

A Jumbie Journey

Master of Fine Arts

Photography and Related Media

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Table of Contents

<u>Artist Statement</u>	3
<u>Thesis Paper</u>	4
<u>Work Cited</u>	18

Artist Statement

In the Caribbean, the Jumbie is a mischievous, mythical, ghost-like creature known for possession and other physical disturbances. Thought to be the souls of someone who has lived a violent life or died a violent death, practices such as exorcisms and prayer are performed in hopes of capturing and banishing these presences from their victims' lives. The Jumbie's goal is not to harm or kill but to cause mischief and mayhem.

Ever since I moved to the United States of America for college from the Caribbean, I have noticed a decline in my mental health. In my culture people reacted to mental health the same way they responded to the Jumbie, as a demonic possession that, according to them, could only be fixed through prayer. Once I became aware of that comparison, I began working on *A Jumbie Quilt* and *Are You Seeing Jumbie*, a children's book that follows a girl, who discovers she has a Jumbie and takes account of how she moves forward with learning to live with it. In both of these projects, I use photography, digital collage, and fabric to explore what it means to preserve a hybrid identity while recounting the impact living in another country has had on my mental health.

The quilt and the book serve as documentation of my relationship with the Jumbie and how we have grown from being strangers to becoming familiar with one another, I wish to create a dissonance that mimics the turmoil I feel as a person caught in between cultures and grasping for solace while battling an unknown foe.

Thesis Paper

Growing as an immigrant in the Caribbean, raised in various cultures, I struggled with the term ‘identity’. As a kid, I jumped between identifying as what my parents told me and how other people labeled me. Ironically, it was not until I left my home for the United States of America, that I felt more in touch and confident with my Caribbean identity. While in America and equipped with a repaired identity I began to notice a decline in my mental health. I was unfamiliar with this struggle because back home people rarely spoke about our psychological state of minds, let alone if we thought there was an issue with it. Thankfully, with the help of a healthcare professional, through photography and quilting I found a productive and healing method to manage my anxiety and I created a way of approaching mental health through metaphors and narratives. In *Are You Seeing Jumbie* and *A Jumbie Quilt* I used photography and digital collage to explore what it means to preserve a hybrid identity while recounting the impact that living in another country had on my mental state.

I was born on the island of St. Kitts and Nevis and at the age of two my family and I moved to St. Thomas in the United States Virgin Islands. I was raised on St. Thomas and at the age of ten became a U.S. citizen. Growing up, my mother always reminded my sister and me that even though we were American citizens, we were still Nevisians. In school, I was always proud to let people know that I was Nevisian but began having doubts when I faced other people’s disbelief. Once I graduated high school, I left St. Thomas for America, where I completed my Bachelor’s of Art and began pursuing my Master’s degree. During the later years of undergrad and the early years of graduate school, I noticed the decline of my mental health and it left me confused about what was happening. I reached out to the campus psychiatrist who calmly explained to me that my new attitude was a result of my brain chemistry and not something I

could control. With this information, I was able to label the foe that many other university students at the time were battling as well.

As I struggled with feeling well enough to keep up in school, I began to see similarities between how I perceived my anxiety and a mythical creature we have in the Caribbean called the Jumbie. The Jumbie is a ghost-like creature that causes mischief by possessing people and haunting abandoned places. On St. Thomas, people in disheveled clothes, talking to themselves and breaking out into fits of mania are said to be “seeing Jumbie.” As children, we were told to stay away from these people, unless we too wanted to join them. When my friend would bring up her struggles with depression, her parents would often tell her to pray more or drink special teas to feel better. Noticing these similarities, I began seeking ways to use the Jumbie as a metaphor for mental illness. I created *Are You Seeing Jumbie*, a children’s picture book, and *A Jumbie Quilt*, a quilt depicted the relationship between the Jumbie and the main character of the book, as a way to begin the conversation around mental health. Both communicate the story of a girl, who discovers that she is seeing Jumbie and sets out on a journey to learn to live with it. Both the book and the quilt feature photographs and fabric collages that take a deeper look into Caribbean culture and what mental health looks like to us.

