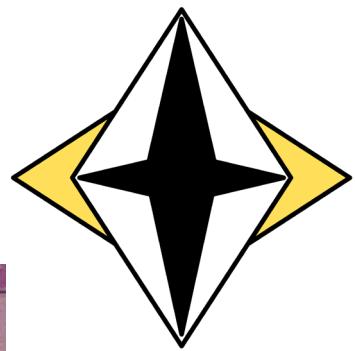


The Black Star



Journal



The Moonflower Issue

Issue #06

December 08, 2023

From Us To You

At night the moonflower blooms, doubling the reach of its petals and releasing a sweet smell to passersby. The day breaks down to dusk, and the soft white flower brightens while others recoil. As we find ourselves in the winter months with nights that seem longer and darkness that, in many ways, feels consuming, we see ourselves and our work here as the moonflower, our strong storytelling lighting the path. With this, we present the Moonflower Issue to carry us into the fourth year of the Black Star Journal.

We also want to thank our masthead without whom this journal would not be possible. Over this semester they have devoted so much time and energy to this community, their writing, and telling the stories that matter. It is also thanks to our section editors who shape and guide these individual voices into a collective, that allows the community we form in person to come together on the page. Finally, we thank our readers for always listening. Have happy holidays.

From us to you,
Naomi and Evan

Handwritten signatures of Naomi Umlauf and Evan Gardner.

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Short Talks

Words by Jazlyn White

On Visibility

The sun at its peak,
peering over tenement buildings, refracting off of windows
and windshields. Both sidewalks are lined with cars. Warmth is everywhere:
metal benches, turning doorknobs, stoops the color of fired clay. It is in the gold,
swaying as her head turns, brushing her cheeks.

This idea came to me in a dream, as words often do. I visualized them in black ink, pen gliding across the page, long before I sat down to write:

Two loops wrapped around two fingers, tied together—most days. Give me your foot, she says. So some days were shiny leather straps and silver little buckles, clicks along sidewalks and scuffs at the soles. These were the special ones, the days I could see long after they passed, in lines of fraying rubber. Some soles: guarded, protected from the concrete. Shoes lined in rows on top of their boxes, the boxes on top of blankets.

The air: cold, smoggy—mixed clouds of smoke and train air—and sweetened by patchouli and frankincense.

On Shoes

On Grease

You can see the deep blue pomade through the clear, plastic jar. The white letters. A lid that scrapes the plastic grooves, smooth. It clung to my fingers, though I forgot its smell long ago.

Darkness is defined as the absence of light, completely and partially; when seconds roll over into minutes, hours, and eyes are pressed tightly together. I do not remember being afraid of the dark like other kids, but I had a nightlight nonetheless. It was plastic; its light yellow and shielding, right at my bedside. The darkness was fleeting and fought away; never absolute, like a burning match. Or sunrises: the moon and the stars become the sun, which breaks through the lightless sky like shards of glass. The poets use the word benighted: benighted soul, like a light switching on and off. This I learned about much later in life. I do not remember fearing the dark, but I do remember being given a nightlight.

On Nightlights

On W.E.B DuBois

DuBois wrote that Black people possess a “double consciousness:” this “peculiar sensation,” “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” I cannot remember when I first learned about DuBois’s double consciousness, but it keeps coming up—in lectures, specifically as I begin writing about myself. I only pay attention to the color of my eyes when I stand in front of a mirror. Preferably one in a bathroom, above a sink, so that my hands can be free. There were a few times when it mattered that my eyes were dark brown. Scientifically, eyes—and hair too—cannot be black, they can only be a shade of brown, but I felt the need to check. I would take a strand of my hair, hold it up to my iris, and confirm that my black hair was indeed darker than my eyes. And only my hair is darker—my pupils blend into my irises unless I shine a light in my eyes. Eventually, I became fascinated with their brownness; the darker rim around them that is also only noticeable when illuminated.

You do realize that you say *ax* instead, right?

On Questions

On Earrings (or maybe “On Innocence” instead)

She slipped them into her pocket seamlessly. My friend cheekily plucked two earrings from a value pack while I stood there completely oblivious, trailing my fingers along the rows of white cardstock. My mother warned me about this. She had the money to purchase them, we both did, and I doubt that, after she got home, the earrings—hoops very similar to the ones that dangled from her ears that day—ever made it farther than her dresser. Maybe her jewelry box. She tucked her hair behind her ears tightly; her brunette, loose curls dusting the collar of her coat. She whisked us into the wintery air.

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The Honest Tea: *strong black woman*

Words by Nelsa Tiemtoré

reader: "I smile and I laugh, but inside I am crying for help. I don't feel comfortable letting people see my pain because I feel like I need to be strong. I need to be strong for everyone around me, and I need to be strong for those who came before me in order to honor their legacies. There aren't a lot of black women in this field, and I feel like I need to prove myself or else I have failed everyone..."

according to scholars, the strong black woman is an archetype meant to portray the ideal black woman wikipedia says that she is defined by 3 things "independence, emotional restraint, and caretaking" and another source says she is defined by "a mask of strength, self-reliance/strength, caretaking" these holy trinities, these trifectas of perfection for black women these definitions, though simple, yield a world of complexities

Independence and Self-Reliance

she can do it all on her own
she's that girl and you can't tell her nothing
but when she decides always to be self-reliant
and only be self-reliant, she pushes everyone away,
loneliness ensues, and she forgets that it's okay to ask for help

Emotional Restraint

this is of importance in the face of adversity
when in conflict with a peer and you're trying to be the bigger person
but when restrained too much emotionally,
you start fighting back tears and hiding behind masks
but crying is okay, crying doesn't mean you've lost,
it just means you're human

Caretaking

no, not in the way of the mammy stereotype,
not that type of caretaking
the type of caretaking that we see in

black sisterhood
the way a black woman stands as the backbone of her community
and takes care of everyone
but somehow forgets to take care of herself
she is nurturing but also deserves to be taken care of
even when she doesn't ask for it

Strength

strength has helped black women navigate many spaces that we have traditionally been excluded from, it has helped us battle our way up the corporate ladder and incinerate the stereotypes bestowed by the media strength to carry the legacies of black women who came before and strength to learn how to rebuild but when strength is a mask— we sometimes forget that a strong black woman can also be delicate and soft

like the seasons change, so does the strong black woman, when she's a "girlboss," some might say it's giving, but when she's hiding her trauma behind a persona, it's not and it's in these moments of duality—of wondering if the strong black woman ideal hurts us or helps us—that's when one must question if the archetype has now turned into a stereotype, or if the strong black woman ideal is empowering and has only been misunderstood

dear reader,

it's okay to be strong for other people, but in the process, please do not forget to take care of yourself. your feelings are valid, and you deserve the time to process them. you deserve the same love and support you give to others. sometimes you need to take a step back and just focus on yourself. ask yourself why you feel so much pressure and how you can begin your healing. those are hard questions to answer and beginning your healing journey is difficult, but the transformative peace that comes at the end, it's worth it.

Side Hustle

Words by Clarissa Thorne-Disla

I need money. As the semester comes to an end, I've begun to contemplate seeking employment. It is safe to say that the urge to spend money that I don't necessarily have is starting to carry some weight. In light of this, I've become increasingly interested in how Blackness and student employment intersect at Brown.

It appears that a good sum of Black students on campus believe that we seek work opportunities at higher rates than other demographics. To gauge a better understanding of how widespread that belief is, I asked 10 currently enrolled Black students who are also employed for their opinions, and almost all agreed with that point. When asked if these students consider their work a side hustle, a majority replied yes. Merriam-Webster defines a "side hustle" as "work performed for income supplementary to one's primary job." One could argue that the term side hustle might not function in this context given the mention of a primary job. However, the labor, energy, and time required for full-time students to remain afloat is certainly comparable to that of a full-time job. Thus the term side hustle feels most appropriate in describing the status of student work.

An important question that then follows is why are so many Black students seeking work? In response, most students reported working because they need money to sustain themselves. Below are some extended answers:

"The work I do provides the income that I use during the school year. Although I could ask for money, it's a pivotal time to learn things like financially supporting yourself, so I do not ask."

"I support myself so that I don't ever have to ask for anything."

To better understand these attitudes I honed in on the differing experiences of working for Brown and other sources of employment. For some students receiving financial aid, work-study is included as part of their aid package. Considering the incredible range offered within the work-study program, it is quite appealing. Earlier this year, attending the work-study job fair, I felt quite hopeful interacting with representatives from each program offered. The event was fairly well advertised, featuring a variety of Brown merchandise raffles, elaborate baked goods, and an extensive array of all departments offering student jobs. Based upon the apparent effort put into the event, it seemed pursuing a work-study job could be extremely beneficial.

