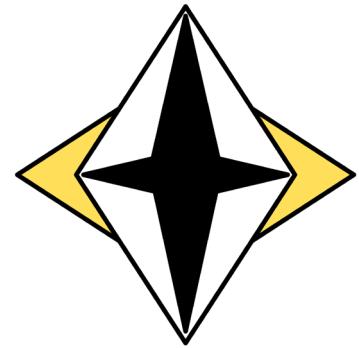


The Black Star



Journal

The Beloved Issue

Issue #07

February 28, 2024

From Us To You

Amidst freezing days and flurries, the month of February has brought warmth. Over the past weeks, we have come together as a community in cultural celebrations and senior appreciation, sharing joy and laughter while honoring those who've created the spaces we love. This includes our own founders, Amiri Nash and Keiley Thompson, whose acceptance of the Black Achievement Award highlights their continued dedication to building and guiding our mission. In this flurry of pride and remembrance, we introduce this year's Black History Month Issue.

With each new year of the *Black Star Journal*, our February reflections linger on diverse dimensions of Black identity. This year our writers have chosen to discuss the things they hold beloved. From considering the beauty of the color brown to tracing the veins of lineage across continents and cultures, they have illustrated the beautiful dissimilarity of the Black experience. Their words and the mission of our journal have intimately aligned this month. By documenting the people, places, and ideas we value, we have asserted that to celebrate Black History is to celebrate the beautiful stories of our lives.

With this, we present The Beloved Issue, an intimate collection of reflections on our blackness, and an exchange of the sentiments we often keep close to our hearts with you all. To our readers, thank you for lending an ear to these stories.

From us to you,
Naomi and Destiny

*Naomi Umlauf
Destiny Wilson*

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Brownstones

Words by Sanai Rashid
(Inspired by Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*.)

- Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with not one color, two or three colors — but a color that somehow contained the muddied multitudes of them all. I am talking about, of course, the color brown.

- This was not a love affair that knocked me off my feet. Nor was it a love affair that tickled my toes as I dreamed at night. Instead, my love affair with the color brown was one of the most damning types of love, the love that grows onto you. The sort of love that makes you draw stars in the margins of your notebooks during class instead of hearts because you know you are on the cusp of a more irreversible type of love, the love that enlightens.

- Was there ever a food you hated as a child? I hated mayo. I would turn my head in disgust if that slimy, ghost-like substance were smeared on anything in my proximity. Then, one day, when I was in the eleventh grade, I ordered a sandwich from the deli. Turkey, cheese, and mayo on a roll. The word mayo just floated out of my mouth like I had been saying it for years, and it stunned me. I was too nervous to tell the man making my sandwich that I had made a mistake. So I paid my \$5.35 and walked out the door, suddenly the type of person who gets mayo on their sandwiches. But when I ate that turkey, cheese, and mayo on a roll, it was incredible. Suddenly, I had forgotten why I had ever hated mayonnaise.

- Did you ever wake up one day and realize you had been shunning something that had never harmed you? Have you ever heard someone say that their favorite color was brown?

- It is not mine: (*it is the color blue*). But I fear that if I don't give brown some love, it will always be the color you reach for in the crayon box when you need to color dirt and peanut butter, and never the color you use to color a heart.

- When I was a little girl, my Baba used to tell me not to call ourselves "black" people. "Are we the color of tar?" he'd look right at me. "Sweetie, we are *brown*."

- I have been struggling to find the link between when we, as a community of brown people, first began referring to ourselves as *black* people, or rather, why white enslavers ascribed the term *black* onto us when we have always been, well, *brown*. Scholar Ibram X. Kendi theorized that during the Atlantic Slave Trade, white enslavers needed an intrinsic human attribute that separated them from those they sought to oppress. What would be this quality fixed in time, space, and body? A virtue that could not be erased? I am beginning to realize that what makes color so fascinating to think about — why it has been the subject of scientific studies, linguistic research, and psychological evaluations for thousands of years — is that color's inherent beauty lies in the fact that it does not try to be anything other than itself.

- Brown can never be white, and white will never be brown. But the opposite of white is not brown. It is black. In his creation of the color wheel, Isaac Newton declared white was "the center," and all the other colors were positioned in relation to their "distance from whiteness." I suppose this shift from brown to black occurred to push us as far away as possible from whiteness, as far away from ever embodying the pinnacles of success, dignity, and respectability whiteness has come to embody in America. We could never achieve Newton's imagined "perfect whiteness."

