants to be loved, to belong, and to be judged by his character rather than on appearance alone.

Filled with pathos and melancholy, the story of Frankenstein inspired my desire to understand the feelings of otherness and hybridity that I have experienced as a mixed-race woman. There is a large quantity of scholarship surrounding Monstrosity, demonstrating that the Monster is a robust tool for explaining the mixed-race experience.

To contextualize my art I focus on *Monster Theory* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and *The Dark Fantastic* by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. I resonated with *Monster Theory* because Cohen uses “seven theses” to explain how people of color often relate more to the monsters and antagonists in media rather than the typical white protagonist. Cohen’s “seven theses”, provided insight as to why I felt my experiences mirrored that of the Monster in a variety of ways.

1. The monster’s body is a cultural body
2. The monster always escapes
3. The monster is the harbinger of category crisis
4. The monster dwells at the gates of difference
5. The monster polices the borders of the possible
6. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire
7. The monster stands at the threshold of becoming²

The seven theses helped me form words around what I feel as I put paint to canvas and hands to clay, as I molded and created to heal the pains of the past.

**Pains of the Past**

It was hard to admit that I had an issue with my identity. To understand the recurring memories that led me to often feel out of place in what should be comfortable, familiar places, I turned to *The Dark Fantastic* by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas. *The Dark Fantastic* looks at the presence of Black girls in fictional stories to understand why their lack of representation and mistreatment needs to be reconsidered in media.\(^3\) The chapter *Hermione is Black* especially spoke to my experiences growing up as an avid reader and as a massive Harry Potter fan. When I first encountered the Harry Potter book series by J.K. Rowling in the fifth grade, I couldn’t help but imagine the character Hermione Grainger at the very least as a girl of mixed-race identity. If she was not mixed-race then deep down I thought, “she surely must be Black”.

Readers are introduced to Hermione with a very vague description of “She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.”\(^4\) The need to point out her “bushy brown hair” is what, at ten years old, declared to me that she must be mixed, because I also have bushy brown hair. I watched the 2001 film adaptation, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, immediately after finishing the first novel and discovered that they cast a white girl for the film. This made the character of Hermione someone whom I could no longer relate to and whose hair looked nothing like mine. I felt discouraged that the opportunity to represent a mixed-race or Black girl was once again neglected.

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However, it wasn’t just the lack of mixed-race representation in books and films that caused me to feel out of place. It was also the real-life interactions that I had as a young biracial girl in environments that I often inhabited as the only mixed-race person. I grew up going to schools in Ellis County, Texas where my classmates were primarily white, with a handful of Black children, and Mexican children (Figure 1). Children tend to speak what is on their minds and, whether they meant the offense or not, it largely impacted the way I viewed myself and my identity. My fellow classmates had never encountered a person of mixed race before and did not know how to read my ethnicity. In most cases, I was asked questions that stemmed from a place of naïve curiosity, like “what are you?”, “why do you look like that?”, and “are you more Black or white?” The abnormality of my appearance to them—my frizzy curly hair, freckles, and ambiguous skin tone—was frequently criticized. In extreme cases, classmates would grab and touch my hair without my consent, call me cruel names based on my appearance, and ignore, or reject me. This is reminiscent of how the characters in *Frankenstein* were immediately appalled by the presence and the appearance of the Monster because they could not understand what he was.\(^5\) These encounters were heightened by how the media had failed to represent biracial and mixed-race characters, further displacing me into the outskirts of my schools’ social groups—a position that felt similar to monstrosity.

Despite being picked on as a kid for being biracial, I have many positive memories from my childhood that shaped how I perceive myself to this day. I remember home being a safe place for me thanks to the intentionality of my parents. Because of my mom and dad, our home was where being mixed was normal, love was abundant, and I was taught to value character over outward appearances while being affirmed that my physicality is still beautiful.

**Fragmentation, Mending, and Quilts**

When I was younger, I would often spend the night over at my Nana’s house. She would let me sit in her sewing room or at her dining room table as she would work on jewelry and textiles. I watched as she took a tray of scattered beads and wire and made
something whole and beautiful out of them. I would listen to the repetitive punctures of the sewing machine as she would sew miscellaneous patches together until they became one cohesive quilt. Everything started in pieces and parts, but by the time she was done quilting, it would be one whole, coherent textile.