Despite work-study technically being a part of my

financial aid package, frankly, I'm hesitant to initiate the process. Why should students who need financial assistance to cover the cost of Brown's tuition have to offer their time in exchange for money while other students who do not need economic assistance can determine their time however they choose? Responses on the questionnaire unfortunately only exacerbate my grapples with work-study. When asked if students employed by Brown feel their time is sufficiently rewarded, a majority answered no.

Other possibilities for work fall under a second category of self-employment. Most notably, Black students providing their own hair and nail care services appear to have great success. When asked if Black self-employed students felt their time was sufficiently valued, 100% of respondents answered yes. Does the difference between students employed by Brown vs. students who work for themselves speak to feelings of confinement and a lack of freedom to just be a student without financial burdens?

As my circumstances have become increasingly dire, the accessible nature of work-study seems appealing. In these moments of job seeking I'm left to wonder how Brown can make student employment a more rewarding experience. It is fair to say that despite the circumstances under which any student is seeking work opportunities, they should be able to enjoy employment. I've found that Brown emphasizes students pursuing careers for genuine pleasure rather than societal pressure to achieve perceived success. Yet according to the lack of pleasure many students derive from work-study jobs, there emerges a contradiction. How can Brown enforce an ideology that work after college should be vastly gratifying while subjecting students to unfulfilling conditions?

First-year, Joshua Bala speaks to the frustration he experiences in his work-study job as a safe walker: "You're paid extra on the weekends, but when it starts getting cold and it's freezing outside you don't want to walk. It's \$13 an hour. \$13 an hour is livable but it's not great."

While the hourly wage does seem to range depending on the department, there appears to be an overall discontentment with salaries. Seeing as I was motivated to write this piece as a way to navigate my attitudes toward work-study, this research will inform my future employment decisions. Though for the time being I'll remain unemployed, if that does change, the likelihood of me pursuing a job through Brown is incredibly slim.

Discussion:

The Untold Tale of Upperclassmen Experience

Words by Arrissa Tachie-Menson

"The only time you enjoy college is your freshman year. From there, it gets harder as you progress."

This was the advice I received from my coworker in 2021 before I started my first year at Brown. I took his advice with a grain of salt, determined to make all four years a fun experience. However, as I enter my fall semester of junior year and reflect on my first two years at Brown, I see he was right all along.

The first-year experience is different for many individuals. Though I cannot speak for everyone, I have noticed one distinct difference now as an upperclassman in the amount of support one receives.

Students at Brown are given academic advisors, Meiklejohn leaders, Bruno leaders, and others to assist them throughout their first year in college. When you search online and social media for college advice, it is usually aimed at underclassmen: freshmen and sophomores. Though I strongly advocate for any freshman or sophomore attending a university to be provided with support, upperclassmen also need this help. However, as one becomes an upperclassman, it is automatically assumed that they can handle college on their own while guiding others in the years below them. Social assumptions that a college junior or senior is capable of handling college must be dismantled. Although college juniors and seniors do have a few years of experience, we must acknowledge the fact that college can be challenging for all individuals regardless of their year.

During my freshman year at Brown, I attempted to dissect what the college experience was about. I divided it into four components: academic, social, professional, and personal. The academic component represents a college student's classes, whether that student is a STEM or humanities concentrator, their grades, their interactions with their professors and TAs, and other aspects of the academic sphere. A huge contributing factor to the academic component for Brown students is the Open Curriculum, which allows students to explore their passions and interests in an academic setting. The social component represents a student navigating the social scene of college

such as extracurriculars, events, parties, making and maintaining friendships, and the communities that they identify with. The professional component represents internships and the student's overall network of people that can aid them in their careers. Lastly, the personal component represents a student's family, finances, and mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

Given my understanding of the college experience, I find it alarming that there is a common notion that juniors and seniors can navigate college without assistance and still be expected to support others. For Black juniors and seniors at Brown, the college experience is not something that can be figured out as an underclassman. The truth is all students need help and support. College is not only an institution that provides education to individuals, it is also a representation of life and its challenges, personal growth, and personal development. Additionally, as Black students who attend a predominately white institution, we have to acknowledge our everyday battles against racism, classism, and many other forms of oppression we experience not only at Brown but also within the Black@Brown community. There is a multitude of identity groups that Black underclassmen and upperclassmen correlate to their struggles and challenges, not only at Brown but in their journey through life after college. This reality for all Black students at this institution requires that everyone, including upperclassmen who may seem to have it all together, need assistance navigating college, their identity groups, and much more.

It wasn't until the first few weeks of school this year that I analyzed how my schedule and dynamics with friends and family had begun to change. From this, and from learning from the experience of past upperclassmen, I gained knowledge of the reality of being a junior and an upperclassman overall. As a junior, my responsibilities were my school work, career, and extracurricular activities, in that order. This was a significant shift from my past mentality in my freshman and sophomore years which was about finding community, making friends, and taking part in my school's social scene. I was so invested

in the social component of college that I had a hard time balancing my personal, professional, and academic life with it. My priority was having a fun time, making memories, and adjusting to my identity groups and how to navigate it at a PWI. However, as one reaches junior year, priorities shift to life after Brown and planning one's future. Additionally, college upperclassmen also have to handle the challenges of journeying through their 20s, which is a challenging experience on top of being a college student. As a result of this major priority for juniors and seniors, upperclassmen are less likely to engage in campus and other social events to make sure their career as well as academic success is not in jeopardy. As a first-generation college student, adjusting to junior year has been the most stressful experience in my life. It has been a consistent fear of feeling that I am on my own trying to secure my future.

Within the upperclassmen experience, there is an invisible obligation for upperclassmen to support underclassmen. While this is fine for many people as we understand that underclassmen need assistance, we may need to recognize that the individuals who assist are burned out and need help themselves. In addition to this, there is a standard we hold for upperclassmen to know everything about the college we attend and to have their life together. One Black junior student whom I interviewed stated, "I'm learning with people where everything is on campus, funny enough, even as a junior. The basic things are known, but some things that aren't a part of my concentration such as buildings or different places on campus [are not]."

Aside from this, there are positive components of the upperclassmen college experience as one becomes closer to their authentic identity and personality. Setting boundaries and recognizing responsibilities is crucial to not only one's 20s but the overall adult journey. There is beauty in navigating college and watching individuals grow and evolve into their true path. However, I ask that we recognize in the college sphere that we should advocate for all individuals, including upperclassmen, to be supported throughout college.

Words by Sarah Ogundare

On August 29, RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) charges were filed against 61 activists involved in the movement to Stop Cop City. These racketeering charges often applied to accusations of organized crime and are unprecedented given the markedly decentralized nature of the movement to Stop Cop City. Evidence of their “criminal activity” and “conspiracy”—which is said to have started on the day of George Floyd’s murder—includes “one individual signing his name as ‘ACAB,’ an \$11.91 reimbursement for the purchase of glue, and one defendant taking pictures of police,” according to the Atlanta Press Collective.

“All Eyes on Atlanta:”

Cop City is an investment of at least \$67 million in an 85-acre model ‘city’ to be used as a police training facility – a project backed by national corporations and banks such as Bank of America, Delta Airlines, and Coca-Cola. To construct Cop City, also known as the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, Weelaunee Forest—said to be “one of Atlanta’s lungs” by the Center for Biological Diversity—would be partially deforested. Not only does this forest provide clean air and a forested canopy to the world’s fourth most urban area, but it also protects neighboring low-income Black neighborhoods from flooding, according to the Legal Defense Fund. This land carries a 20th-century history as a prison farm after settlers forced the Muscogee people from the land, according to the New Yorker.

Atlanta is also the most surveilled city in the US. The Atlanta Police Foundation monitors its citizens through “more than 12,800 private and public interconnected” surveillance cameras. According to The Guardian, Cop City would only boost the police presence immediately adjacent to the lower-income neighborhood of color lining Weelaunee Forest. As Garrett Brand, a Brown sophomore and organizer, said, “Building these Cop Cities allows police to overtrain themselves into policing Black and Brown communities.” These arguments and more were discussed during Atlanta’s June 5th City Council Meeting surrounding Cop City.

Chants like “Viva, viva Tortuguita” echoed through and around Atlanta’s City Hall as Atlanta locals and organizers from across the country—from university students to senior citizens—rallied against allocating 67 million dollars to Cop City. Tortuguita, also known as Manuel Paez Terán, was occupying Weelaunee Forest in protest and had his hands raised when he was murdered by the police, according to NPR. Joining the over 400 people at City Hall were Jo—whose reading growing up was rooted in the work of Black radical organizers—and Garrett—who drew on his intersecting interests in prison abolition and environmental justice. In the hours that Jo waited outside the building in the line extending around the block, they were in community with folks from tattoo artists to UGA students.

