

A Graduation Narrative in:
Exploring Culture in Visual Media and
Graphic Design

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Penny McElroy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "P" and "M".

Johnston Center for Integrative Studies

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*"If I told you that a flower bloomed in a dark room, would you trust it?" —
Kendrick Lamar*

To come from a place in the world stifled by poverty and violence, exploited and underappreciated for its culture, and appropriated for all the wrong reasons, yet still be a person of virtue, honesty, intelligence and love is damn near impossible. But I am here today to tell you that anything is possible. I am from Chicago, Illinois born to two Jamaican parents, and I am lucky to say that I went to one of the top ranked schools in the nation for both academics and diversity. But it was not a simple task to get to where I am today. I worked for every accolade I earned, from staying up late at night under the lamp at the kitchen table, to waking up before sunrise on the weekends to feed the homeless. I did this and more, knowing that I had something to prove, and a whole lot to represent.

*"Learning is the only thing the mind never exhausts, never fears, and never regrets."
— Leonardo da Vinci*

From a young age, I spent my free time reading a lot of books and learning from observation. I wasn't much of a troublemaker, or a slacker. I was known as the smart kid in class, and I couldn't have been anything less if it weren't for the care and concern of my strict parents. From them, I learned to take care in myself as well as empathize for others. This is the

same teaching that I carried with me throughout my life to make me the person that I am now. Johnston has brought me into a world of overwhelmingly caring people, and opened my eyes academically to the world of learning both inside and outside of the classroom simultaneously through living and adapting. My first year was defined by a desire to be involved in as much as I could socially and academically through my experiences in Johnston as well as the classroom. I made it a point not to miss classes, mainly because of how often my parents reminded me of the cost of each day missed in relation to my financial loans. My upbringing as a member of the Chicago youth leadership organization called Kappa League also taught me that my existence as a black man at a university must not go wasted. This gave me motivation to not only show up to class, but complete all assignments and projects as given, even though I contracted all but four courses I took at the University. I was informed that Johnston students were lazy, and used the program to get out of final exams or excuse themselves from homework altogether. I also knew of the stereotypes embedded in the minds of all those who follow traditional Western societal views, in terms of African Americans. Of course, I felt a lot of pressure to perform to the best of my ability in all areas, which I quickly learned was virtually impossible especially with my tendency to perfect all the little things. I intended to

pursue science as my major, but I changed as soon as I discovered that my passion for art was undying and rapidly increasing as I spoke with upperclassmen in the program. I realized that with the opportunity to craft my own emphasis, I could integrate multiple concentrations of art and design to hone to my interests, and this is what inspired me to declare art as my major during the second semester of my freshman year. This same year I was offered to Ann Peppers as the work assistant. Through this experience, I developed a relationship with most of the faculty and became more acquainted with students with similar interests outside of the classroom.

Johnston allowed me to build an integrative educational experience, gave me a better understanding of my place in the contemporary world, and allowed me to express sides of myself that I otherwise normally wouldn't be permitted. I came into Johnston hoping to create my own major and earn a degree, but I had found so much more. I had the support of a loving community. I had the desire to give back to the community by using the opportunities to participate in academically planned events. I helped direct and curate events like Salon and talks on race along with social parties on complex. From planning things like Open Mic nights, music exhibits, and porch parties to more academic events, I always found unconditional help and support from members of the community.

It was incredibly satisfying to play music at parties and live performance events. Being a community DJ allowed me to express a side of my creative process that I usually share with select few friends. I was able to provide an environment for others to enjoy themselves while also enjoying the ability to share my art. Music has been a key part of finding my way in the Johnston program. I have become known as someone with exceptional music taste thanks to my knowledge of making beats, playing at parties, and my overall love for discovering new artists. I spent much of my free time listening to new music and producing and mixing my own computer-based electronic sounds. I used this as a way to share time with others and exchange personal experiences. In May of 2014, I spend the term learning to create and produce my first completed music project under an alias I had created on Soundcloud. These very beats had found their way to be used by some of my peers and students of the University for short films and video projects.

Living in Holt was a safe, comfortable environment to start my Johnston experience. However, I quickly discovered that Bekins basement was a better fit considering my social practices and living preferences. The basement was a den for loud music and late-night screenings with the people I lived with on that floor. It was here I spent most of my time during my

second year. I could easily travel from room to room at any point of the day to hang out with neighbors and learn about their time at school as well as past experiences. I found that sharing my ideas with others was easier than expected when I indulged in the culture of living and learning. It was severely gratifying seeing how education doesn't stop in the classroom, and that nearly every moment could be taken as a chance to educate myself and others.