When I created *Are You Seeing Jumbie* I knew I wanted to write something reminiscent of a hero’s journey. The story is based on my life, so it could not end with the hero defeating the villain, because that was not how it worked for me. In my actual journey, I came to terms with the fact that my anxiety will not simply vanish and that it will always be a part of me. In the narrative I constructed, the main character would go through various methods of ridding herself of the Jumbie, only for them to end in failure. Desperately, she decided to take a new approach which would be calmly interacting with the Jumbie. I came to this conclusion of my book while

reading the story *When Sadness Is at Your Door* by Eva Eland. In this book, Eland personifies sadness as a house guest that showed up uninvited one day. Through various trials, the character in the book eventually learns how to live with the emotion. I thought this was an excellent and realistic depiction of dealing with a new unwanted feeling.

After reading various children books it was time to create one of my own. I began photographing myself in mundane places such as my bedroom, my bathroom, and other places I frequented, like the local library and the laundromat. I depicted my relationship with the Jumbie through staged photographs, to which I interacted with an empty space where I imagined the Jumbie to be. Once I had the images to tell my story, I printed the images on fabric. Using scissors and an exacto knife, I removed my figure from the image. I placed a section of an abstract watercolor painting (Figure 1) that represented my cultural identity behind the silhouette. The paintings referenced memories, photographs, and conversations about home. The painting consisted of what I considered to be my new St. Thomian and Nevisian identity. I used the collaged and cut-out effect, often used in children's books to show differences between concepts, which I gathered through the ample children's books I read during this time. In *Are You Seeing Jumbie* the painting depicted how the main character does not fit into the photographic world, in which she finds herself.



Figure 1: Untitled, 2020

I searched for various lightweight and wispy fabrics to create the Jumbie. I felt that fabrics like a black satin or mesh adequately represented the Jumbie as a ghost-like creature. Using scissors or simply ripping the fabric I glued and hand-sewed the pieces of the Jumbie onto the quilt (Figure 2). This allowed the Jumbie to appear free-flowing in certain parts and be stiff in others. In my story, the Jumbie is not consistent character. In the beginning, the girl is fearful of the Jumbie, so its appearance is all black and true to its ghost-like nature. As the story goes on, its presence changed, now the Jumbie is more colorful. Once the girl learned that the Jumbie is not trying to physically harm her, she is no longer afraid of it. She is aware of it and question its motives, but she knows it will not hurt her. Fabrics reminiscent of carnival costumes were chosen when the Jumbie's colorful side began to enter the story. Materials with lots of sparkle and loud vibrant colors signified that both the creature and the main character come from the same place. Once all the images were created, I re-photographed the photo-textile collage and

digitally added the text to the story the book tells. Mimicking the Jumbie's mischievous nature, the text moves and swirls around the images. I used simple language that involves various questions like "Do you feel trapped?" and "Have you prayed?" in hope the reader would answer the questions honestly and have an open conversation with the reader. As a child, one of my favorite parts about being read to was participating in the stories. I loved whenever the person reading to me would ask if I agreed with what the character was saying or what I would do, had I been in the story. This is an element of story-telling I wanted in my book, because I felt that it would be a great eye-opener for both parties to hear what the other thought about the main character's decision to get to know her 'foe.'

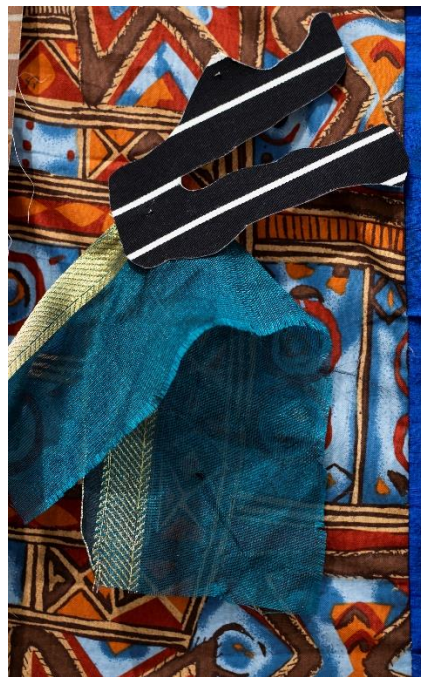


Figure 2: Jumbie on A Jumbie Quilt

As I continued working on the book, I wanted to create a piece that accompanied it, spoke to the same subject matter, but focused solely on the relationship between the two characters. After rediscovering the quilt as a mode of story-telling in "A Holiday Jewel Box at a County Gem: Quilts, Silver and Jade at the Taber" show at the Thomas T. Taber Museum of the