For Garrett, Cop City epitomizes the intersectional nature of activism. This came through in the speeches he heard at City Hall from the parents, children, university students, and 70-year-old women who spoke. Garrett recalled one woman who emphasized environmental racism and others who discussed reproductive rights, as constructing Cop City

would worsen air pollution, lead to increased asthma rates, and worsen maternal mortality rates for Black women. All of them contributed to being the “most diverse coalition of people in terms of race, gender, ability, political beliefs.”

After countless speeches against Cop City, the Council meeting ended at 2 a.m. with an 11-4 council vote to approve allocating 67 million dollars to Cop City. For Jo and Garrett, these powerful gatherings kickstarted their organizing to Stop Cop City. Jo got involved with phone banking campaigns while Garrett joined Student Coalition meetings, which did screen printing for posters to give out at the rallies they attended, supported the active Faith Coalition against Cop City, and planned long-term movement strategy. Both of their involvements in the summer of 2023 spurred them to continue advocating from Providence, despite the distance.

From Garrett’s perspective, this movement is especially effective because of its decentralized, unpredictable nature. With a coalition this broad comes supporters with different skill sets and risk levels—from traditional campaigning strategies to social media posting to more direct action. For example, on 11/20, a Block Cop City action organized a march and tree planting rally in the forest to demonstrate the importance of preserving the forest. Instead, police with AR15s, trucks, attack dogs, tear gas, and arrest threats made to press members prevented the 400 to 500 community members from even arriving at Weelaunee Forest. According to Garrett, the brutality of their response only added “energy and purpose” to this movement, as building Cop City would only amplify this level of violence.” As a result, getting involved in the movement is all the more important, accessible, possible, and necessary.

Two Brown Atlantans on the Movement to Stop Cop City

Moving forward, both emphasized that the police’s increased militarization is not an issue isolated to Atlanta. Baltimore has a Cop City \$330 million proposal, and Chicago has a #NoCopAcademy campaign to halt their \$128 million construction, according to Southside Weekly. Additionally, the GILEE (Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange) program epitomizes the international impacts of increased policing, as it promotes collaboration with Israel’s military and shares its tactics.

So, support remains as important as ever, especially by spreading awareness in conversations with friends. As Jo stated, “It’s in our interpersonal connections that we radicalize people.” This can look like attending teach-ins like the ones Garrett and Jo led on November 6th and bringing up what you learn in later discussions. Garrett and Jo encouraged supporters to follow Instagram accounts like Community Movement Builders, read stories from reputable sources like the Atlanta Press Collective, and distribute and support mutual aid funds like the Atlanta Solidarity Fund for legal support. In whichever ways you are able, as Garrett said in closing, keep “all eyes on Atlanta.”

Vanishing Voices:

Words by Helena Evans

1984, *Beloved*, *The Hate U Give*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Thirteen Reasons Why*—these are a select few of the titles of books that have been banned in numerous public school districts throughout Florida. The *Miami New Times* reported that there have been 1,406 book bans in Florida during the 2022–2023 school year.

In a March news release entitled “Governor Ron DeSantis Debunks Book Ban Hoax,” Florida’s governor claimed that the only books that were being banned in schools were those containing “pornographic content and other types of violent and age-inappropriate content.” Additionally, according to Florida Commissioner of Education Manny Diaz, Jr., “under Governor DeSantis, Florida is committed to rigorous academic content and high standards so that students learn how to think and receive the tools necessary to go forth and make great decisions.” So, what are we meant to do when there is distinct evidence of book banning, but this evidence falls contrary to claims made by official governmental leaders?

My mom joined a book club in August called the “Banned Book Club” that meets every month at our favorite local bookstore in Miami, *Books & Books*. The club was started by a 16-year-old high school student named Iris Mogul, who wanted to have discussions about these books since she was unable to at school. I asked Mogul where her desire to start such a book club stemmed from. She said, “I’ve always loved reading. At the beginning of high school, my stress led me to view reading as an obligation instead of a pleasure. I lost my interest in books but found it again once I started using Miami’s disgracefully slow public transit system. In terms of resisting unjust legislation, I have always been passionate about social change and politics.” The book club’s first assigned reading was James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Here, Baldwin

explores the narrative of a Black teenager in 1930s Harlem as he struggles with his relationship with his family and the church, and highlights subjects such as racism, violence, explicit sex, treatment of women, and profanity.

Scholars and students alike do not have a common consensus on why these books have been banned. Some see whitewashing as the goal, while others imagine it as a more pervasive form of brainwashing. While DeSantis continues to maintain that the so-called book banning was a hoax, it appears that there are, however, thematic ties between the aforementioned books and their resulting censorship. To this point, Mogul says, “DeSantis and his efforts to erase important history and literature have impacted me directly. I have noticed my teachers tiptoeing around uncomfortable topics out of fear of the authoritarian school system.”

All these books address social issues and injustices prevalent in their respective contexts, as they delve into deeper themes of racism, discrimination, and inequality. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* interrogate how societal norms impact identity, particularly in the context of race and gender; both novels highlight growing up and living as Black in a white world, with *Beloved* set during the time of slavery, and *The Bluest Eye* during the 1940s. *The Hate U Give* is a modern story about a high school girl’s struggle of switching between her two worlds—her poorer Black neighborhood and privileged whiter private school—and the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores coming-of-age themes as they relate to growing up “other” in a society that has named one different from the norm. Ideas connected to dystopian worlds and their connection to

power structures and societal control are highlighted in 1984, which explores a society ruled by an omnipresent leader, and in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where a totalitarian society subjects women into positions of child-bearing slavery.

Due to the overlapping themes in the topics that are considered inappropriate—topics that are often conceived as being too difficult to talk about in colloquial settings—books are being taken off library shelves and out of school curriculums. All of these books emphasize themes of trauma inflicted on marginalized communities; because of this, readers are left to think that this purposeful erasure of certain subjects is used to keep younger generations from learning the truth about our country’s history.

In our conversation, Mogul touched on this topic, saying, “There is reluctance to acknowledge systems of oppression that have plagued this country since its beginnings. Having conversations about real topics like white supremacy [and] systemic racism can be uncomfortable, but [are] absolutely necessary. If we don’t come to terms with our history, it will repeat itself.” Unfortunately for the country’s youth, censorship of books emphasizes how America has historically kept marginalized voices out of normative conversations. However, as an eleventh-grade student actively in the fight, Mogul told me, “I would be lying if I were saying I never felt fearful, but most of what I feel is hope. I am surrounded by brilliant, creative, and dedicated young people who pay attention to what happens around them. I feel confident that this generation and generations to come will fight with all their blood, sweat, and tears to resist censorship and enact change.”

The Quiet Erasure in Florida’s Schools

Exonerated Central Park Member Yusef Salaam Wins New York City Council Seat

Words by Madelyn Amoo-Otoo

"I want to thank every one of you for your belief in our vision for a better future rooted in fairness, equality, and justice," stated Yusef Salaam in his victory speech to proud supporters in New York. Yusef Salaam's journey, from being formerly convicted as a member of the Exonerated Five (formerly known as the "Central Park Five") to winning a City Council seat in Central Harlem, resonates as a testament to resilience and redemption. His journey from wrongful incarceration to a position of political influence stands as a symbol of hope and transformation in a community often marred by adversity.

Salaam's story is deeply intertwined with the tragic tale of The Central Park Five—a group of teenagers wrongfully convicted in 1989 of brutalizing a white female jogger in Central Park. Alongside his peers, Salaam endured a staggering seven years in prison with charges of rape, assault robbery, and riot.

The time that the Central Park Five spent incarcerated—ranging from seven to thirteen years—reflects the flawed nature of the legal system. The documentary *When They See Us* sheds light on the events leading to their wrongful convictions by showcasing the unbreakable bond formed among these teenagers who were united by innocence and a shared fight for justice.

Despite their harrowing ordeal, the emergence of DNA evidence and the confession of the real perpetrator finally led to the exoneration of Salaam and his friends in 2002. However, their re-entries into society were marked by struggles, with Salaam

facing the grim reality of eviction and choosing between paying rent or feeding his family upon returning to Harlem.

Yet, Salaam's journey shifted from victimhood to resilience by using his past as a catalyst for change. His uncontested election to the New York City Council underscores not just a personal victory but a societal shift—one that acknowledges and corrects past injustices.

His journey—from a wrongfully convicted teenager to a council member—epitomizes the power of the human will to overcome hardships. Salaam's ascent isn't just an individual achievement; it's a collective win for those who have suffered injustices at the hands of the criminal justice system.