In my *Memory Webs*, I take scraps of unstretched, primed canvas and paint different images on each fragment (Figure 2). I then crochet and stitch the pieces of canvas together, occasionally alongside materials such as ceramic tiles or ribbon. For my ceramics, I create intricate pots and at the moment of completion, I cut them up and stitch them back together (Figure 3). This patchwork is also present in my experience as a biracial woman—how often it feels as though I am two races stitched into one person—largely impacts how I see myself as an artist. I choose to work in multiple media and to piece different components together for my work because my art is never just one medium as I am never just one race.

![Image of a textile artwork](image)

**Figure 2.** Lauren Careese Alexander, *Out of Sync*, Acrylic gouache on canvas, ribbon, and silver coated wire, 28 x 50” 2023
I have plenty of matriarchal influence on my love of quilts due to my dad’s mother, my Nana, and my mom’s mom, Grandma, who have been making quilts for a long time. Another matriarchal figure that I look up to for her mastery of textiles is contemporary artist Faith Ringgold. Ringgold uses quilting and painting to tell stories of activism and African American struggles, as well as to display scenes of Black joy, nostalgia, and what it is to be an African American woman from the 1960s onward. (Figure 4)⁶

Even though I am inspired by Faith Ringgold’s story-telling quilts, I knew that my work could not be labeled as quilting for a few reasons. Firstly, the stories that I tell within my work are ambiguous, they are told through only the fragments that I can remember rather than chronologically and clearly. Secondly, my paintings are not soft and warm, they are cold and harsh due to the roughness of the canvas and the wire. Lastly, they serve as a way for me to

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wrangle the moments floating around in my mind and hold them together in a concrete manner. I knew I wanted my own term for my paintings, similarly to Nick Cave creating the term “soundsuits” for his sculptures or even Faith Ringgold specifying that her quilts are “story-telling quilts” rather than just quilts or just paintings.

I landed on the term *Memory Webs*. Just as spiders weave together many threads to create one web, I am weaving together my memories with wire and paint to gain a clearer understanding of my past and myself.


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I wanted to approach ceramics similarly to how I was forming the Memory Webs and so I began to investigate the Japanese art of *kintsugi* also known as “golden joinery.” *Kintsugi* is a technique used to repair fragmented pottery that highlights the cracks with gold rather than attempting to restore the piece to its original, perfect form (Figure 5). Many artists have experimented with *kintsugi* in different ways, but an artist whose work is important to me is Glen Martin Taylor. Taylor took the idea of *kintsugi* and interpreted it in his own way. His pots are not joined together seamlessly with gold delicately sitting in the cracks, but they are put back together in a violent way with spikes, barbed wire, nails, hammers, and other harsh materials (Figure 6). Taylor’s work has always spoken to me more than the traditional method of *kintsugi* because his work appears monstrous and dissonant while remaining beautiful and whole—a feeling I want to emulate in my work.

![Figure 5. Tomomi Kamoshita, Kintsugi cups repaired for a workshop hosted by Kamoshita in 2023.](https://ifamstories.org/)

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Memory Webs and Fragmented Vessels

The very first Memory Web that I created was *A drop of coffee in a sea of creamer* (Figure 7). I was thinking about the “one-drop rule” that arose in the American South out of slavery and segregation. The “one-drop rule,” also known as the “one Black ancestor rule” or the “traceable amount rule,” declared that if someone only has one-sixteenth of Black in their blood, then they would be considered Black by judges, affirmative action officers, and members of the judicial court. When I took the standardized Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test as a child, they did not have an “other” or “mixed race” option, so I had to mark my answer to the “what race are you?” box as Black. I always felt weird about it because I am both Black and white, so why could I not say that?

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A memory I am fond of from childhood is when my Nonny, the mother of my Nana, would always let me join her and Nana’s coffee time in the morning. However, I was too young to have a proper cup of coffee so my Nonny would give me a little mug that was mostly creamer with a drop of coffee in it. Even though it was not fully coffee, it was my coffee. It was my way to have a seat at their table where they played Scrabble, read the newspaper, and chatted about what was going on in the world. I may not be fully Black or fully white, but I am thrilled to have a seat at both tables.

