

# Black Personhood: Activism, Arts & Africana Studies

**Johnston Center for Integrative Studies**  
**Advisor: Julie Townsend**

**Jewel Patterson**  
**Patterson**

*"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*

*The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."*

- W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk"<sup>1</sup>

Coming into college I was sure of what I wanted to do: be a psychologist for juvenile halls. My sophomore contract and emphasis showed that confidence. The title of my emphasis was Reawaken: the Psychology of Child Development using Music, Art Therapy and African Studies. In my sophomore contract, I included a personal story about why my emphasis was important to me, all the classes that fell perfectly within my emphasis title, including studying abroad in Ghana, West Africa, and even a graph to show how all the aspects of my emphasis related to each other. Child developmental psychology was the overarching umbrella and music, art therapy and African studies were just some of the methods I would use in my counseling sessions. On paper, I was prepared. Still, nothing could have prepared me for the vast amount of growing I would do right after this sophomore emphasis was approved.

During spring semester of my sophomore year, I applied to be an intern with the REACH club on campus. In the interview for the internship I expressed my belief that what the kids in the juvenile halls needed was role models and leaders in their communities. Professor Jen Tilton challenged this belief and asked me where I thought the leaders of their community were. I wasn't sure. I went on talking about how the juvenile hall kids need to learn to express their emotions in constructive ways and learn to avoid tempting situations by taking advantage of after school programs and their community centers. Professor Tilton then asked if I believed the people facilitating these after school workshops and working in the community centers were not leaders in the community. I still wasn't sure. After that interview, I realized that I actually wasn't sure about a lot of things. I had thoughts, theories and conspiracies about everything, but what did I actually know for certain?

I was chosen to intern with REACH along with two other students. In the units, I focused on getting to know the kids while maintaining a professional relationship. Outside of the units, in the lunch room, I focused on networking and creating relationships with the staff. I was right on track according to everything I'd prepared for.

In the beginning of August, the last month of the internship, 18-year-old Michael Brown was gunned down by a police officer. I was at home when I came across a picture of his lifeless body online. I had never understood the meaning of terror more than I had in that moment. I was compelled to watch the picture as if, at any moment, he might show signs of life. I was not afraid of the body itself, but the thought of whose body it could have been. I imagined that it was one of my brothers, my cousins, my boyfriend, my friends. I imagined he was kin to me. That picture of Michael Brown's lifeless body was symbolic... symbolic of a history of hate and injustice that is hardly recognized and in no way rectified. I was furious, sick to my stomach with the realization that people in America still don't value the life of Black people, people in America still feel like a Black person's life is extinguishable at any age. I didn't know how to talk about what made me so angry. I didn't know how to describe the pit in my stomach that I felt when I saw a police car. I didn't have the words. I started following Black activists who had the language to describe what I was feeling when conversation about whether or not Mike Brown deserved to be murdered swarmed the internet.

One afternoon in the staff lunch room, a new station played the surveillance video of a black man robbing a liquor store was leaked. By this time, the police officer's statement of defense was on every social media site and so were everyone's opinions about it. A

correctional officer loudly stated his position on the matter; Mike Brown deserved it, especially if he robbed the store. Michael Brown deserved to be killed and if this child did steal from a corner store he earned the right to be slain. At home, I wasn't afraid to say my opinion and describe why the mishandling of Mike Brown's case and subsequent media hurt me so much, but faced with an opposing opinion, a white man in a suit similar to Mike Brown's murderer's, I said nothing. I looked around the room for anyone who disagreed, but I said nothing. All summer I struggled with understanding what I knew to be certain. Not a conspiracy, not a myth, but factual. In that moment, I knew for certain, I could not stand idly while my family, my people, Black people, were murdered, especially when trained officers believe that, even before it is known if a Black person commits a crime, they deserved to be murdered. This was the beginning of my transformation.

My time in Ghana, West Africa, was life changing. Being in a space where I was not forced to think of the color of my skin, where the people surrounding me accepted me as equal, as human, was the best experience. My last month in Ghana I was to do an independent study of my choice. Before August I planned on interviewing elders in the communities we would visit and speak to them about the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, but since my transformation I wanted to do more than just talk. I wanted to fight.

