

Transformative Learning through Bookmaking in a Black Women's Art Collective

“...books were a rich and varied visual testament to our cumulative learning and the strength of our collaboration.”

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ABSTRACT

This visual essay by Adjoa Jackson Burrowes uses the sociocultural dimension of transformative learning theory to examine bookmaking in a Black women's art collective as they worked on an artists' book initiative called project 2020 that amplified the historically muted voices of Black women artists during the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Transformative learning, bookmaking, artists books, black women, art collective Project 2020, pandemic, race

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The artists’ book initiative, *Project 2020*, was conceived in response to the challenges of maintaining a consistent art practice during one of the biggest existential threats to humanity in recent history. The COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-political trauma that resulted, including social isolation, prompted nine mature Black women artists to join in a creative union to amplify our historically muted voices through bookmaking. The work of creating these artifacts continued in spite of many challenges but ultimately acted as a source of inspiration for many of the participating artists. The visual narratives, created over a nine-month period, serve as an example of transformative learning practice as each member was required to adapt their art making to the ever-shifting conditions.

Project 2020: An Artistic Response

The idea for this collaborative artists’ book project came into being as a result of a conversation I had with two artist friends, all members of another artist collective, WOAWA (women of an undetermined age). We each decided to invite two artist friends to create a book structure no larger than 12” x 12” when folded, in conversation with the socio-political events taking place. A total of nine artists met virtually and at a safe social distance in July, 2020, to share the thematic focus of their books. By August, 2020, each artist completed the structure, theme, and their artistic entry for the book and mailed it to the first artist on the rotation. Every 30 days the books traveled, first by mail, then during in-person book swaps to the next artist in the rotation. In March, 2021, after nine months of gestation, the completed books were returned to their mother-creators for finishing touches.



Figure 1. Second Artists’ Book Swap in October, 2020, with Artists Gail Shaw-Clemons, Pamela Harris Lawton, Author, and Francine Haskins

The theoretical framework for this visual essay is the sociocultural dimension of transformative learning theory. “Transformative learning is about change in the way we see ourselves and the world we live in. The mental construction of experience, inner meaning, and reflection are common components” (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 130) of transformative learning. Initially developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978, the theory has undergone many transformations and expansions. Taylor (2005) developed seven lenses based upon approaches posited by adult education scholars. He breaks them down into “two groups, based on their ‘locus of learning’” (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 131); those concerning the individual and those focused on sociocultural learning.

The sociocultural model of transformative learning derived from Freire’s (1970) social emancipatory theory “in which transformation is an unveiling of the social transformation of the oppressed through an awakening of their critical consciousness that leads to empowerment” (Lawton, et al., 2019, p. 29). One of the approaches within the sociocultural model is the race-centric view which speaks to the “experiences of individuals of African descent within the sociocultural, political, and historical” (Sheared, 1994, p. 6) context they live in. In this approach transformative learning is seen as a daily, conscious strategy.

The race-centric approach to transformative learning is particularly poignant for the artists in *Project 2020* because it speaks to the ways in which the intersection of racism and sexism (and we add ageism as another intersection) transform the ways in which Black women think, exist, and view the world. “To foster transformative learning, this perspective promotes inclusion of voices traditionally silenced and sense of belonging as a member of the group” (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006 as cited in Merriam & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 143). As with Critical Race Theory, story or counter narratives are the mechanism through which transformation occurs.

Project 2020 embodies a transformative learning framework as art practice in three important ways. First, as artists, the conditions in which we created the work required constant adaptation, transforming us as practitioners along the way. Delayed and lost mail packages, restrictions on in person gatherings, and fatigue were some barriers we had to overcome. Because the collective was made up of women at a very specific intersection, we aimed to create social support for our members, so it also fulfills the social emancipatory aspect of transformative learning—ultimately awakened our consciousness as artists through highlighting the ways in which our shared identity impacts our lives as artists, and people in a broader sense.



Figure 2. New York Artists, Gloria Patton & Michele Godwin.

Second, the artifacts themselves are examples of transformative learning in that they follow an exquisite corpse art model defined by the continual transformation of a work by the participating artists in response to each book’s theme and the artistic visions of previous artists in the rotation. Each book began with the individual's choice of form, narrative, media, and theme. With each monthly rotation, each artist was free to add their contribution within the original artists’ book format. The resulting books were a rich and varied visual testament to our cumulative learning and the strength of our collaboration. Artist’s books have a “mongrel nature” (Phillpot, 1998 as cited in Burkhart, 2006, p. 249) meaning they defy specific definition, existing at the junction of art, documentation, and literature” (Phillpot, 1998 as cited in Burkhart, 2006, p. 249) much like the members of our collective live at the intersection of race, gender, and age.



Figure 3. Artists Francine Haskins and Pamela Harris Lawton during “Magical” Meet-up at Artist-Mentor Lilian Burwell’s Home/Studio, August, 2020.

The four key aspects of transformative learning, “life experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action” (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 134) are embodied in our process. Through making art together and engaging in conversations about our perspectives and approaches, artists engaged in this kind of practice learn from one another in ways that are both transformative and empowering.

Third, through our public blog (<https://bookproject2020.blogspot.com>) and the work itself, we demonstrated transformative learning in the relationship between ourselves as artists, our work, and the audience, ultimately seeking to awaken consciousness, or conscientization (Freire, 1970) within our audience on the various socio-political themes that we all tackled. In addition, the benefits of this particular art practice were highlighted through the blog posts where artists shared work in progress, finalized art technical discoveries, and research about their topics.