I came to the University understanding that not many would be able to relate to the extent of diversity that I came from. I found many situations to be socially tortuous due to the inability to explain my perspective from the position of a black man in a high class, private predominantly white institution. I was underestimated and publicly mocked on several occasions due to other's insincerity, high level of ignorance, and lack of knowledge. I have realized from my past experiences living in the Johnson community that there are a lot of people who have not experienced a culture outside of their own. To me, this has boosted my motivation to clearly and effectively communicate my views. It has also helped me to understand others from a different perspective than what I'm used to. Johnston has allowed me to build my ability to exit my comfort zone and enter a community of people who all want to learn differently. Apart from participating in community

meetings, I have presented myself in active involvement at Johnston events and I have reached out to join the Johnston Mentone Special design committee. Many of my designs outside of class were dedicated to public relations in the group African American Association/BLACC. I took the time the majority of my senior year to partake in school wide events to raise racial awareness and bring social equality into reality, from forums on race to talks about improving school-wide diversity and even off campus events to help underprivileged youth both at school and back home in Chicago. I not only raised public awareness of these events through my poster and flyer advertisement designs, but I participated in full capacity.

My academic pursuits ranged from theory in visual media analysis, cultural studies, graphic creation, marketing analysis, computer science and programming for web design. The breadth of my education came from the area of visual media, cultural theory and marketing studies, and I found depth in the arts and graphic design. Towards the beginning of my fourth year, I began foundational education in computer skills for web programming. I concentrated my efforts in education to build a foundation in computer programming just so that I could have a more solid ground to build from as I continue my studies and learn to program for mobile apps and web design after school. Having the skills to not only design how a website looks

but also build how it navigates and functions in a live setting became of high importance to me. My education in cultural studies and theories of popular culture crossed with my learning in psychology and human behavior, which offered insight into social patterns and structures of media engagement. My courses in visual media studies and theories of media and visual culture, society and technology gave me agency to critically analyze stereotypes and representations in popular culture, our means of sensory perception, and its effects.

We exist in a world of images. Since the day cavemen realized leaving marks on the walls made them feel some type of way, the world has rapidly developed in creating pleasant and emotionally evocative forms of media for the human eye. It cannot be argued that without the sense to perceive and the ability to understand the message behind an image, pictures would be as meaningless as a word with no definition. I have always been an artistic person, and I realized quickly that this is where my talents and passions lay. Ever since my father taught me the easygoing ways and loving messages of his favorite artist, Bob Marley, I have been an advocate of optimism. It's honestly such an easy and self-rewarding lifestyle. I have noticed my share of negative images that are promoted through the media, such as for cigarette products, and I want to be a part of the team that helps

combat these negative promotions. I once researched the detrimental effects of media and technological developments on modern society. I found that through working with sketching, painting, and graphic design, along with reading articles on cultural and societal values through visual media my true interests are in the fields of iconic design and media analysis.

I chose to decline the chance to study abroad I wanted to have my skills in design software solid and I felt I could do this by spending as much time in the learning environment as possible. This is not to say that I was opposed to studying abroad, but since I have already had experience living in other countries and exchanging cultural values, my time would be best spent learning academically and in Johnston. I spent several weekends during the last three semesters on an Indian reservation in Bishop, California. During this time, I was involved in exchanging cultural history, learning about Native groups, went to a parade and I even participated in my first Pow Wow ever. I found myself thinking a lot about the significance of the Pow Wow event. I felt welcomed, but also like a tourist. I was merely a spectator to the traditions of the people, taking awe in the historical dance ceremonies, food and regalia being worn. I drew many similarities to a modern day rave or music festival, and although I was reassured that this specific Pow Wow was small enough to resist monopolistic exploits, I

worried that the larger annual events had become commercialized and undervalued. I wondered if the monetary gains earned from the event would be used for personal use rather than giving back to the community. I felt a great sense of community at these events. I saw a range of participants from all races and young ages to older folk. The people were very accepting and treated everyone with the same amount of respect and interest, which I felt fully comfortable with coming from a similar community such as Johnston.

Through the development of relationships with those on this campus and elsewhere during my time in college, I have fulfilled the requirements for an interdisciplinary education that has provided me with the skills and knowledge to grow as an artist as well as an intellect and advocate of social consciousness. The opportunity to utilize an alternative method of education, and determine an individualized major of my own is an opportunity that I could not have imagined having at my early age in grade school. My education in the Johnston program has given me the ability to be more resourceful as a student, confident as a free thinker, and adventurous as an interdisciplinary academic. I am grateful to have been able to live in an open community that respects each other's values as much as their own. Without the immensely inspiring community of Johnston, I could not have become the person I am today. If my work could possibly enlighten or impact the

world in a way that could incredibly change the world, I will be able to take pride in the power of positive media.