My advisor for my project was a man called Rabbi Kohain, an African-American Jewish Rabbi who grew up in America and has made a life in Ghana. Even before I met him I knew he was integral for my growth period. And when I met him, he showed me why. Much like the social media activist accounts I followed in the summer, Rabbi Kohain gave me the passion to speak

and the language to do so effectively. He did not tiptoe around issues of race in America and did not pretend that neo-colonialism didn't exist in Ghana. Rabbi Kohain was real. He talked to me about Pan-Africanism, the principle that encourages solidarity amongst all people of African descent. He lectured me about the state of African Americans and how it related to the position of the African diaspora. He encouraged me to follow politics like I follow sports and fight for equality of Pan-Africans as if it was my job. He gave me a blueprint to run with.

I knew I wanted to fight, but didn't know where to start. In speaking with him I decided I wanted to my final project in Ghana to be about Pan-African activism. My project focused on interviews with well-known activists like Samia Nkrumah to local activists working in grassroots organizations. I learned how activists in Ghana thought about their issues, organized like-minded people and planned strategies. Ultimately, I studied how to become an effective activist before jumping into a cause with no direction. Surrounded by these people, I felt unstoppable. I vowed to hold these experiences close to me and to bring the mindset I learned as an activist in Ghana back to the United States of America.

When I came back to California, I promised myself I would be ready to put what I learned to practice. I started working right away, was a member of REACH again, was the co-president of our campus Black student organization (BSO), but began creating an extended chapter of Pan-African Youth Club, an organization on Ghanaian college campuses, and even connected with local BSOs to see what their beliefs and experiences were. Overall, I made sure to wake up every morning reminding myself of everything I learned in Ghana. After a while, it got more challenging for me to keep my Pan-African activist mentality. I wasn't surrounded by people

who understood the importance of Pan-Africanism or activism. My friends weren't talking about politics and how to make California a better space for us. So many black people had died by the hands of police officers during my semester abroad and those names, which were etched into my memory, were lost from everyone else's. And worse of all, I was back in Redlands, California where me and my brown skin tone stick out like a sore thumb. No one had the fire or desire to fight, to educate and challenge themselves. Ghana was slowly slipping away from me. I felt confused, lost and dejected.

I started out with four classes that spring semester: Race Theory, Race and Criminal Justice Policy, a returning from studying abroad course and Statistical Methods. I quickly dropped the returning from abroad course when I realized my experience was vastly different from everyone else's. I had never been out of the state, let alone the country, before, I didn't go with any students from my university, and I didn't have a hard time fitting in and had a great time embracing a different culture. The only thing that class did for me was point out the disadvantages I gained by stepping back on American soil. The returning abroad class forced me to understand that, in many cases, it was because I am Black and in America that I did not have all the experiences that my classmates had. That it was because my mother did not inherit years of accumulated wealth we could not have vacations out of country, the state or even the city. It forced me to realize that I never had it like that, and according to my Race Theory course, it was never meant for me to have.

My Race Theory class required me to focus on theories about race mostly from white male perspectives, which caused me to become hyper aware of what historical ideals white men on

campus and in the world may have when they look at me. It opened my eyes to the ways race was received to many of our forefathers and leaders of America. Furthermore, Race Theory taught me that these outdated beliefs are every so often re-worded and spoon-fed to the next generation. The feeling of unity and hope for change that I felt in Ghana was suddenly null and void. America's history is, in many ways, being recycled and so many people around me seemed content with that thought. There wasn't a sense of urgency to change or vision of a unbiased communal country. Race Theory and the returning student course coupled together after studying abroad compelled me to recognize my position in America. They pushed me to recognize that Ghana was far away and so should be all my thoughts of equality and righteousness.

Statistical Methods was an 8am course I had to take in order to follow the psychology path I was on. With the commotion happening around me, my daily epiphanies and determination to keep my Ghanaian mindset, I realized this course was excessively challenging for my first semester back. Struggling to find my place, I found solace in my Race & Social Protest course. In this class, I was able to talk about the prison industrial complex, race, and my passion for the two. We even got to study the politics around prisons. I did hands-on work such as interviewing people, working with non-profits and lobbying with them and more. This class challenged me to focus on every aspect of an issue before going to contest it. It urged me to stop moping about the disadvantages I had and do something about the hindrances of many other community members.