Salaam's victory serves as a reminder of the system's need for reform, particularly when it comes to cases involving racial bias and wrongful convictions. It highlights the importance of supporting individuals who have experienced such injustices and creating opportunities for them to thrive and contribute positively to their communities.

As a City Council member, Salaam now has the platform to advocate for criminal justice reform, equity, and the rights of those facing similar challenges. His story resonates with many, and his election provides hope for a more just and inclusive society. It underscores the importance of recognizing and rectifying past injustices while working towards a more equitable future.

Million Dollar Mouth

Art by Praises Amponsah



In recent years, there has been an uptick in the number of Black Americans who use recreational DNA websites such as 23andMe and Ancestry.com to learn more about their ethnic background. What many do not know is that a simple DNA test, whether it be for ancestry or health purposes, can significantly impact one's qualification for life insurance.

Genetic Data:

Words by Tope Adetunji

Life insurance, while it may not be important to us now as young people, is very important as we get older. When considering having children, life insurance allows beneficiaries to claim a financial payout after death. This money can be used to cover educational expenses, mortgage payments, funeral costs, and many other things. As beneficial as life insurance is, one's genetic data can play a big part in whether one receives it and how one's premium is calculated. In 2008, the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA) was passed. This law bans health insurance companies from denying coverage to those with a gene mutation; however, it does not apply to life insurance companies, long-term care, or disability insurance. It is within the right of these companies to ask applicants about their health, family history, and any genetic information they may possess to determine whether they are eligible for coverage.

This loophole within GINA has proved costly for thousands of Americans who have undergone genetic testing or done an AncestryDNA test. Black people are prone to certain diseases or ailments, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, diabetes, and sickle cell disease. In an article by Fast Company titled, "If You Want Life Insurance, Think Twice Before Getting a Genetic Test," an anonymous source who chose to be identified by the name "Dave" was recommended by his doctor to get a genetic test. Dave was at risk of having a harmful breast cancer (BRCA) gene after learning that his sister had it. Men with this harmful gene have an increased risk of prostate cancer. However, after hearing about people being denied life insurance due to such findings, he ultimately decided against this testing.

"On the one hand, I know that there is something I could do that could help prolong my life," said Dave, "But I'm terrified that my insurance company will find out if I get a positive result. This is not the calculation I want to be doing when it comes to my health."

It is a shame that taking preventative measures for one's health or an ancestry DNA test can lead to perverse outcomes. This system is backward because failing to take these preventive measures leads to a greater need for life insurance. Some recreational DNA databases also sell genetic information to pharmaceutical companies and clinical research facilities and even provide genetic data to law enforcement. The most popular example of this was in the case of the Golden State Killer. While law enforcement agencies claim to use this information for good purposes, such as solving cold cases, it poses privacy concerns. Most people do not expect their genetic information to be seen by anyone other than those doing the genetic testing. As this information is very personal, the fact that it may be used against someone for life insurance purposes or even used by law enforcement for personal or proximate identification is an invasion of privacy. Moreover, the fact that many people do not know that this is a possibility adds to the privacy concerns. Recreational DNA websites have either changed their policies to accommodate the concerns of their customers or continued to sell private information. Certain genetic testing programs such as Color Genomics try to offer full transparency to potential users about genetic discrimination, while 23andMe has stated that it is "in support of state and federal laws to 'add life, disability, and long-term care to a list of protections.'" However, this is not enough.

A Double-Edged Sword

I anticipate that as more Black Americans find out about the dangers of genetic testing, they will seek it out much less. These choices, however, have health and cultural implications. While life insurance companies do not discriminate based on race, the sheer fact that there are many health disparities between ethnic groups is an indication that Black people, who are predisposed to certain health conditions and already receive inadequate health care in the U.S., are more at risk of not receiving life insurance. Moreover, fewer Black Americans will be doing ancestry DNA kits, which may not seem significant, but with a history of enslavement, displacement, and natal alienation, it has detrimental effects. So what will it be: your cultural ties and health or life insurance?

Words by Favour Akpokiere

The “F-Word”

Yup. Let's talk about it.

No, not *that* F-word—the word “**Failure**”—and let me tell you, it's not as scary as it sounds.

At an Ivy League, the concept itself seems so taboo, but when we learn to embrace failure and redefine what it means, we are able to take away the power that this concept holds over us.

When I failed my very first college midterm, I felt my entire world come crashing down. All sorts of thoughts were running through my head, and imposter syndrome hit hard. *Wow, you used to be smart, what happened....Lots of other people aced that test, why couldn't you?... You don't deserve to be here...*

The reason failure has such a negative connotation in society is because it is oftentimes equated with self-worth: if you don't succeed at accomplishing **x,y,z**, the world can make you feel worthless. So now, whenever I'm facing a big goal, I have been working on adopting the mindset of separating my failures from who I am as a person. **Failure is a redirection. It's time for re-evaluation.** The moment that I got my midterm score, I realized that I should've taken some time to reflect. I didn't take into consideration the fact that my study strategy wasn't as effective as I thought, or that my time management skills could've been a lot better. Crucial reminders like those could've saved me from entering a cycle of self-doubt.

Admittedly, moments of failure sting. To dodge disappointment, the temptation to avoid trying altogether can be strong. But let's be real—it's the risk of failing that makes the success that much sweeter. You could've crashed and burned, but instead, you demolished your goal. Plus, I can guarantee that if you try something and fail, you'll at least learn valuable lessons from your mistakes compared to if you never tried at all.

I actually have another personal example of this. During my freshman year of college, I wanted to completely reinvent myself. In high school, I was the shy girl who just kept her nose in her books and did nothing extraordinary—so one day I tried out for various dance teams. I have never danced on a team in my life, yet I was truly convinced that the solo bathroom performances that I put on in the shower would be enough for me to make a team. The morning of the audition, I was so excited. I was already picturing myself as a dancer, but when it came down to it, **the audition was truly horrible.** I couldn't keep up with any of the fast-paced movements and my head was starting to spin. I ended up calling it quits early and making up an excuse that I felt like throwing up so that I could leave. **Did I make the team?** NO. But was I able to learn a lot? You bet. I learned that I didn't really enjoy dancing competitively as much as I thought. And that **it truly doesn't hurt to try.** I feel like my experience made me truly believe that statement for the first time ever.

Sharing our personal stories of failure serves as a powerful reminder that the journey to success is seldom a smooth, linear path. When we openly discuss our experiences of falling short, whether it's a botched assignment or a challenging class, we break down the facade of perfection that often surrounds academic environments. Failure is a universal experience, yet society's silence can lead individuals to feel isolated in their struggles. When we open up about our own setbacks, we peel back the curtain on the illusion that everyone else is effortlessly succeeding. It's a powerful acknowledgment that failure is an essential part of the learning process. It reassures others that stumbling on the path to success is not only normal but a crucial aspect of growth.

Failure is

Painful.

Beautiful.

Humbling.

Inevitable.

But it's *not* a definition of who you are.

Failure isn't

Weakness.

Permanent.

A reason to give up.

Rot (verb): gradual deterioration through lack of attention or opportunity

"Languages are encoded in gender. Consider the gendering of the Spanish language. Or the connotations of the word Master: do you not think about power?" — Mumia Abu-Jamal

I. Earth

I am the ground that Goliath falls on. His safety, his cave, his beginning and end. The elevation to his step, and the mossy pillow he lays his head on to rest. I am the earth that buries his body when he departs. The earth that churns out flora bright like sunbeams on an April morning. Like foliage in the garden of Eden.

I am the arbiter of rot; the architect of vegetation. The giver of new life.

I am but a mother.

Because is the earth not but a mother?

Who began as a bride? Supple and sweet and lovely, married and giving birth to daughters? Daughters who will be quelled like Eve, rebuked like Lilith, and married off to men of their own? Daughters who in turn become mothers, pummeled and disemboweled? Who are reduced to sediment, trampled upon and crushed until they are nothing but the dirt.

But I must digress; I am not yet a wife.

II. Grandma

I do not think my Grandma knew how to be an earth.

In that, she was not the dirt but was the world. Was the solar system. Was the nebula bursting into the cosmos, stewarding all she had on to glory. She never cried; only about the things that mattered. And her efforts were never pointless.

Her mother was a wild terrain, reeling and sprouting radical vegetation, rooted nowhere but spreading everywhere, abundantly gracing the South with new life. Grandma never had her ways but she possessed her spirit. Perhaps that is why Grandma was never trampled. Never fully owned. Was but a canary, singing and beating desperately against a cage called Devotion.

