

Skin, Hair, Skull, Nerves

By Andrea Morgan, PhD candidate

When many people think back on the year 2020, what they'll remember is COVID-19, wearing masks, being quarantined and isolated, and the uncertainty regarding what "normal" would look like on the other side. As a Black woman in neuroscience, that's not all I'll remember.

After the murder of George Floyd, the world around me quickly began to crumble, but the vast majority of the people around me assumed that it was due to COVID-induced loneliness. In reality, I was absolutely devastated by the increased violence toward Black people that I was witnessing, and that feeling of despair was exacerbated by the fact that so many around me weren't willing to understand. Each day I left home, I feared for my life, and that took a toll on me in a way I never imagined. That toll almost stripped me of everything, and I struggled for a long time with finding meaning in any of my work. Why did becoming a scientist matter so much to me if, at the end of the day, all I'd ever be is just another dumb Black girl? Much like Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, I found myself begging and pleading for a brain, all the while wondering if I would ever be good enough even if I had one.

I became depressed when the basic question I asked myself, "What's the point?" seemed to echo on forever in my head with no answer. I knew that I needed the PhD to have the credibility to do outreach and policy work, but I didn't know how to drag myself back to lab every day when I felt so crushed under the weight of my own Blackness. Then, one day someone asked me a question that changed everything.

"How do you deal with not seeing others like you succeeding?" was the question. A good one too, because I had never thought about how. As I did though, I came to understand that my response to not seeing people like me here succeeding was to insert myself—my talents, skills, and hobbies that have nothing to do with science—into everything I do. If I can't see others like me succeeding in science, then I can at least see myself in the science. The importance of drawing came back to me, and I decided to start drawing things that were related to my work in neuroscience in some capacity. The more I drew, the more I learned, and the more I learned, the more excited I got about my own work that I thought I had lost the ability to care about. Drawing allowed me to see myself in my science, and this motivated me to keep going, even when things became intensely difficult. Despite the continued question of why this matters to me so much if I can't become something as a Black woman, I see my competence when I draw, and that motivates me to press on even when I start to believe the racism and wonder if maybe I am just too dumb.

I continue to draw as a hobby and to see myself in this work that I've sacrificed so much to do, but also because it helps me understand and make sense of my science. My hope is that visitors seeing this piece will recognize that, despite differences in things like skin and hair color, we are all still made of the same materials (and that definitely includes brains).