During this time of yet another transformation I gave attention to thoughts of changing my emphasis. I went to see a professor in psychology who was honest to tell me that, in order to become a counselor for juvenile halls I did not need to be on the psychology track. He told me that my Statistical Methods course, although helpful, was not needed and I should focus more on race and ethnic and sociology tracks. This opened up so many more opportunities for me.

That whole spring semester I heard the words of Rabbi Kohain ringing in my ear. In all this talk about unity and oneness he also reminded me of one factor: in Africa, even though I may look it, I am not African and in America, even though it may seem like it, I am not fully American. I felt so comfortable in Ghana, yet my American mannerisms and style set me apart from others, just as, in America, my characteristics and dark skin make me displaced. There is no given space for African Americans. I struggled with the thought of this and wondered how others dealt with the feeling of displacement. I decided that for the remainder of my time at the University of Redlands I would focus on Black people and their experiences in America. I would focus on how Black people cope with and celebrate their double existence in America. Toward the end of the end of that semester I started work to begin re-founding a multi-cultural sorority, Alpha Chi Delta.

The first semester of my senior year was eventful. The Alpha Chi Delta had gained numbers and interests, over the summer Professor Jen Tilton, myself and several other students created the Inland Empire Fair Chance Coalition, my connections with local non-profits had strengthened and my head was balanced and ready for the year. I started to put my promise to focus on the Black experience on campus to start.

The thoughts on the multicultural sorority split the campus in half, one side that supported a new space that empowered women of color and the other side that felt all involved were reverse racists. After incidents of cultural appropriation on campus, myself and several other students formed a group informally known as Project Real to hold the administration accountable to these issues and more. On November 18<sup>th</sup> the president held an all school forum to discuss matters of race and inequality that students of color expressed. During this meeting "Project Real" stood up and presented the president with a list of demands, explaining that this forum has to be a beginning of a change, rather than the conclusion. Throughout this semester the resistance to the demands of the student activists only solidified my belief that race relations in America have only seldom changed, but I made an obligation to myself and I stuck with it. I spoke with many students of color about their experiences with race on campus. If not through my participation with the clubs I was involved in, then through class. For my African American Literature final I made a documentary highlighting the experience of the 3% Black student population on the University of Redlands campus. Fall semester served as a time frame to conduct research into how Black students felt they were being portrayed in America and how that portrayal played into how these students were dealt with on school grounds.

The emphasis title "Black Personhood: Activism, Arts and Africana Studies" comes from what I've learned studying not only my own, but other different, individual experiences as a Black person in America. It took more time than I planned and even difficult inner battles to come up with something I felt was all encompassing of my Redlands experience, but I believe this is it. I've moved away from the idea that I need a PhD in psychology to counsel juvenile hall children and be the leader for their communities. I, now, see myself as a licensed counselor for

all “juvenile delinquents”, in two parent homes, group homes or juvenile halls. In all the areas I travel to counsel my clients, I plan to look for the Black activist groups and communities to continue networking and planning for the common goal.

I wanted to make sure I showed what my study of Black Personhood included by adding Activism, Arts and Africana Studies. How do black people react to injustice? After segregation, how do people identify Black spaces today? How do Black people tell their history or theories of a lost past? How does that history mirror the present? These are just some of the overarching questions I’ve found myself answering with this emphasis.

I am currently taking my last four classes. Race in the City, where I’m researching how historically black spaces in San Bernardino County dispersed and how they are recognized today. Interning with Inland Empire Fair Chance Coalition, where I’m supervising the social media outlets and assisting our partner Riverside All of Us or None with projects. I’m also taking a preparation course for the Race on Campus conference in May Term and currently working on my Black Womyn’s panel at the WGST Conference as a part of my senior project.

I was worried, from the amount of time it was taking, that I wouldn’t find an emphasis that could grasp the sum of my learning experience at the University of Redlands. I may not have every part of every black experience memorized or understood, but I can say that I understand how it is that black people have historically and presently coped in the face of violent, silent and institutionalized racism. Overall, we survived and continue to fight for a space for ourselves, a space to thrive in our own lives and be unapologetic about who we are. W.E.B Du Bois said it best when he wrote that a “Black/African American” “...*simply wishes to*

*make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."*<sup>11</sup>