Her voice was beautiful and agonizing and strong. So strong that grandpa tried to catch it at her throat and squeeze it into submission. But how does one tame a wild bird? Tame a wild song taught through generations?

Her spirit was too strong. She slipped out the cage yet never left its side. Stockholm syndrome. Or a head to carry back to camp and show victory, I suppose.

But I must digress; she was not my mother.

Roots

Words by Naomi Nesmith

Art by El Boveda

Guess Who Stole X-Mas



III. Mother

My mother dances in the morning. Salsa steps to old classics while she cleans. Sways to the rhythm of *Boricua* croons, teary-eyed and yearning. She cleans because she must or it will bother her she says. Because it will make her anxious.

She cleans like she is in servitude to a king. To a God, even. Not just her family.

Her movements are dutiful, militant, well-paced, yet somber. I sigh; I think that she is beautiful. The sort of beauty rich with sadness *princesas* with light skin and long hair carry before their rescue. Before finding out that they are royalty. I hope to never clean this way. To never be this type of lovely.

Her language is female: birthing, soothing, conquered, unnerved. Her words are careful when she speaks. When the fervor in a room lulls and she grasps at entry to be heard. Like a fragile white *princesa*, *borinqueña y nacida en la isla*.

Her husband booms over her, dominant and conquering. He is the beast he slays and the warrior who found her. Who rescued her and brought her to his castle. He snarls at every word she says and shoots back words like arrows. She winces and subsides. She is a diamond but not born of coal.

The warrior-beast is pleased and enjoys the cleanliness of his castle. He has quelled a rebellion in his eyes. He never notices the quietness of his rib. Never notices the words choked on and swelling in her throat.

I worry for *mi madre princesa*. For the tears that form at the corners of her eyes. For the words left bleeding in her throat.

It must not be easy to be her.

To have had a father drunk with grief. Who borrowed dimes from his daughter with slurred promises to return them. Who never knew love without pain. Without adversity. Who died just as he entered the world: small. Alone. Unheard. A piece of *yagua* adrift and floating through life.

To have a mother bitter like the Atlantic Ocean, castaway at sea. Drowning in the journey to America, gripping photo albums and mother tongue. She outlived her husband through sheer strength of will, determined and angry and sorrowful. She carries that stubbornness now; even in her decline. I surmise her dementia is a recitation in forgetting. In leaving the present and rewriting the past until we are all but petals in her plants, pruned into compliance.

I never knew *mis abuelos* deepest wishes. Never knew more than the stories *mi madre princesa* seldom told in passing. Caught in a language I can only half comprehend, their words fluttered away like doves I could not pin down and attach meaning to.

The warrior-beast does not like to hear about *mis abuelos*. Does not indulge *mi madre princesa*'s stories in his hardstone english. So *la princesa* sighs and turns away, caught up in a tower called Marriage far away from her people.

Somedays I wish to be the prince that saves her. That brings back *isla* sun to her dreary North American world. But I am neither a man nor her saving grace, though I am her daughter, soon to be taken and disemboweled all the same.

But I must digress, for I am not yet my mother.

(Part 2)

IV. Time

So much depends upon a red wheel-barrow, glazed with rainwater and carrying the salt of the earth like pieces of time dripping out of an hourglass. I hold it in my hand, breathing in deeply, letting kinship wash over me as it falls back to the earth.

I wonder what time would say to my corpse after it has killed me. After it has hollowed me out and enveloped my skin, black like the earth that takes it. After I am decomposing; eaten by maggots, rotting and unraveled, sitting eternally in my own filth until my bones are trampled upon.

Until they are stripped bare like the peel of an apple. Chip by chip you carve out places for yourself within me. You point and decide what is of value; what you'll eat. You conquer me and I am left devoid of red. Devoid of color.

Because men see me and see an absence of red. See something to take by force. See an apple, ripe and untouched and tempting, thinking first to claim it.

I thought you were the color red. I thought you were fiercely striking and lovely like a promise of something more. Something epic. Something to escape the toils of girlhood: of starving and scavenging for beauty like the last hit of a drug too expensive for me to squander.

But now I'm left sniffing glue, red like lipstick. Like lust and desire. Like projections and smoke screens and rubble.

I was not yet red. I am not yet capable- am not a canary, bright and free and able to escape the chains that want to take me.

Because the men are here and they're hungry. They want a captive, a corpse, a pig to bleed. Bleed red, because red means you're ready to be pillaged. A soil fertile enough is red for you. It is soft and accommodating for your hubris at the expense of my humanity.

A red that provides you bliss- that makes you think 40 lashes start to spell out a smile even when the blood and meat of your bones cascade into dirt on the colosseum floor. An array of vengeance so strong that Satan turns away. Looks with disgust at the calamity of man.

I will be a good woman. Because to be a woman is to grieve. To be an absence of color. To be cultivated to produce the workings of man, supporting life as it comes, plucked from our wombs without second thought.

To be a woman is to have things taken from you without second thought.

But I must digress, for I am but a woman all the same. From red I have been wrought and to red I will depart.

V. Time Reprieve

So much depends

Upon a red skull

Glistening with blood and

Carrying the fruits of decomposition

So much gold, says the scarecrow,

So much woe.

Thuck, thuck, says the metronome

Placed out into the field. I

Laugh with it. grieve with it.

The passage of time dripping down my face

Like legs of wet matter

It hurts; beauty is pain.

I scream

colors into the night

Oozing into corn crops

A canvas display Lilith grinned at-

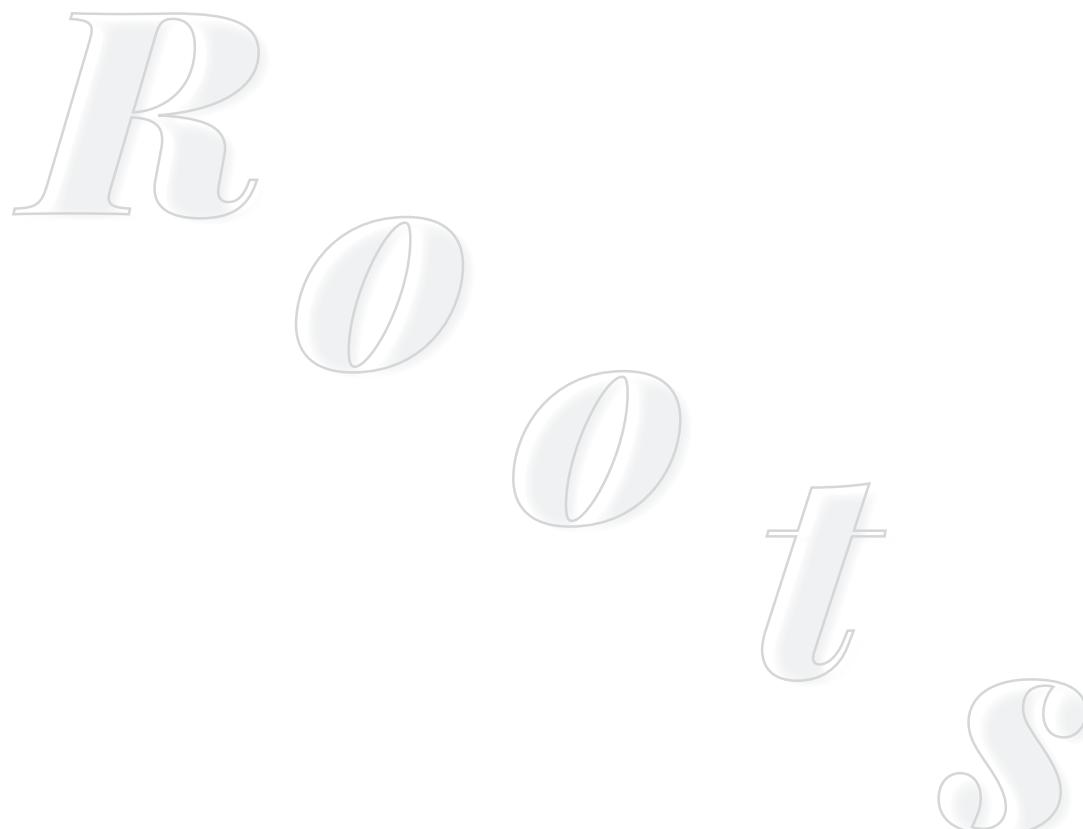
in her turbulent glory.

The sky cried lightning,

Heaven turned away from her.

Confessions of a healing sky.