Lycoming County Historical Society in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, I started working on A Jumbie Quilt. The show featured beautiful quilts created by award winning quilter Wendy Etzel. With various pieces of fabric and a sewing machine Etzel recreated log cabins, mansions, winter landscapes and other scenes that spoke to the history of the Williamsport area. The fabrics used in the background of the quilt are all based on patterns I had seen back on St. Thomas, such as the multicolored cotton fabric with palm leaves on it. The purple fabric with a pattern reminded me of a painting I made in high school, and the orange and brown Ankara fabric shared a resemblance with an outfit I'd worn in elementary school. Once the base patterns were selected, I printed my photographs on the cotton sateen fabric and sewed them on to the background cloth (Figure 3). The images consist of shots of the Jumbie when it first appears, (Figure 4), to shots of the two characters merging together as one (Figure 5). The merged images conferred the process of accepting that the Jumbie is a part of the main character and learning to live with it. Outside of the photographed stories I have attached smaller Jumbies that interact with the larger Jumbies and the main character in the story (Figure 6).



Figure 3: A Jumbie Quilt, 2021



Figure 4: Appear, 2021



Figure 5: Mermaid, 2021



Figure 6: Close-up of Jumbies and a photograph on *A Jumbie Quilt*

In addition of quilting, Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* was a big inspiration in my work. In the beginning, I intended to display my images with fabric borders in a grid formation. Once I made a mockup of this structure, I noticed how much it resembled a quilt. I taught myself the physical process of quilting by reading instructional books by Rachel Reynolds, Georgia Guback

and watching tutorials online. *Tar Beach* gave me a glimpse into what a mature series of political art could look like as a children's book. Ringgold created paintings and then constructed a quilt from her paintings. She would then photograph her work, and use the photographs as illustrations for her story about a young girl, her big imagination, and the love she shares for her family, all while dealing with topics such as racism and classism. Ringgold's book showed me that it was possible to talk about big topics to a young audience without oversimplifying the language. When I began writing the story for *Are You Seeing Jumbie*, I teetered between the narrative being a personal retelling and a self-help book, both ideas I was not fond of. I leaned towards the personal retelling and included more voices from home. In hope that the story would appear more authentic and honest. I wanted to show the people back in St. Thomas that for me the best way to combat my monster was to address the subject of mental health through metaphor.

Other than children's books, I researched subjects like mental health, hybrid identities, the Jumbie, and other monsters. The first book I read was *Understanding Stuart Hall*, by Helen Davis. Hall was a well-known Jamaican-born British cultural theorist. In the chapter Cultural Identity and the Diaspora, Hall speaks about the visual representation of the Afro-Caribbean and Asians of the diasporas using the term "new post-colonial subjects" and calling for us to change the way we look at identity, saying "we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (184). This was a great thing for me to read, because as someone who grew up in various cultures, it felt as though I always needed to pick one of them and encompassing them all was incomprehensible. I kept Hall's words in my mind, as I continued to research the Caribbean and hybrid identity. In Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* he writes, "As far as my identity is concerned, I will take care of it myself. That is, I shall not allow it to become cornered in any

essence; I shall also pay attention to not mixing it into any amalgam {a mixture}. Rather, it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it” (192). The immigrant story is one of displacement and various unfitting. It is longing for a home you do not remember, while living in a space you do not feel you belong to. In both my quilt and the book, the jarring contrast between the photographs and the paintings depicted the feeling of division. A feeling shared between all age groups.

