

# Fierce Solitude

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**Abstract:** The idea of solitude is usually known as nonsocial. However, solitude does not contradict social engagement but deepens it. Currently in progress for the Student Scholars Program, my creative project explores a



reconceptualization of solitude connecting to themes of home and family, memory, childhood, and the self. By researching various historical and contemporary interpretations as foundational tools informing my work, I came back to the familial space of the house. Sewing and knitting nightgowns and slippers and then

hanging them on a clothesline tell the story of my household's significant female figures-grandmother, mother, and daughter. I draw upon new experiences with solitude in this space with a knitted blanket where patches of sewn muslin signify the places I've lived and the beaded words narrate feelings of home.

Connecting to my Black Hispanic/ Latina and multicultural identity, I deepen my self-awareness and connection to the outside world by claiming my space in solitude.

## Project Proposal

There is no sole definition of solitude. It is a cogent term in the public imagination, traditionally related to a profound experience. There is a long history of Indigenous and religious practice to retreat in the desert or mountains for solitary contemplation. Philosophers have generated various definitions, each leading to different questions. Aristotle described solitude as, "fit only for beasts or gods...and the idea of solitude where...the philosopher meditating alone in his study is a cliché of western culture (Koch 1990)." Today, solitude is expanding to encompass a broader range. Zoe Lescaze, the writer of the New York Times article, "An Artist Whose Muse Is Loneliness," writes about the contemporary South Korean artist Haegue Yang who compares solitude to humbleness, when asked about the difference between solitude and loneliness. Yang employs traditional solitary practices, such as deliberately alienating herself through constant travel, living alone, and keeping a few close friends. Her approach resonates with the French novelist, Marguerite Duras who once said, "One does not find solitude, one creates it." Ironically and paradoxically, her newfound success hinders her ability to maintain a sense of isolation,

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which so successfully fueled her art. Yang's art conceptualizes solitude and identity. In my project, I broaden these themes by exploring the connection with concepts of the self, home and family, memory and childhood, and sense of place. Thus, I redefine and re-conceptualize the subject of solitude and its relation to personal identity.

Often the idea of solitude is stigmatized as nonsocial. However, solitude does not contradict social engagement but deepens it, "...the self and other are in constant dialogue with each other." (Kanfo, 2012). Comparatively, cultural critic Philip Koch states, "... rich and emotional experiences of the outer world are possible in solitude." In Gaston Bachelard's book, *The Poetics of Space*, the house is used as a metaphor for human attachment to a space where memories and imagination are protected, housed, cultivated, and accessed. He explains that dreams, memories, imagination, childhood, etc., all exist through solitude where childhood plays a great role, "...it is certainly greater than reality...it is on the plane of the daydreams and it remains alive and poetically useful within us" (p.16).

Dorthe Nors, a Danish writer, is one of the few writers who claims her space in the subject. In an interview with publisher and editor Laura Macaulay, Nors spoke about her book *Wild Swims*. She articulates the purpose of using solitude as a theme in her writing:

"Solitude-and the ability to be with yourself ...to be open to the life that you carry with you is important to all people." Occupying various spaces (e.i.on a plane, hotel rooms, in the middle of a crowd), her characters hide within their inner selves where they reflect on their thoughts, ideas, moral shortcomings, fears, and memories. Nors's sensibility aligns with my project to explore responses to outside events through personal experiences and memories. Due to past experiences of feeling a lack of belonging, I often describe myself as someone who "lived in a room". It was through a sense of unbounded imagination that allowed me to share my personal experiences. Similar to Nors' characters, I hide within my inner self and contemplate the spaces and objects within the home (i.e. my bedroom, clothing, flowers, and knitting and sewing). In my project, I use materials reminiscent of home to create this type of imaginative 'fantastical' world, that grows from the need to understand my place in the world, integral to female Black Hispanic/Latina artistic identity. These materials primarily include sewing, knitting, and beading. My memories, thoughts, emotions, fears, and ideas are translated into various mixed media processes that expand my concepts in relation to solitude. My intention to produce a narrative beyond the "room" and explore this through an imaginative perspective, reflects my openness to share my experiences. Thus, I shift and expand the attitude towards solitude beyond the western ideology of isolation and loneliness towards a socially engaged concept existing within both self and relation to others.

