

Nell Painter. *Old in Art School: A Memoir of Starting Over*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2018. 352 pp.

After a prominent career as a history professor, Nell Irvin Painter retired from her position as the Edwards Professor of American History, Emerita at Princeton University and enrolled in art school—first as an undergraduate at Rutgers University and later in a two-year graduate program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), graduating in 2011. That story, in and of itself, is remarkable, and her memoir of that experience is partially a tale of how she learned how to switch her identity and way of thinking from historical research to creative painting. Add to this story that Painter is a nationally recognized African American historian of five books and the recipient of honorary doctorates and national fellowships. She put all of this aside to accomplish a long-held dream to go to art school. Her youthful classmates and art instructors did not know, or care, about Painter’s “other life.” However, they did note her age and gender often by traditional forms of marginalization and silencing. As Painter navigates her new world, while also struggling with the decline of her aging parents, she juggles her changing professional and personal identity, her developing skills as an artist, and her own education in art. This book chronicles that process, lushly illustrated with some of her work, and is mesmerizing in its reflection of her educational and life process.

For historians, Painter raises fascinating questions about the process of skill-building, positioned in opposition to beliefs about natural talent in the making of a professional. Painter describes this as her ongoing question about ontology versus epistemology: is becoming an artist a natural talent or a learned skill?

Painter loves learning the new skills of art, and she describes the mechanics of being an artist in luxurious detail: the best kind of eraser, paper, pencil; the dynamics of color and pigment; the allure of art stores; realism versus abstraction; drawing versus illustration; the great need for pushpins. With her, we learn about *transcription* (the close study of other artist’s works), *écorché* (the study of a human figure with the skin removed to display the musculature), *pentimento* (traces of the original drawing that the artist has erased), *collograph* (a type of print that can hold different textures, including collages), and complicated processes and applications, such as screen printing, Adobe Illustrator, and Adobe Photoshop.

While in school, Painter respects her young classmates even as she is often frustrated by their ahistorical simplicity and exclusion of her. She both admires and is annoyed by “tattooed art kids bounding around in shorts and flip-flops, day and night, amazed by what was still

news to them, annoyed by misunderstood rules, propelled by hormonal surges, drinking and drugging and fucking in the bushes, throwing up in their studios. Exhilarating, yes indeed, but exhausting (p. 141). Her young peers' art, music, and ideas confound her, as do her art teachers' lessons in the complicated status rules of being an artist: what galleries are worth being shown in, the significance of selling or not selling one's art, the peculiarities of contemporary art and design, and the cultural rules of looking "like an artist." Would she ever break into the "mystic ideology of the ontological An Artist" (p. 225)? She fears not.

Painter's understanding of her identity as old shapes this memoir almost as much as her gender and race (note the title: *Old in Art School*), and the ironies of these struggles pervade the text, including when Painter's mother (who wrote a bold memoir, *I Hope I Look That Good When I'm That Old*) rejects a cane because she doesn't want to look old. Accepting her age remains Painter's struggle too: chapter 1 begins with a fellow student asking Painter, "How old are you?" and she wrestles with the way she is perceived, applying W. E. B. Du Bois's familiar concept of "double consciousness," of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" to her newly experienced identity of being an old woman, the oldest person in the room. Only after graduate school, when she is initially horrified and embarrassed when her age (then seventy) is broadcast, does she come to terms with and accept her age as a benefit and even a freedom. Freedom to disregard slavish career paths, freedom to not worry about income or emotional support, and an ironic freedom to be distracted from artistic obsession by the real-world demands of her aging and ailing parents. As Painter notes:

Aging is a very big deal; it changes your life, not usually for the better, but there is some better. The better part is emotional; old people are happier and more trusting than the youth. You learn that all that upheaval that used to distress you really isn't such a big deal after all. Just let it go. . . . There's a wonderful freedom in not having to prove anything. (pp. 102-103)

Interwoven with her changing identity as old are the more familiar identity struggles of gender and race. Painter describes her engagement with the historical challenges facing African American artists in the past and present, including the social politics of skin color and tone in paint. As a Black woman, she became accustomed to being marginalized and ignored. Yet, after years of successful professional stature, it slaps Painter hard in the face again in the virtually all-White art school environment. She then turns to collage, incorporating the written word and African American historical narratives (Harriet Tubman, Michael Jackson, slavery, urban landscapes, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the

nineteenth-century German physician who used human skulls to create categories of race, and references to other Black women artists, like Sylvia Boone and Faith Ringgold).