Figure 7. Lauren Careese Alexander, *A drop of coffee in a sea of creamer*, Acrylic gouache, canvas, linen, and rose-gold coated wire, 26 x 29”, 2023.

The “one-drop rule” has been useful for me in understanding the binary construction of race, but also as a tool to reflect on a personal, loving memory. I often approach my art like this, a negative thought and a positive reflection will bounce back and forth in the recesses of my mind until I have no choice but to put the thoughts to canvas or clay.
I have developed a visual vocabulary over the years which is composed of symbols and images that are always connected to a personal memory. This visual lexicon serves as a guide for when I struggle to remember something clearly but can remember the feelings associated with it.

I have cataloged my visual vocabulary into the categories of color and imagery:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Symbolism</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Passionate emotion</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Red Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Serenity, peace, breath</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Blue Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Life, energy</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Green Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink</td>
<td>Girlhood, femininity</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Pink Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Strength, power</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Black Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray</td>
<td>Figures in grayscale represent feelings of unbelonging or otherness</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Gray Example" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td>Symbolism</td>
<td>Example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated flower motif</td>
<td>Delicate, fragile, sensitive</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorns/Spikes</td>
<td>Resilience, nature’s defense mechanism</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair</td>
<td>The love/hate relationship I have had with my hair over the years</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The droplet</td>
<td>Blood, rain, and tears</td>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clouds</td>
<td>Comfort and connection</td>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricks and walls</td>
<td>Home and safety</td>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fences</td>
<td>Keeping something in and something out</td>
<td><img src="image7.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I utilize my visual vocabulary for all my work, but for ceramics, I am also influenced by the textures and colors of works by contemporary artists Paul S. Briggs, Wangechi Mutu, and the Zulu Beer Vessels from the twentieth century. The spikes in *A blessing and a curse* (Figure 8), as well as in the vessels found in *The wounds that shape us* (Figure 9) were formulated after seeing the textured surfaces found in Briggs’ *Double Cuttle* (Figure 10), Mutu’s *MamaRay* (Figure 11), and Zulu Beer Vessels from the Phongolo region (Figure 12). All three of these art pieces appear as though they provide a rich sensory experience and I wanted to be able to emulate that tactile response.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 8. Lauren Careese Alexander, *A blessing and a curse*, stoneware clay, mid-range glazes, and gold-coated wire, 7 x 7 x 9”, 2023.
Figure 9. Lauren Careese Alexander, Vessel from *The wounds that shape us* installation, Acrylic gouache, canvas, rose gold coated wire, rubber bands, elastic hair ties, nylon, ribbon, stoneware, mid-range glazes, and nichrome wire, Occupies a 12 x 8 x 10.5’ space, 2023.

Figure 10. Paul S. Briggs, *Double Cuttle*, Stoneware, glaze, 12”, 2011.13

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Figure 11. Wangechi Mutu, *MamaRay*, Bronze, 65” x 16’ x 12’, 2020.\textsuperscript{14}

Figure 12. Zulu Beer Vessel from the Phongolo Region, Pot Number 106, Ukhamba, 220 x 260mm.\textsuperscript{15}


Identity vs. Identifier

In my ceramics and paintings, I seek to instill the difference between identity and identifiers. In *Mixed: Embracing Complexity by Uncovering Your God-led Identity*, author Eli Bonilla Jr. defines “identity” as someone’s character, beliefs, and actions rather than outward appearances. He further defines “identifiers” as what we use to differentiate those around us based on their appearance. For example, I can be identified by my freckles, brown eyes, curly brown hair, and tan skin.

While flipping through photos of my childhood ballet class, I caught myself only looking at the outward appearance of those little girls and making note of what ethnicity they were, rather than who they were as people. This led to the creation of my Memory Web titled *Out of Sync* (Figure 13), as I realized I was doing the same thing that they did to me: asking what ethnicity I was, rather than asking questions that would indicate my character. Since then, I learned that the way people look on the outside is an *identifier*, not someone’s *identity*.