Left barren and alone.



becoming an artist

Words by Destiny Kristina

There are so many parts of my life I have forgotten. There are parts of myself I no longer know. That is terrifying. Art is meant to be life, but I have forgotten mine. *How do you make art?* I think the earliest memory I have is when I was five years old, and I'm often convinced that I made it up based on stories I've heard from that time. Memories feel like dreams anyway, half real, too vague, slightly unplaceable. I don't have them at my grasp, I can't reach them with my fingertips. I only know them when they're jerked out of me, from the deep recesses, in the middle of conversations late at night, or early in the morning, or middle of the day. The time doesn't really matter.

Memories might just be dreams. Both of them are composed of things that we think should not happen, should not be possible. A miracle. Life is full of miracles. Life is a miracle, and if life is art, and art is life, then art is a miracle. I think of artists as people who have different brains than mine, who paint on blank walls with splatters that end up in the shape of a childhood that does not belong to them or me. *How do you make art?* It's a story in itself, even when they say it is a reflection. How do they decide what to make? How do they put their life into a museum?

What is my collection for the gallery? I have the first notebook I used to tell stories. I would pass the book around for my friends to read, and feel a glow in my chest when they asked me what would happen next. A small part of me thought that they might have been asking to be nice. My whole body was small then, so it was a bigger part than the one that resides in me now.

There's a doubt in my writing—in my art—what is art? Am I making art? *How do you make art?* Have I been making it this whole time? Have I ever made it before in my life? Am I meant to decide?

I looked up art in the dictionary.

art. /ärt/ noun

1. the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.

“the art of the Renaissance”

Similar:

fine art

artwork

creative activity

2. the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.

“the visual arts”

I imagine things all the time. Is the fifth generation of my Sims 4 family art? This is not a rhetorical question. I've been playing since I was eleven. Maybe ten. The ages started to blend together as soon as I was done with them, like my tweendom had to be discarded. I'm closer to twenty now than twelve. Will I throw these years away too? Or maybe I'll just lock them in a box, only to be opened when I'm old, and a child, a child of my child, with big brown eyes that look straight out of a family album, asks me what my life used to be like. If I make it that far. I haven't reached middle age, but I'm somehow always in crisis. I don't know if I've always been this way. I don't remember that far back.

I remember hearing that I had an old soul. I liked old music. I was mature for my age, the age being four. And five. And so on. Am I mature now? I feel more like a child than I ever have. I always wished to be older. I wish it now. But I hate it. The way everything falls on my shoulders. The way I'm alone now, for the sake of independence. The way the quiet is too quiet when I can't hear the heartbeats of the people who used to hold my hand. The way I don't know how to hate because I was taught that I shouldn't.

I don't think I hate anything. I don't know if I ever have. Hate is too strong, too poisonous. Hate is not art. Not my art, at least. If I have any. *How do you make art?* How do you make anything?

How do you make life? How do you make memories? How do you make dreams? How do you make a moment? How do you make something that you know you'll remember forever? How do you know you haven't already forgotten it? *How do you make art?*

This is just thought notes

Oh to dream of you walking
 The mayo rings around your mouth
 I thought it was disgusting
 Your dencher case full of ashes
 Your white teeth, your big eyes bore into the bone
 Your narrow nose and thin lipped smile that you passed onto me
 Your inquisitive tone
 The arrogant arch of your voice sails through my rough waters
 I think I have your charm
 The way you look at people and make them feel seen
 To dream of you walking is to stay up crying because I have no one to watch the history channel with
 Your knobby knees cracking and ankle monitor flashing green
 Blue jeans and leather shoes
 Cigarettes have always smelled of home
 The day I closed my eyes as the sun touched me and said my favorite color was orange and you said yours was blue
 Oh how you were my sky and I was the sun with even knowing it
 Your blocky capital letter handwriting
 Munchkie
 Skin and bones and irish spring
 Cigarettes and sunshine

Words by Yenée Berta

Legs and All

Your weak leg drags across the plain terrain of gravel. When I was younger you carried yourself,
 your leg, as if it were a child sleeping. Tentatively heaving it over years of sidewalk.
 But as the gout crystallized around your joints, you couldn't help but burrow for a new beginning
 Toiling for a treasure that was never there
 Lamenting in bottles of liquor
 The delicate child you once lifted above all things in the universe
 Wallowed within herself
 Dreamt of solar systems that were really just sidewalks
 Became another meaningless body
 You, the porter
 Me, the baggage
 I can't help but sickly fantasize about slicing your leg off.
 I can't decide if I want it to feel like butter or quick sand or both
 If I want you to run or fly
 How you need your leg for both
 How have I bestowed myself upon you just to drift away once more
 And how can a leg drift away if not cut?
 How can a daughter pile up into pieces,
 to exist only when she is called on a drunken Sunday night
 To be vital but worth so little must be my own fault.
 Forgive me.

Respite

"Take a nap and dream of me walking"
 I dream of mayo rings wrapped around your mouth
 Something like white halos
 My glare of misunderstanding
 Your sureness in the divinity of the white sauce
 I wondered why you liked it so much
 Now I see that it was supernatural
 Heaven
 If this is heaven
 If this is heaven then it smells like cigarettes and sunshine. Your dencher case full of ashes is confetti
 If this is heaven, our trips to 7-11 are voyages through unknown terrain
 The sidewalk is baptized with the soles of our feet
 Your Steel Reserve Beer is a liquid lifeline and I am a crutch
 If heaven exists the passageway is through your narrow nose and thin lipped smile you passed to me
 Your endless eyes you kept for yourself
 Heaven is your inquisitive tone cloaked in baggy blue jeans
 Even when the arrogant arch of your voice that sails through my rough waters,
 I have to relent sometimes
 Sometimes I
 Pull back the layers of skin and bone to smell the irish spring soap
 To see you as you are
 Your knobby knees cracking and ankle monitor flashing green is all just a part of paradise
 Your face collapsed in a book holding the secrets of the universe
 Your wide toothed grin glistening
 Nothing is ever that beautiful but you are
 Sometimes I
 think about our heaven
 The day I closed my eyes as the sun softened against my lashes
 I said my favorite color was orange
 and you said yours was blue
 Oh how you were my sky
 and I was your sun without even knowing it

Tone It Down

Competitive Public Speaking as a Black Woman

Words by Ayoola Fadahunsi

I have spent eight years of my life on a stage, setting a scene, arguing over political dilemmas, and proving my innocence as a “mock” defendant. Competitive public speaking has emboldened me, giving me the confidence to speak and engage in any space, it has also left me defeated, demanding that I must change, that I must tone it down.

“Aggressive”

I started public speaking as an eager 12-year-old, who was not fit to be a track star. One year of track informed me of my physical limitations, sparking my venture into speech. Speech was where I embraced my hidden desire to perform. It allowed me to tell the stories of others, translate narratives into dramatic readings, and become someone with experiences beyond my own.

“Mean”

In speech, I mastered the art of poetry interpretation—reciting poems and inserting life into them through dramatic yet strategic expression, tonal inflections, and hand movements. By bringing the text to life, speech awakened a vibrancy within me, unlike my failed attempt at running, my speech inquisition was successful and my achievements gave me much-needed confidence in middle school.

“Bold”

This confidence was short-lived, however, as speech extended to debate in high school, where I competed in both poetry interpretation and Lincoln-Douglas debate. Debate gave me the opportunity to argue, and I eagerly utilized every minute of my allotted time to defend my stance. Debate allowed me to be a “lawyer,” cosplaying at my future career. But disillusion quickly set in as debate also exposed me to numerous micro-aggressions, and taught me that I needed to make myself digestible for others.

“One of the judges told me that you were a bit aggressive and mean during your debate.”

“I think you can tone it down a bit, your boldness can be problematic at times. You can be a good debater AND have a pleasant demeanor.”

“I heard a judge in the break room telling people that he could not stand watching your rounds.”

Debate was my pride and joy, a space where my mind could configure unconventional arguments to make a claim. Countless hours were spent filing through hundreds of pages of case briefs, and sourcing material to prove my philosophical argument. Each debate topic (standardized testing, fossil fuel subsidies, nuclear weapons) became my own personal dissertation, my arguments in rounds, a chance to defend that month’s efforts.

“Problematic”

5 a.m. Saturday and Sunday mornings, two-hour car journeys, and never-ending pizza-for-lunch encapsulated debate tournament weekends. Each tournament was a chance to show my knowledge. I walked into each round with a mission, a purpose. My passion for debate fueled me, but this approach was received in various ways. Passion became my downfall it seemed, as judges routinely told me I was aggressive and unpleasant, told me to tone it down.

“Un-likeable”

I didn’t know what *it* meant, and if *it* was simply me being myself then I was at a loss. I could tone down the volume of a song, and tone down the heat on the stove, but I was not an object with a built-in off button. That did not seem to matter though, there was something unpalatable about me and I sought to change my disposition.