Western thinkers have long defined what solitude should and could be: namely, a condition of being alone. However, I can attest, from personal experience, that there are other traditions where the meaning of solitude is much more complex. The "being alone" is only a small portion of what solitude has to offer. As an artist, I use solitude as subject matter in my work and as a mechanism to navigate my identity through my work. In my project, I will explore the richness of solitude provided in creating a practice to intentionally claim solitude

as a space of my own. My purpose is to deepen engagements and understandings of complex issues within personal experiences with consideration to culture and race.

Significant to this project are artists Tschabalala Self and María Magdalena Campos-Pons. They find their power in identity embedded in cultural history and memory that parallels their personal story of blackness and black spirituality. Maya Angelou utilizes solitude to guide her work by regularly renting a hotel room just for writing. While revisiting the question of identity, she reflects, “What I represent in fact, what I’m trying like hell to represent every time I go into that hotel room, is myself.” She likens Nors’s idea that we carry our experiences, “I believe that one carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and dragons of home under one’s skin, at the extreme corners of one’s eyes and possibly in the gristle of the earlobe.” Angelou is an empowering, poetic, and modern counterpart to Gaston Bachelard, her thoughts on identity, belonging, and growing up parallel my own and feed into a new perspective of solitude; we feel safest when we are inside ourselves, a place where we belong and the children inside are our real selves.

From her television series, *Iyanla, Fix My Life*, guided by her personal experiences, Iyanla Vanzant provides healing to families who are spiritually troubled. She often mentions that she uses her show as her “ministry”; to guide others to become their truest self through trust; in self, in faith, and people. A spiritual leader, writer, and educator, Vanzant specializes in reaching black audiences, addressing identity, self-awareness and acknowledging the past in order to heal, or “doing the work” as she infamously says. Both Maya Angelou and Iyanla Vanzant are quintessential contemporary women of color finding their identity and solidarity in solitude.

They are significant references for this project. Their teachings will drive my meditations on the subject of modern solitude and provide a metaphysical and conceptual backbone to the artmaking process.

The intent of this creative project is not to define solitude but to start a conversation, by giving a different perspective and exploring these possible concepts and their role in solitude. Through my research, I will develop my own original interpretation of solitude and its connection to identity. By using my personal experiences as a reference, my creative research will become a narrative where I use my identity as a member of the Black Hispanic/Latina community to break down stigmas around solitude and the communities’ involvement.

Therefore, as an artist who thrives in and makes work about solitude, I am claiming my space and defining solitude in my own right to do right by my larger community. I see my work breaking away from the social and political limitations many artists of color confront and concentrating on new work that will extend and reflect an alternative form of identity art: to know one’s self and embracing all that one finds there as a means of overcoming the confinements of colonial history. That is why solitude is important to me and is reflected in my work. As a Black Hispanic/Latina, multicultural artist in the 21st century, it is important to embrace and claim solitude as a gateway to a deeper cultural relation.

## **Project Statement**

Fierce Solitude will embolden artistic identity and claim solitude by a Black Hispanic/Latina female artist. This creative project is important to the field of visual arts, as it creates and encourages deeper conversations about solitude that encompass contemporary spirituality, philosophy, identity, and empowerment. Redefining solitude provides new instantiations that go beyond the classical western definition and appropriation of the concept. I decolonize the concept of solitude and show the fierce positive force it can be.

## **Project Goals**

The goal of this project is to define my role as a Black Hispanic/Latina and multicultural female artist and claim my space as an artist who thrives in and makes work about solitude. I strive to present a range of possibilities of what solitude can be in research and artmaking. As I apply personal experiences to define the essence of the relationship of solitude and creativity to art-making, I use a reflective practice to develop and produce artwork to understand how solitude is an act of being connected in space, environment, with self and others.

## **Introduction**

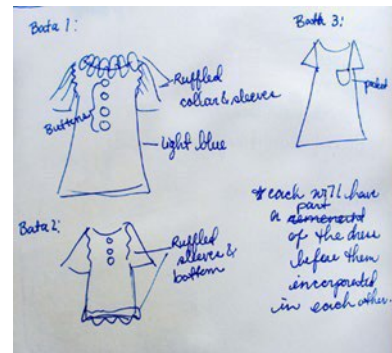
My research and analysis relied on various historical and contemporary sources and interpretations about the meaning of solitude. I observed how philosophers have generated various definitions, beginning with Aristotle's description of solitude as "fit only for beasts or gods." Today, the idea of solitude where the intellect meditates alone is a cliché of western culture.