Figure 13. Lauren Careese Alexander, *Out of Sync* (detail), Acrylic gouache on canvas, ribbon, and silver coated wire, 28 x 50” 2023

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The wounds that shape us is the largest piece in the MFA qualifying exhibition to Feel, to Mend, to Be. It is about how my identifiers have caused a love/hate relationship with myself and my hair (Figures 14 & 15). My hair was a constant topic of scrutiny growing up because my white classmates had never seen hair as curly as mine. My curly hair is very much a part of my identity because of the years of pain and frustration it has taken to get it to a place that I am happy with. Before my own internal conflict and complex relationship with my hair, it was solely an identifier that others noticed.

Figure 14. Lauren Careese Alexander, The wounds that shape us installation, Acrylic gouache, canvas, crocheted copper wire, rubber bands, elastic hair ties, nylon, ribbon, stoneware, mid-range glazes, and nichrome wire, 2023.
Conversely, the work *Home is what you make of it*, is focused on my identity rather than my identifiers (Figure 16). I have always lived in neighborhoods where most families were people of color, I attended schools and workplaces that were mostly white. I learned that people have more things in common than they do differences and are often misinformed or misunderstood. In the middle of the picture plane are images of three homes in my life that I remember best that I painted on canvas, cut up, and collaged together: a house in DeSoto from my teenage years, a house in Lancaster from my childhood, and the Southside on Lamar building in Dallas from my young adult years. Surrounding the houses are clouds, a motif in my visual vocabulary to symbolize connection and comfort, as we all must live under the same sky (Figure 17).
Figure 16. Lauren Careese Alexander, *Home is what you make of it*, Acrylic gouache, canvas, and rose-gold coated wire, 25 x 26”, 2024.

Figure 17. Lauren Careese Alexander, *Home is what you make of it* (detail), Acrylic gouache, canvas, and rose-gold coated wire, 25 x 26”, 2024.
This back-and-forth between identity and identifier is visible in my ceramic work such as *Just Like Your Parents*, a piece that contains two full pots and a disjointed, put-together third pot (Figure 18). The pink pot represents my mother and the dark blue my father, while the disjointed pot is a self-portrait. I have always been told that I look just like my parents, which is an identifier, but I have also been told that I act just like both, which is my identity. The self-portrait pot is also a physical representation of my middle name, Careese, a name that is important to my identity because it is my parents’ names, Cara and Maurice, pieced together.

Figure 18. Lauren Careese Alexander, *Just Like Your Parents*, Stoneware clay, mid-range glazes, and wire, 2023.

As for *Consider the grackle who does not reap or sow*, this piece lies in between my identity and my identifiers (Figures 19 & 20). The bluebonnets and grackles speak to my identity as a Texan. I grew up taking photos in bluebonnet fields, a tradition for kids growing up in Texas because the state flower is seen as a precious thing. People are not allowed to pluck or mess with the flower in any way. As for the grackles, they are a pesky bird species that flock buildings in Texas cities around February to March. Grackles cause a lot of grief to apartment residents due to their loud and strange cries and the mess that they make on our cars and streets. As for the title, *Consider the grackle who does not reap or sow*, it is my take on the Bible verse Luke 12:24:
“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!”

The grackles and the bluebonnets are both valuable to God despite what I think of them, and I am valuable to God despite what others think of me. This piece is a reminder to me of that value and that my faith is a large part of my identity.

Figure 19. Lauren Careese Alexander, *Consider the grackle who does not reap or sow*, Acrylic gouache, canvas, mid-range clay and glazes, silver coated wire, and acrylic ink 50 x 37”, 2024.
Truly this is how all my art operates. I take fragments of memories, experiences, research, imagery, and emotion and piece them all together to comprehend what it is that I am feeling or thinking of. Art is the window that I view the world through, and art is how I make sense of it all in the end.

What Are You?

When I began making my Memory Webs and fragmented ceramic vessels, I thought I had an identity problem that needed to be fixed. However, looking at both series has reminded me that I don’t have an identity problem at all. My identity is in who I am in my character, what I believe in, where I am from, what my art is like, and how I function as a human being. All these things are evident in my art, whether it was consciously or subconsciously added. It is my Memory Webs and ceramic vessels that have given me the answer to “who” and “what are you?” that I was asked all those years ago.
Bibliography