Themes, Research, and Process

Monthly socially-distanced book exchanges, allowed us to interact in person. This ritual was especially poignant for those isolating alone at home during Covid-19. Regrettably, as the pandemic worsened, in-person meetups were changed to book drop offs outside of our homes. Frequent video meetings, however, created continuity.



Figure 4. November 2020 Book Swap at Artist Aziza Gibson-Hunter’s Home.

Washington, D.C. was the base for most of the artists in our group, while others lived in Virginia, Maryland, and New York. All are art educators—some retired after decades of service, while several members actively navigated the sudden switch to digital learning in schools, universities, and communities, as a result of the pandemic. As bookmakers, painters, printmakers, dollmakers, and mixed media artists, we embraced the artist’s book as a powerful medium to tell our own stories as Black women artists living through the multiple crises and traumas of 2020. This urgent social reality showed up in the themes we chose.



Figure 5. Artist Gail Shaw-Clemons Printing the text for her book, *The Crocodile*, at Pyramid Atlantic Art Center, Hyattsville, MD.

Prompted by the killing of one of her students by police in New York, one artist created a visual critique of police brutality. Dandelions or thistles were frequent metaphors for women’s resilience in other books, while the *We, The Coffee* book highlighted the strength of Black women in times of crisis—like coffee, the hotter the water (or situation) the stronger the coffee.



Figure 6. Artist Julee Dickerson-Thompson discussing her *We, The Coffee* box book at Artist-Mentor Lilian Burwell’s home, August 2020.

Other topics included masks as symbols of survival, pain, and resilience, inspired by Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem, *We Wear the Mask*. I turned to a Ralph Ellison essay referencing names to launch my book. Another artist used a small book *Retablos of Resistance* "inspired by Mexican retablos [gilded and carved folding screens typically found in churches/homes most are small, book-sized altars] and ex-votos [small paintings on tin]" (Artist #9, unpublished document). Another's concept of "progression" sparked questions for her about how things come to change in the world and in society, while another member explored X as an unknown factor in math, along with its uncertainty and doubt, as a prompt for hers. Finally, one member urged us to bear witness to what we "witnessed" in 2020, and decided to use the recurring silhouette of a young girl as a symbol of innocence.



Figure 7. *Retablos of Resistance* artist pages.

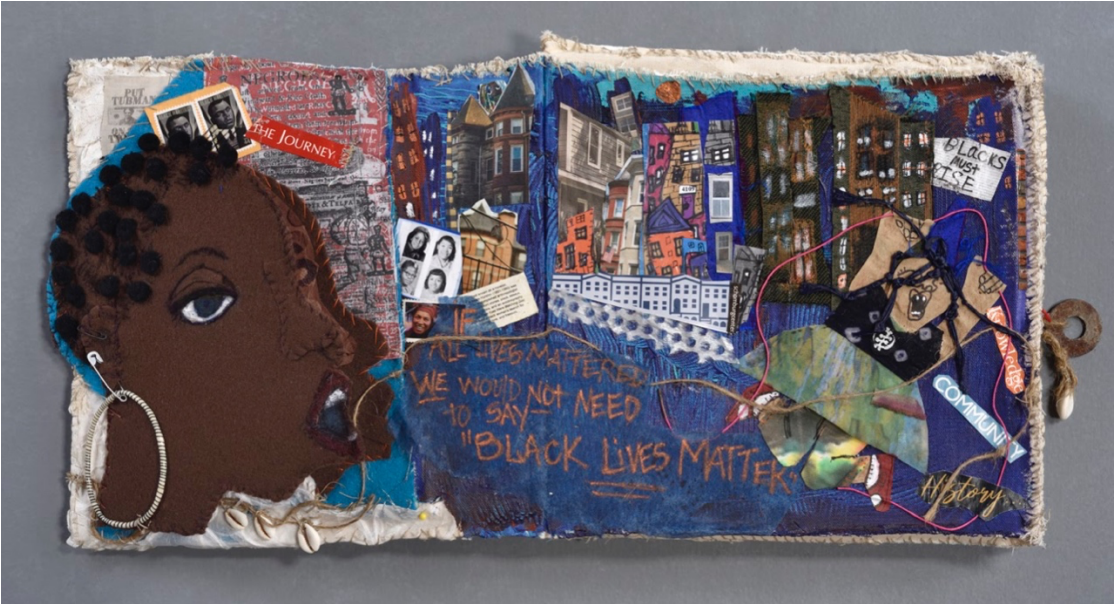


Figure 8. Witness in the Midst of it All artist pages.



Figure 9. We, The Coffee artist pages.

Though each artist took different paths to conceive their artists’ book, informed by their own unique histories of making, each was united in their determination to make meaning from the multiple crises that erupted that year. The visual narratives embodied in the nine unique artists’ books document the traumatic social, cultural, and political

landscape in a restorative act to transform our pain. The transformative learning that took place built our resilience, cemented our relationship as a community of artists, and empowered us to amplify our voices.



Figure 10. Artist Kamala Subramanian's entry in Artist Francine Haskin's book, *Witness in the Midst of it All*



Figure 11. Artist Michele Godwin's entry in Artist Francine Haskin's book, *Witness in the Midst of it All*.



Figure 12. Artist Aziza Gibson-Hunter’s entry in Artist Kamala Subramanian’s book, X.



Figure 13. Author's entry in Artist Kamala Subramanian's book, X.



Figure 14. Artist Francine Haskin's book, *Witness in the Midst of it All*, with entries from three artists.

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