“Loud”

Debate went from a place of joy to an environment where I walked on eggshells, especially around white male judges who had openly complained about a teenage girl. In an attempt to be digestible, I stripped all emotion from my debate, sticking to the facts—bland recitations replacing my former zeal. My results didn’t change, however. I simply went from an aggressive Black girl to an easily forgettable Black girl.

I would love to declare that I reclaimed my own narrative, and debated toned up to the highest notch, but this was not the case. I continued to be demure in debate and eventually ended the activity. Unfortunately, I did not want to fight yet another losing battle.

Upon speaking to other Black girls in my debate program and those who had participated in competitive public speaking, I understood that my tale was not unique. Black women are not seen as they are, but through a bias-built filter that has formulated a conception of who Black women are and how we behave.

Fortunately, college competitive speaking has been kinder to me, with more diverse groups participating in the activity. Here, I have been able to re-embrace my inner performer. And despite the occasional biased judge, college has healed my prior experience.

But even more, I have decided that it is not my burden to tone it down, to become a version of myself that is digestible. I refuse to lower my voice, or temper my passion, or confine myself to a pleasant version. My only responsibility is to continue to honor the young, eager, and hopeful 12-year-old girl who finally found something to strive for. For her, I will tone it up to the highest boundaries.

Memories

Words by Zahira Branch

Heat can be felt by everyone, inside and outside. It is the hottest heat wave LA has ever seen. People who can't escape their jobs, even though it is summer, are on their way to work. Children are outside playing, enjoying their last days of freedom before those "back to school" shopping signs begin to pile up in every store window. Meanwhile, Jonathan Lockwood, or Jon as his mother called him, is being held on the 16th floor of the Lockwood Tower.

As Jon looks out the freshly cleaned window of his apartment he imagines what the lives of the kids he sees down below are like. He thinks maybe one of them, like the boy with long hair, gets to play all day until he feels his legs are going to fall off. Maybe the other boy, with the bright red shirt, never worries about his mother or when his father will ever be in the same room as him for more than two minutes. And though he can't see from this height, he assumes the girl with the blue sneakers is running with the most breathtaking smile on her face because she is going to get ice cream.

"Jonathan Lockwood," he screams. "I'm here."

His mother comes running into the living room, almost tripping over the belt of her robe, and says, "Jon, is everything okay? I heard a scream?"

Jon simply nods with reassurance and hugs her with all his love, knowing the scream she heard could have been his or not. After the embrace, Mrs. Lockwood mumbles, "My Jon, such a sweet boy," and makes her way back to her office with her book. Jonathan, now with one tear falling down his cheek, hears the private elevator ding and looks at his watch, a gift from his only childhood friend Zach Clarke. *Zach, oh the good times we had. Man, I wish you were still here. Why did he have to take you to NYC? It's been two years since you left, and it still feels like yesterday.*

The elevator doors open and out comes a man in a \$3,000 satin suit. He acknowledges the boy and makes his way to his bedroom down the hall, past the four rooms on the left and the five on the right.

Jonathan feels the temperature in the room drop. As the man passes, he mumbles, "Mr. Arthur Lockwood II, how may I serve you?"

Jon yells down the hall. "I'm going to the lobby Mom, be back in a bit." Silence follows his voice and he enters the elevator.

The Lockwoods are known around the city as "old money." However, Jon himself never really knew where his family's money came from; he just knew it changed the way people saw him and his family. On the edge of becoming a teenager—his birthday only two days away and exactly two weeks before the start of school — Jon knows that this is his last chance to enjoy summer as a kid. This summer will bring about the talk with his father that all Lockwood boys have with their fathers around their 13th birthdays. Afterward, nothing will be the same, no matter how hard he tries.

Jon has a plan that involves two steps. The first step is to make some new friends who can show him the fun things to do in the city as a kid, and the second step is to avoid being anywhere near his father on his birthday at all costs. He figures if he isn't with him, he can't have the infamous talk.

Exiting the elevator, Jon's mind wanders. Ever since he can

remember, the rules have been simple and always given clearly, but with no explanation: no interactions with kids not approved by Mr. Lockwood himself; no going outside at any time unless approved by Mr. Lockwood himself; and most importantly, on his 13th birthday, at 2:00 p.m. specifically, he is to enter his father's office for a very important talk.

Jon sits in one of the lobby chairs, enjoying the much clearer view of the kids playing outside, longing to be a part of their careless play. Jonathan doesn't pay attention to time, or anything really, but when the kids he is watching begin to leave, he looks down at his watch.

"2:00 p.m.!" he says, louder than intended.

Hearing his voice bounce off the ivory walls of the lobby and receiving a few judgemental glances from passing neighbors, he rushes upstairs. *Mother will be waiting for me. I hope she hasn't tried to make lunch on her own.*

The elevator seems to pass each floor slower than ever before, eventually reaching the 16th floor. The kitchen has its usual dark and gloomy appeal, and the apartment is covered in eerie silence. *Of course, Arthur is on a business call and probably hasn't come out of his room since he arrived home.*

Jonathan notices a very bright light shining from under the second door on the right side of the hallway, which happens to be Mrs. Lockwood's office. He feels a great sense of urgency to open the door and check on his mom but finds his body will not move as fast as he wants it to. He grabs hold of the doorknob and enters the room, only to be blinded by a bright flash of light.

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An abandoned factory building stands alone in a crowd of trees. The building, now converted into the research laboratory for the mysterious company, Lockwood Incorporated, is completely illuminated. Two men are conversing in the main room of the building. A third man is present physically but not consciously. He lies strapped down on a table.

"Sir, he didn't make it to the talk with his father again. The memory just phased out."

"How can that be? We programmed everything right this time?"

"It's unclear sir, things began to go awry during the same part of the memory as last time."

"Alright, well put him back under and fix whatever glitch this is in the system. We need to know what happens during that talk."

"Sir? It's a pretty old memory, I'm not sure our system can keep doing this and keep Mr. Lockwood alive. Should we still continue?"

"Of course! Why would you even ask that? Let's go!"

"OK, sir. Putting him back under."

"The boss has given us limited time to figure out what the talk the boys in his family had on their 13th birthday, and Jonathan Lockwood was the last one to receive that talk. Do your job and get him to that part of his memory."

"Yes sir."

The Positivity Bias

Words by Emmanuel Chery

Navigating systems of success like sports and school doesn't come without challenges, as each individual's personal situation and circumstances can either ease or worsen the inherent difficulties within these systems. But for minority students competing or performing in majority spaces, discrimination from peers and superiors can make measuring up to others even more difficult on top of the work one has to do to achieve or surpass the standard. This creates the phenomenon of minority students having to work harder than the average student to achieve the same level of success and respect. Being part of minority groups that are widely perceived as not proficient in a certain skill or talent can inhibit the recognition of excellence by one's peers, which is further difficult and not conducive to perseverance. The strive, then, becomes to defy expectation in one's success, inadvertently trying to create a positivity bias, whereby one is seen as an exception to a negative belief about an entire group of people, rather than motivating the dismantling of said belief. In this strive, however, one becomes trapped relying on their skill or talent to continue shielding them from the scrutiny faced by their minority group in this space, putting the responsibility for individual treatment on the person, rather than the system. Ultimately, an intersectional look at how success in sports or academics can allow for a positivity bias to be created around an individual, but tie their standing to their performance, can reveal how we can begin to blame ourselves for how we are treated in society.

One example of this positivity bias that can be created around high-performing individuals lies with black students in academia. Originating from the times of slavery, black people have been conceptualized as intellectually inferior in continual efforts to dehumanize them. Nevertheless, there have been several successful black academics throughout history, despite the various challenges that have been put in place to hold black students back from success. For black students who end up at schools like Brown University and other similar institutions, the positivity bias often first emerges in grade school from peers or teachers of different races, where one might be told they "aren't like the other black students," or are adorned with so-called compliments like "well spoken" or "well behaved." While for anyone it is flattering to be highlighted and exalted for one's performance, it can often feel the recognition is done at the expense of others, which is a difficult thing to have to grapple with as a child and isn't much easier as an adult either. It can feel good to defy negative stereotypes, and yet in that defiance can lie a guilty recognition that one's personal success is doing little to combat what is

believed about one's minority group. Black students within the ranks of higher academia are challenged to succeed without flaw, perhaps in hopes that the perception of the entire racial group is finally viewed as equal in intellect and talent, rather than recognized as minor exceptions that don't speak for the larger population.