As an immigrant I strived to channel the lack of confidence and fear that comes with a hybrid identity. The pride of belonging to multiple cultures but also the clumsiness of not knowing how to properly equip myself with that knowledge of those cultures often left me feeling embarrassed and othered. The hybrid identity is akin to a cloaking device. Unfortunately, I often felt as though mine ran out of power whenever I found myself surrounded by my Nevisian family members and St. Thomian classmates. Often the book and the quilt feature the Jumbie and main character alone in a room. This choice was made to give the viewer a glimpse into my inner struggle. The viewer and reader looks on as I grow desperate in trying to fix my “cloaking device.”

While I was learning more about the Black Caribbean identity, I did some digging into the Black American identity as well. This was something placed on me in America, and I often struggled with whether I had the right to use it. Rutledge M. Dennis, the author of *Biculturalism, Self-Identity and Societal Development*, wrote that many Black Caribbean immigrants in America have had to “learn how to interact with the established resident Americans, those whose ancestors came to this country before theirs, and who view themselves as the real Americans as opposed to the immigrant Americans” (52). While this was a hard pill to swallow, it was one that

was important and eye-opening for me. It allowed me to view myself and my situation through St. Thomians' eyes. Although I understood the cause of their reactions, I could not sympathize with them. My family and I were outsiders, yes, but that did not make me any less St. Thomian, nor did it make me any less Caribbean. I wanted to transport the pride and passion I felt about my upbringing into my work. When creating my painting, I depicted the memories and experiences I shared on St. Thomas. The watercolor painting took on a new abstract form. Like my memories and the feelings of nostalgia, it is not something I can control; it is free-flowing and constantly merging.

In my research on mental health in the Caribbean, I discovered Natalie Turner's study "*Mental health care treatment-seeking among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks: what is the role of religiosity/spirituality?*" In the study, Turner discovered that "racial/ethnic minorities tend to use mental health care services less than whites, with African Americans and Caribbean Blacks having lower rates compared to non-Hispanic whites" (5). Turner then went on to explain that both African Americans and Caribbean Blacks were more likely to subscribe to the idea that prayer is important for dealing with stressful life situations. Overall, the study found that "African Americans and Caribbean Blacks were more likely to use God/religion/spiritual practices as coping mechanisms" (11-12). My parents and close family members fall into the percentage of Caribbean people who turn to God and prayer as coping mechanisms. In the Caribbean, the Jumbie is referred to as a wait-about spirit, or one that lacks the power to harm, so it limits itself only to frightening people (Lawrence 22). From a Caribbean mindset, the dead and living are not to mingle. Once someone is dead and their soul has left their body, they belong to God and are in his domain. The living have no jurisdiction to interact with them. Wait-about spirits are dangerous in Caribbean lore, because of their power of possession and their creation.

Jumbies and spirits are topics of Gods and churches, they exist on a plain that we believe can only be vanquished by the omnipresent being, who we believe created the world. Christianity has been forced onto the enslaved people from Africa, and many of their descendants still practice it with the same fear and diligence as their ancestors. Taking this into consideration was vital when writing my story. If I disregarded our dependency on religion, I would be met with resistance and my message would not be heard.

When it was time to research monsters, I had a tremendous amount of fun. I began by watching movies with monsters in them and observing the relationship between the people and the creatures. I found myself drawn to stories where the protagonist would either transform into a monster or could call upon or control a monster. I watched movies like *Colossal*, *Godzilla vs. Kong*, *Pan's Labyrinth* and the *Harry Potter* series -- movies where creatures existed and interacted with humans. I wanted to bring similar interactions into my work in order to show the eeriness I felt when the Jumbie was around. In his article *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil (At the Interface)* Niall Scott wrote: "In West African religions, the original zombie was not a single concept: the term covered a wide range of spirits and demi-god-like beings, both good and evil. This diversity survived into Haitian vodun and even into the lore of the American South. The slaves who had been long supplanted from their homelands and who eventually overthrew French colonial oppression in Saint Domingue did so, in part, by recourse to the shared African identity evoked by vodun. The zombie, a soul-less hulk mindlessly working at the bidding of another, thus records a residual communal memory of slavery: of living a life without dignity and meaning, of going through the motions" (46). I was fascinated by the relationship between slavery and the creation of the zombie myth and immediately thought of Robert Nicholls's argument that many "African slaves... generally drew

