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April 4, 2011

Sensation and Belonging in the New Urban Environment

When we first begin fighting for our dream, we have no experience and make many mistakes. The secret of life, though, is to fall seven times and to get up eight times.

So, why is it so important to live our personal calling if we are only going to suffer more than other people?

Because, once we have overcome the defeats—and we always do—we are filled by a greater sense of euphoria and confidence. In the silence of our hearts, we know that we are proving ourselves worthy of the miracle of life.

--Paulo Coelho, (2002, ix)

Creativity is a gift, it speaks to me and I am open enough to listen, but I struggle to live my creative self. From Paulo Coelho's epigraph (2003), the calling to be creative finds us when we least expect it; we have no choice or resistance. We must do everything in our will to achieve it. If we are fortunate enough to nurture this gift, we make every effort to overcome obstacles to achieve the rightness in our hearts. My gift was nurtured and encouraged when I went to art school. The laboratory of creative energy opened its doors, and allowed my gift to be realized. The Ontario College of Art & Design became, as bell hooks (2009) claims, "a culture of belonging" (p. 7) for me. Upon reflection, OCAD provided me with a community and a place to call home, in the urban environment of Toronto.

The physical building of Ontario College of Art & Design signified an institution of endless imagination and welcomed continual experimentation from its students. I

entered as a doubtful stranger, alone and uncertain of how I would grow. Similarly to hooks with her dreams of education and the urban,

I could not understand how the earth could be my witness in this strange land if it could not be a mirror into which I could see reflected the world of my ancestors, the landscape of my dreams. How could this new land hold me upright, provide me the certainty that the ground of my being was sound? (p. 12).

I had doubts about following my creative dream and questioned, how, as a visible minority, this group of people could become my community and this institution my place of belonging. How was my destiny going to be constructed in this new space? With these questions as a sub-text, OCAD, surprisingly, is where I found others that shared my creativity, passion, desire and aspirations in fulfillment of our talents. As I settled in to this new culture of post-secondary education, music was a method to narrate my cultural belonging. It provided me a confidence to further situate my new urban self in an environment that welcomed my gift.

The urban self I entered OCAD with was a self, constructed of different sensations. More than a geographic location, the urban is made up of my contribution. As Dlamini (Lecture, Jan 24/11) states, “geography is given, community is built”, and Gendelman, Dobrowolsky & Aiello (2010) claim, that time and place are used to tell stories (p. 184) and for me, it is where I add the layer of sonic energy that is also used to narrate urban space. The sounds, sensations and associations in the city contribute to the history, excitement and chaos of being in the urban. The rattling reverberation of streetcars clunking by on the old tracks; the audacity of car horns; the aural familiarity of the subway chimes; and to the music I have on my iPod as I stroll down Queen Street,

contribute to defining the urban environment. When layered with the aesthetics, these sensations contribute to the DNA of my urban self.

From the roots of reggae that wafted throughout my childhood home, to my love of the hip-hop beat, to my fascination with the ferocity of jazz and many genres in between, music has been there for me. It became an integral part of my life. While I attended art school, tunes were a fundamental part of working in the studio environment, it was a way to share who you were with others, it offered a narrative of self and a proclamation of being. I could express my cultural roots with nothing more than hitting the play button. As a mixed race/black child from the suburbs, I came to OCAD with unknown expectations; I questioned how I would find my artistic voice and my place of security in this new urban sphere.

In my move away from suburban, another layer that the urban offered me was the newness of transportation. I shifted from strictly car travel over to bike, streetcar, subway and foot. The landscape offered things that were not previously a part of my lifestyle in the suburbs. Not only was I offered different modes of transportation, the urban also offered up a first hand participation in an act of visual expression I had read about at length. This act that was one quarter of hip-hip culture, a form of expression whose hours mimic an owl and whose visual identity was less than chameleon. Much like Gendleman et al. (2010), I too believe that graffiti and mural art illuminate and keep a record of public conversation (p. 186). A record by which, “unsanctioned authors transformed its original, one-dimensional message into a rich, layered document exemplifying the diversity of street-level discourse” (p.187). I regard these pieces of street art as modes of narration that add to the fabric of a community. However random and misplaced they

may appear, someone's story is being told on these walls and/or buildings. When I entered OCAD, I found a new urban experience that was embraced by my senses.

Paul Miller, [aka DJ Spooky], professes the unavoidable marriage of artistic expression with urbanness. He argues,

We live in the era of the world city. So much of what we see is about what we project out into the world. Your eyes have a perceptual architecture. They break light waves and particles into some kind of coherent meaning that the mind then organizes, and makes into metaphors, thoughts, and, of course, images (p.149).

Both the visual and aural forms of expression I found in the city, provided me strength to be the self I am today. I am not a musician, ceramics is my mode of expression, but long before clay, music captured my ears, and I had the desire to listen.

From the walk I have taken to OCAD a thousand times, to the familiarity of the school I knew, a more contemporaneous vibe loomed in the future. The single brick building I graduated from is not unlike others in the city. Its appearance is bashfully unoriginal but serves as a tribute to its 1957 architectural aesthetic. Two years after I graduated, 100 McCaul Street became the home to a new piece of architecture in construction of the new Sharp Centre for Design. This new building hovered over the single non-descript structure that held us all in the one edifice, with hallways that wreaked of oil paint, polyurethane and melting wax. The fragrance of this new fantastical structure by Will Alsop, radiated a germ-free hand sanitizer and an 'I-love-design-technology' type of smell.

In 2004, OCAD took a step into an age esteemed in design, high enrollment rates, capital campaigns and whose new addition is what Amin would call, a symptom of

modernity (101). With the increase of student population, and the advent of modernity, the institution made a stride to keep up with the age of what Amin terms, ‘urban sociology’ which describes a spatial formation and a social entity (102). In the building’s expansion, it broadened its turf and made an attempt to become an integral part of the social landscape of Toronto, while addressing the societal needs of the community.

Sassen argues that, “a new urban sociology should provide an understanding of cities as a particular kind of space in a globalized modernity” (qtd., in Amin, 101). Moreover, this understanding of globalization is also one that cannot be silenced. I witness its voice getting louder and louder in its architectural responses around the city. Within the cultural diversity of Toronto, there a millions of narrators, but not everyone can have the stage. With the advent of modernity, the buildings within the urban are voices to better understand how urban centres function in the globalized society.

While my move from suburban to urban has been positive, I have spent my years relocating from place to place. I feel as though I am nomadic, but have managed to locate my place of community and belonging in school. School, becomes a geographical site that I have grown out of and into, and one where I feel comfort in myself as an artist. In the current creation of my urban self, I am still on the move, but grounded in education. As I make my way over to Winters College (at York), I am engaged in a different type of schooling, in a building that is not unlike the one at OCAD. My creativity now lies in the written word. In this newness of York University, I have found a place to belong and where, as Coelho (2002) states in the epigraph, I fight for my dream, listen to my calling and endure the falls in order to rise above the rest. With my new knowledge base, school still offers me a site of belonging in a life full of an eternity of re-locating and learning.

References

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