Another example of the positivity bias lies with high-performing queer men in athletics. The number of publicly identifying queer athletes is always increasing as queerness is progressively normalized. Yet the stigma still remains concentrated in athletic spaces, as sports are seen as pinnacles of masculinity, and queerness as antithetical to that. Gay jokes are perhaps as common to locker room chatter as talk about the sport itself, creating shame for the few male athletes that may be queer. There lies a twofold issue when it comes to queer men in sports. First, the potential homophobia may prevent people from wanting to get involved with them, and second, athletes already committed to a sport face discrimination from their peers, worsening their experience and making it hard to perform. This issue even affects non-queer athletes, as the allegation of queerness in itself is a slight of sorts, which can affect one's standing within a team. This then becomes an issue of team culture, and how mocking queerness is used for teammates to bond over. For queer male athletes, then, the work becomes succeeding in one's sport to avoid the scrutiny of peers, placing value and emphasis on performance solely, rather than one's well-being and existence as a person. Furthermore, in any situation, it can be difficult to advocate for oneself against discrimination, especially when the perpetrators in question are to remain your teammates for years to come. Striving to be an exceptional athlete and an exception to the stereotype places queer athletes in a difficult and perhaps even unmotivating mode of life, one that does very little to substantially alter male athletes' general perception of queer people.

Ultimately, individual success in spheres not seen as typical to one's minority group can be hindered by the discrimination that is perpetuated by people at all levels of competition. Existing as an exception and a rarity to a negatively held stereotype complicates what it means to succeed and how to fight back against the assumptions people may have. It is important, though, for minorities performing in majority spaces to remind themselves that, in their perseverance through discrimination, they are not to blame, and that what has been widely held as true about an entire group of people for decades is not necessarily one's burden to upend or dissolve.

Cobra Unveiled: Media Reactions to Black Women's Vulnerability

Words by Crystal Kembo
Art by Praises Amponsah

American media has traditionally portrayed the Black woman using three main caricatures: the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. The Mammy caricature is described as the nurturing Black woman. She's often heavier, older, of darker complexion, and lives for everyone but herself (e.g., Aunt Jemima). Next is the Jezebel caricature who frequently exaggerates the sexuality of Black women; it depicts us as seductive figures and plays a notable role in our sexual exploitation (e.g., Foxy Cleopatra in *Austin Powers in Goldmember*). Finally, we have the Sapphire caricature that introduces Black women as loud, rude, overbearing, and emasculating (e.g., Rochelle in *Everybody Hates Chris*). These three stereotypes trap Black women in rigid boxes, rendering it impossible to voice our truths without fear of victimization. While contemporary media may not overtly portray these caricatures as in the past, they still wield significant influence in shaping people's perceptions, empathy, and credibility regarding the painful experiences of Black women. This influence is evident in modern instances of Black women's vulnerability, as exemplified by cases like that of Megan Thee Stallion.

On November 3, 2023, Megan Thee Stallion, acclaimed rapper and three-time Grammy winner, made a triumphant return to the spotlight with her latest single, "Cobra." This release comes years after the 2020 incident where she was shot in the feet several times by fellow rapper Tory Lanez. This event sparked public uproar, particularly among users on the platform X (formerly known as Twitter). While many Black women came to Megan's defense, discussions often veered into irrelevant factors such as her sexual history and physical appearance. Many commenters even went so far as to question the credibility of her account or insinuate that she deserved to get shot. Part of the confusion was due to the fact that Megan had initially told the police that she wounded her feet by stepping on glass. However, after finding the courage to name Tory Lanez as her shooter, she detailed why she had initially lied about the cause of her injuries.

Megan clarified that she was hesitant to name Tory due to the widespread surge in police brutality and racial justice protests following the death of George Floyd. Unsure of whether the police would shoot first and question later, Megan Thee Stallion found herself making a choice emblematic of the decision that many Black women are unfairly expected to make. She decided to cover for Tory Lanez instead of speaking her truth. In thinking about how the police would respond to an armed Black man during one of the most politically tense times in contemporary American history, Megan chose to protect her aggressor even if it meant silencing herself. Her decision to withhold information echoes the historic burden placed on Black women to shield Black men from harm.

Black American media has played a significant role in perpetuating damaging expectations, particularly through films that exploit the struggles of Black women in abusive relationships. Growing up with iconic Tyler Perry movies like *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, it becomes evident how these portrayals contribute to normalizing the narrative of Black women enduring abuse from Black men. The plot of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* follows Helen, a Black woman in an extremely abusive relationship with her successful attorney husband, Charles. After being kicked out of their home and replaced

by Charles' mistress and their children, Helen struggles to rebuild her life. As she gradually finds strength and happiness without him, the plot takes a disheartening turn. When Charles is shot and paralyzed, Helen, still legally bound as his wife, chooses to care for him. Shockingly, he persists in verbally abusing her during her role as his caregiver. In the end, Helen's nurturing nature is portrayed as essential for transforming Charles into a kinder person. Storylines like these have not only conditioned the Black community but have also influenced broader public perceptions, framing Black women as only valuable or virtuous when they support or cover for Black men. Yet, when it's time for us to be protected, we are instead ridiculed, discredited, and silenced.

this, commenters used her words to slut-shame and victim-blame her. Rumors about her sexual history, fueled by famous male rappers like DaBaby, depicted the assault as a consequence of Megan's sexual liberation, gaining support for Tory Lanez. This strategy to downplay Megan's trauma proved effective even after Lanez's 10-year prison sentence, as online users continue to torment her over her alleged sexual experiences. The ongoing backlash severely impacted Megan's mental health, prompting her to step away from the public sphere, seeking solace and healing from her trauma. In her 2022 album "Traumazine," she opened up about her mental struggles and addressed the victim-blaming she endured, notably in the song 'Anxiety.' Navigating through declining mental health and the profound loss of her mother, Megan confronted challenges that she had silently been battling. However, Lanez supporters dismissed her vulnerability, branding her a Sapphire or a modern-day "Angry Black Woman".

Now, as she makes her comeback with "Cobra," Megan embraces a new form. The song delves into themes of suicidal thoughts, alcoholism, betrayal, and more. Megan explained the choice of the name "Cobra" on her social media, stating that, "cobras embody the art of healing and renewal. They gracefully shed their skins in hopes of healing from their past and during the process are very vulnerable." The song's first two lines read: "Breaking down and I had the whole world watching. But the worst part is really who watched me?" This opening line serves as a disheartening reminder of the limited support for Black women who are victims of violence. Media stereotypes like the nurturing Mammy, the promiscuous Jezebel, and the emasculating Sapphire have repeatedly impacted Black women like Megan Thee Stallion. However, Megan's journey is an admirable contribution to dismantling these stereotypes. While Black women often keep their pain private, projecting strength to the world, Megan defies this norm. "Cobra" not only reveals her healed form but also showcases the ongoing, sometimes unglamorous, yet authentic journey of healing. She challenges the idea that healing is a neatly packaged "glow-up" and emphasizes that it is a slow, genuine process, that warrants acknowledgment and understanding from the public—especially as a Black woman.

The world imposes unrealistic expectations on Black women. It's demanded that we prioritize nurturing at the expense of our own truths. We find ourselves restricted from embracing our sexuality, as doing so jeopardizes our credibility. Even amidst incredibly traumatic experiences, there is an expectation for us to quickly overcome and suppress any feelings of anger. The continuation of these racist stereotypes has marked Black women as distrustful and has stripped us of our agency; this can have fatal consequences. In the healthcare system, our pain is disregarded as we lose countless Black women to maternal deaths. In the criminal justice system, our accounts of rape and sexual abuse have historically been disregarded due to the notion that we are lustful beings. Yet, when we attempt to fight back, we are labeled as Angry Black Women. For Black women to successfully combat these ideals, society must stray from stereotypes that devalue our experiences. This is admittedly much easier said than done. However, we can start with dismantling these stereotypes in the media. So, let's stop entertaining the trivialization of Black women's trauma, and let's start protecting Black women.



Megan defied societal expectations by naming Tory Lanez as her assailant, challenging stereotypes about Black women in violent struggles. This caused upheaval among Lanez's supporters, who struggled to reconcile Megan's actions with preconceived notions. So, they opted to confine her within a different narrative rather than simply embracing the notion of a Black woman challenging stereotypes. Her sexual history took center stage, reducing her to the title of Megan the Jezebel. In this case, as in many traumatic experiences for Black women, sex played a crucial role. Black girls are often hypersexualized from a younger age than their white counterparts, a societal norm that wrongly attributes our pain to an assumed "innate" sexual desire. Megan Thee Stallion's music addresses and challenges this negative perception, advocating for the reclaiming of Black women's sexuality through empowering lyrics. She discusses Black female autonomy and sexuality in the same manner that male rappers have been doing for years. Despite

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