on what they knew to create what they needed in New World situations” (49). Nicholls is the author of the article “The Moko Jumbie of the U.S Virgin Islands History and Antecedents,” in which he wrote about the origins of the Moko Jumbie and what the figure means to St. Thomas. The Moko Jumbie is the protector of St. Thomas and our mascot, considered to be the light side to the Jumbie. Legend has it that the Moko Jumbies are the spirits of the enslaved people stolen from West Africa. Moko Jumbies are depicted as tall beings in colorful attire and masks. Their height represents their mode of transportation. It is rumored that they walked from West African to the Caribbean and can see evil spirits approaching. Both Nicholls and Scott lead me to the thought that it’s possible that the Jumbie was created as a manifestation for people who felt guilty or anxious about those who have passed on. From that thought I arrived at the idea that the Jumbie appears when someone is emotionally and mentally in distress. It lurks around them, camouflaged into their surroundings, like a predator, until they are at their wit's end, which is when the Jumbie will make itself apparent. Once the Jumbie appears, it cannot leave until the person has figured out what is causing the emotional or mental unrest.

Steven Schneider said in his article *Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors* that “what makes horror film monsters at least potentially horrifying (what makes them monsters, to begin with) is the fact that they metaphorically embody surmounted beliefs; to the extent that they succeed in horrifying viewers, however, it is because how they embody surmounted beliefs is invested with cultural relevance” (15). The very idea that the Jumbie is connected to emotions, but cannot be controlled, is scary for someone who possesses a need for control. That lack of command is illustrated in the quilt, when the Jumbie appears in colorful pieces that weave and fray throughout the quilt. It breaks through and drapes around the photographs, disrupting and sometimes hiding the images. Much like with an actual Jumbie, this is something the viewer

cannot manage. They cannot touch the piece and pin the arms and legs of the Jumbie out of the way because the pieces will fall back to where they were. In the end, the viewer must come to terms with the turbulent Jumbie and take accept the piece for what it is, knowing that the Jumbie does not hurt the quilt but is its inseparable part.

Are You seeing Jumbie is displayed on a pedestal for viewers to stop and read. Behind the book, *A Jumbie Quilt* (Figure 7) is hung from a steel quilt-hanging pole. The curving and squiggling of the pole's ends bear resemblance to the Jumbie figures both on the quilt and in the book. Though the two works took on different final forms; they complement each other. The quilt has enough room to breathe, while enticing viewers to take a closer look at the various patterns that show up throughout the work. These patterns show up again, once the viewer glances through the book. At the end of my own Jumbie journey, *Are You Seeing Jumbie* is a metaphor I created that blended both my mental health struggles with my cultural mythology in hope of calling attention to a bigger conversation that needs to happen back at home.

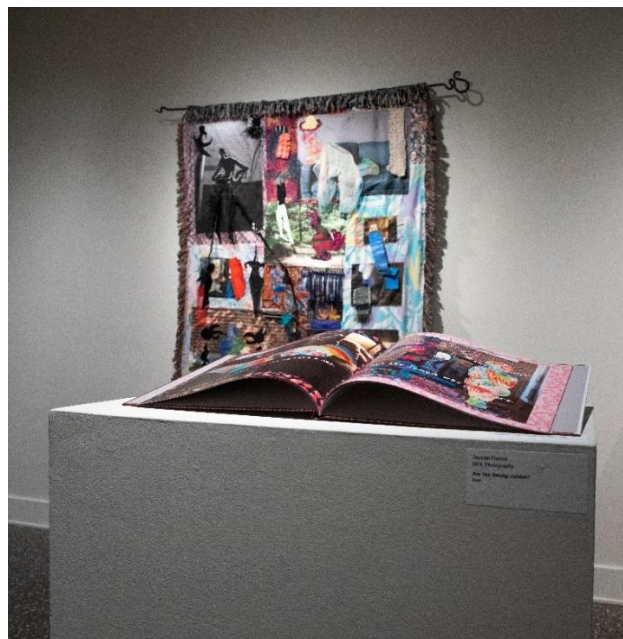


Figure 7: MFA Thesis Installation at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, 2021

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