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On Their Own Terms: Painting as Self Expression for Black Muslim Youth

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As part of my dissertation research in 2019, I facilitated an afterschool Muslim Students' Association (MSA) club with a dozen low-income, Black Muslim youth in a West Philadelphia charter school.[1] My research question was: "How do Black Muslim youth experience their religious and racialized identities at school?" I used participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups to address my question. While not the original focus of my study, students' artistic self-expression emerged as an important topic for analysis.

As an ethnographer, I co-ran the club with a Muslim teacher at school, Ms. Ina (all names presented here are pseudonyms). We introduced painting as an enrichment activity and noticed that it became the students' favorite activity. Observing students painting revealed two main ideas: 1) how an afterschool space within a charter school can be an asset-affirming, free, and joyful space for Black youth, and 2) how artistic expressions are filtered through students' identities, including religious identities, which are often unacknowledged in school.

Scholars have noted how afterschool programs for low-income Black youth are often framed within a deficit lens; clubs are viewed as a way to keep "culturally deprived" youth off the street (Baldridge 2014; Halpern 2002; Kwon 2013). In contrast, Ms. Ina and I implemented the asset-based framework that Baldridge (2014) advocates by allowing students to bring their full selves to the club. Ms. Ina and I hoped that ultimately this creative space for Black youth could serve the pursuit of racial justice by encouraging students to view themselves as agents, capable of unique self-expression and social action, rather than as passive consumers. As anthropologist Aimee Cox (2015) notes in her study of Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter, creative performances allowed the women to be acknowledged on their own terms, rather than being viewed as individuals in need of intervention. Bell (2010) also notes how arts can tell "counterstories," while Garcia (2017) applies a "funds of knowledge" approach to arts education in working-class schools. Drawing from these frameworks, the MSA painting sessions allowed low-income Black Muslim youth to visually represent themselves on their own terms.

Artistic Creativity

During a painting session, the students described MSA as a space of freedom. When I asked the students to keep the paint area clean, 10th grader Mikael commented, "I don't know why afterschool curriculum teachers think like it's a hassle for us to do something. Cause you said, sorry sorry (to clean up). For us, it don't mean nothing. But when a teacher asks us to do it,

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you're in my grade, why are you asking me to do something, unless you're cool with that teacher." Mikael made the distinction between afterschool as a place of voluntary participation in contrast to grade teachers who commanded student obedience. Mikael was happy to clean up because he viewed MSA as a volitional space.

While Mikael emphasized the freedom he enjoyed in the afterschool program, other students viewed painting itself as a form of free expression:

> Uma: "What I like about art is you can be creative."
> Lana: "That's not how it be in art class."
> Keshawn: "My teacher say, 'if you don't get it right, I'll call your parent.'"
> Lana: "In my art classes, you cannot be creative."
> Uma: "She call your mom for that?"
> Lana: "Yea."

Uma, a 7th grader, expressed pleasure at having the freedom to be creative, for example, to paint her own canvas without strict specifications (how many colors to use, no defined topic, etc.) 10th grader Lana explicitly contrasts this afterschool freedom with her restrictive art class. She shares that her teacher believes art should be done "right;" if not, she would call Lana's parent. Uma's incredulous tone suggests that she does not believe Lana's claim that art teachers could police creativity in such a way. Lana, however, re-affirms her perception by distinguishing between the school classroom and afterschool as qualitatively different. Lana's sister, 7th grader Keshawn, agrees: "In my art classes, you cannot be creative." Lana and Keshawn both experienced in-school art classes as a place where their creative expressions were policed, in contrast to MSA.

Islamic Expressions

As the girls chatted, 10th grader Yahya, a Salafi-leaning Muslim, shared his views.

> Yahya: "There are a lot of things Muslim not supposed to…I can never draw nothing with my eyes open. My dad told me. You're creating something that's not alive. So Allah (SWT) is going to ask you when you die. You can't draw the face of the Prophet (peace be upon him)."
>
> Uma: "Right, so you don't draw the Prophet."

Uma agreed with an Islamic viewpoint in which the Prophet Muhammad's face (peace be upon him) could not be depicted because of the danger of idolatry (Taluğ and Eken 2015). The strict Salafi interpretation of Islam went a step further, banning the drawing of human faces and new art forms because such actions would lead to Allah's (SWT) [expression glorifying God] judgment after death (Esposito 2011). Yahya's views on artistic limits were shaped by his Salafi-leaning dad's influence on his religious life outside of school. Nonetheless, in school, Yahya painted his initials on a blue canvas. While Yahya did not draw human faces, he did not reject painting either, instead using art as a form of self-expression.

Uma and Keshawn also employed painting as a form of faithful self-expression. Uma painted stars in a night sky, over which she painted the Arabic word “Allah” in white. Keshawn, unable to write Arabic, asked Uma to paint “Allah” on her own canvas, which consisted of bright yellow and purple stripes. Both girls exhibited their Islamic identity through inscribing the name of Allah (SWT) on their canvasses.

Painting by Uma. Photo by Irteza Binte-Farid.

Painting by Keshawn. Photo by Irteza Binte-Farid.

Painting allowed Black Muslim youth to engage in creative forms of self-expression that they did not often experience in the classroom. It also allowed them to represent their religious identities in visual form. By modelling what creative self-expression looked like, Ms. Ina and I hoped that our students could craft future spaces for themselves in which they could freely express their racial and religious identities and perhaps someday become agents of social change.

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