I was impressed to find some contemporary interpretations that began to separate from the traditional meaning. Clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, Danielle Knafo ties solitude to relatedness stating that instead of understanding solitude as contradicting social engagement, it can deepen it. I mainly referenced the works of two writers Iyanla Vanzant and Dorthe Nors as a metaphysical and conceptual backbone to the art making process. I resonated with Nors, a Danish writer, who articulates solitude as the ability to be with yourself and to be open to the life that you carry. Iyanla Vanzant, creator of her television series, *Iyanla, Fix My Life*, guides others with her personal experiences and provides healing and awareness to families spiritually troubled. Vanzant is the main inspiration for the reconceptualization of solitude.

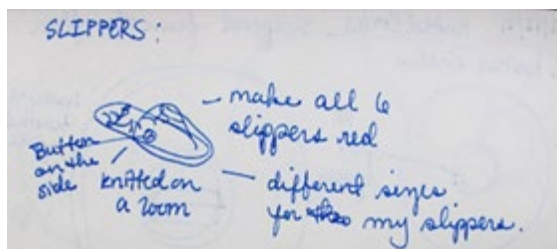
Through my findings and my own personal experiences, I identified several key concepts to begin developing ideas for each piece. Key concepts included: sense of place, home, family, childhood, imagination, memory, and self.

## Batas and Slippers

The batas became a narrative and representation of who I am within my familial community. La Bata is a Spanish term for dress/nightgown. I was reminded of my late grandmother who would use this term when I was little. Through a conversation with my mother, I understood the significant roles the women in my family played and how those roles were passed on to me. *"You are my mirror, just like I was for my mom."* This quote by my mother inspired the creation for this installation.



I purchased three corresponding colors of fabric to represent female figures; grandmother, mother, and daughter. I referenced a nightgown I already owned to determine the sizes of each gown, doubling the sizes that best matched my mother and grandmother. For the gowns, I gave each of them their own unique features while carrying some of these features



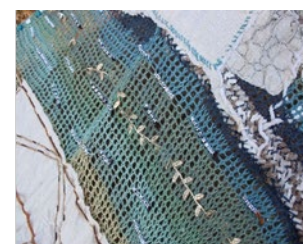
into the next gown. This is to indicate that each woman carries the same trait as the one before. For the slippers, I used a circular knitting loom for a faster process and red yarn. The red yarn reminded me of the hibiscus flowers my grandmother used to grow around the house as well as the feelings of warmth and comfort within the home.

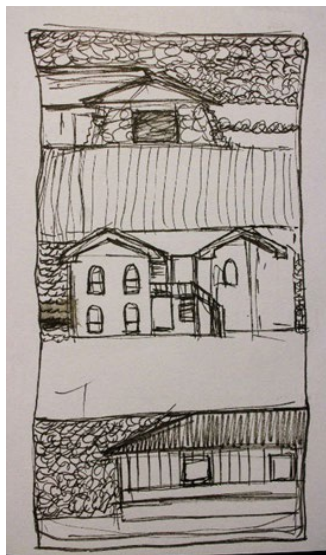
## House Hammock

My mother would tell me the story of how she learned how to knit, sew, and crochet at a program for young mothers. The baby blankets she made me, which I still keep, were the inspiration for



the House Hammock. The idea of home and family largely shaped my personal identity and I found solitude within my tightly knit familial community.





For this piece, I worked with narrating the feelings of home by depicting three of the Florida homes I lived in as a child sewn into knitted blanket. I chose several skeins of multicolored yarn to create an abstract background that reminds me of my time in Florida. The blanket was also knitted on a circular knitting loom. For the homes, I sketched and cut out portions of each house and hand stitched them to the blanket with yarn that corresponded with each of the homes. I then cut out shapes to allow the background to show through. Letter beads were sewn through the empty spaces of the blanket. Words included *belonging, space, community, etc.* as they narrated feelings of home.

The final product was displayed as a hammock in the Fine Arts Building during the BFA Exhibition in May 2022.

## Conclusion

Though this research is still ongoing, I have realized how my home and family life is heavily intertwined with the concept of solitude. I see that it is not just one idea but it in fact connects to many concepts, especially selfhood. The idea that experiences and connections of the outside world are possible to achieve in solitude. For myself, this was expressed in my inner, familial community.

Personally, solitude is a reflection of who I am, where I have been, and how I got here. These questions will guide me in my future work. Solitude can extend and reflect an alternative form of identity art: knowing who you are and embracing all that you find there outside of the political and social issues that many contemporary artists focus on. It is a possible connection to personal identity within the concepts of sense of place, home, family, childhood, imagination, memory, and self. Solitude is the ability to be with yourself, be open to the life you carry, and be aware of how one shows up in life and in the world.

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