Her other struggle is that of art versus history. History, her earlier life's career, was about Truth, and she saw her venture into art as being one of freedom from Truth. History was facts, events, clarity, coherence, and reasoning, requiring hard work and confirmation. Art involved mistakes, accidents, and spontaneity. Painter's old self keeps creeping into her new self, and she berates herself for that: "Loosen up! Let go! Stop making sense!" (p. 246). The release of her award-winning volume *The History of White People*, published in 2010 to great acclaim in the middle of her MFA program, intensified Painter's identity crisis even more. All the strengths she felt as a historian worked to her detriment as an artist. Only on the other side of graduate school does she see how art school taught her to move beyond straight and generalized narrative history to focus on seemingly obscure particularities, details, and individual lives.

Another struggle is her self-confidence, which is almost daily battered by her art teachers' tough critique sessions, by her peer students' social exclusion, and by the anomaly that her past prestige as a historian is of little worth in the art world (Yale University, which had offered her a chaired professorship and an honorary doctorate as a historian, rejects her application to art school). Graduate school is hard on everybody, her friends remind her, and by the end of her first year in the MFA program at RISD, this award-winning historian felt ground down "into a pathetic, insecure, little stump" (p. 204).

Yet Painter still exults in the gratitude for schools that allowed the time and freedom to indulge. In her undergraduate program at Rutgers, Painter luxuriates in the visual and cultural depth of her daily commute on urban public transportation. Then, at RISD's graduate school, Painter was euphoric because she had the time in her studio to learn new skills and make mistakes. This freedom was interrupted by family demands—her mother dies and her father's health deteriorates during this time—and her lingering history profession. During this period, she served as the president of the Organization of American Historians and gave invited talks about her new book, culminating in the epitome of her professional conflict when the scheduling of her final master's critique conflicted with receiving a prestigious award at Harvard University.

Ultimately, the memoir is a discussion of multiple identities, including age and professional identity. The process of becoming what Painter calls "An Artist" involves the ontological instability of being a woman, being old, and being Black and how those experiences change, drawing on "who's speaking to whom, when, where,

and for what purpose” (p. 239). Inherent in this ontological reflection is the epistemological one, or how we learn to be who we are and whether art is a native talent or a learned skill. Enraptured with the experience of learning the trade of artists and still admiring her own training as a historian, Painter relies on the informed, structured processes of education and her own hard work to help her get where she wants to go. Her internal ontological debate is settled when she graduates and comes to terms with her own self-confidence and enjoyment of the art processes—learning not to see herself through other people’s eyes and to move beyond Du Bois’s “double consciousness.”

For this historian of education, this memoir is provocative in a variety of ways. It reminded me of the dynamics of graduate school—my own and that of my current students—which can be brutal in its insistence on taking apart one’s original assumptions and exhausting in its instruction of different skills and ways of thinking. We are proud to be admitted to graduate school, and then in the face of unfamiliar knowledge, we think we were admitted by mistake. New theories disconnect us from our old ways of thinking, writing, and knowing; new obsessions take us away from the outside world. If we are socially marginalized in any way in this process—as women, gender fluid, older or younger than the norm, people of color, people with disabilities, first-generation college students, heads of households, and recent college graduates—the learning process can be even more challenging as we wrestle with expectations and assumptions that bleed in from the outside world. We can feel unmoored, critiqued, lost, and unsure. Somehow, we hang on, in love with our new subject, and gradually gain the skills and self-confidence to bloom. And then we take our unique knowledge and run with it into a new world.

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Diana D’Amico Pawlewicz. *Blaming Teachers: Professionalization Policies and the Failure of Reform in American History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020. 264 pp.

With the possible exception of police work, is there any other occupation in the United States that has been as politicized as teaching?