- My mother brings me into the bathroom while my father, uncle, and grandparents talk outside in the living room. I am eight and still shorter than my mother. This will change. "Mommy, what is the word you and daddy are talking about?" I try to see my reflection in the white bathroom tiles surrounding us. I can not. She plops me onto the toilet and comes in close. "It's a word white people used to call us, because they were angry and wanted to make us feel bad," she says. "It is a word you should never say." I will never forget the sound of my mother's voice when she tells me how white people used to call us *niggers*. It becomes the forbidden word, a word I still don't say. I think I'm too scared. Of what, I'm not sure. Myself? "Why did they call us that?" I ask, already knowing the answer is about what we share and what our bathroom tiles do not. "Because of the color of our skin. Because we're black."

- I learn to hold blackness to my chest so no one can take it away.

- I forget about brown.

- But how can I when I see myself baking in the summertime, reminding me that I am a product of time, grown from the seeds of the grounds my ancestors used to run through? Yet, I have not yet risen. I am browning, filling in an identity that belongs to the slave ships, the courtyards, the church pews, the carnival parades, and the colored water fountains, but most of all, an identity that belongs to myself.

- We are the bricks of the brownstones our people used to own in Bed-Stuy. White people live in them now but they'll always belong to us. So, when I'm old enough, I'll buy my own. I couldn't see myself in those white tiles, but for once, I see myself in those brownstones.

- It's summer (because isn't it always?), and we threaded each other's fingers through one another a little too tightly. It was as if we were afraid someone would shine a flashlight down on us and reveal us as the frauds we were. Cloaked in the woolen afghan of the night sky, I was brave. So, I asked him one of those questions you ask someone you know won't be in your life very long. "Do you like blue butterflies, or the orange ones better?" He didn't hesitate — *the orange ones*. Of course, I liked the blue butterflies better. But I don't think I told him that. Instead, we continued talking about other insects, like fireflies, and how they always seemed to glow when you weren't looking, and ladybugs, which he thought were stupid (which hurt me a little). With my brown hand embraced into his white grasp, I squeezed him tighter to close the gap I knew would eventually tear us apart. The impermanence oscillating between us both, leaving me now to weave together the loose ends of the tattered blanket I tried to pretend ever kept me warm. But if it wasn't for him, I suppose I would not have kept one eye open that summer, always looking toward the sky to see if there existed something that contained us both — a brown butterfly.

- What if I told you brown was the opposite of blue?

The Black Star Journal

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Back Cover Art: “Blk Enby Gems”
Lyric Johnson

1. Boriquén (noun): The indigenous name for Puerto Rico. Translates to “Land of the Valiant and Noble Lord”

Tu Abuelo was a short man with two faces. One was graced with el sol de Puerto Rico, a jibaro among Brownsville's city-people. All Alcolado, música de salsa, and rum. I'm still fond of the combination of smells and rhythms. He wasn't a tough man but he was funny. Liked to wiggle his dentures at children in the street, make them laugh. Sold piraguas and hot dogs in the summer and dealt numbers for gangs all other times. Could never work a 9-5 job. Last time he tried to, a group of morenos robbed and jumped him for being a "spick." I always thought it was mildly impressive that they could tell. He looked Italian, he was so white. Tu Abuela, a woman 11 years his junior, would smile at the thought. She hated his guts by the end of their marriage but boy, was she proud to marry a man so white. Abuela was the lightest of her family, hence she was the pretty one. Hair not a lick straighter than mine but the beauty salon could hide it. Plus, she had "ojos verdes cuando era pequeña," which I was never allowed to forget.

Appearances were everything to her. She didn't let anyone know how illiterate she was. How she repeated sixth grade three times in P.R. before ditching school for boyfriends completely. How she grew up with the shame of being an orphan, her father in jail for murder, and her mother scornful against him and his "seed." Appearances were everything to her. It's why she never cried, never apologized. Hardly ever spoke sweet words. She could not imagine herself without a grudge, without a ghetto, without a person to devour through words. Without a reason to feed the pigeons and plants by the window and reminisce on a time and a place different from this one.

Abuelo couldn't make her happy, nor could she, him. So they hid — Abuela behind her pride and Abuelo behind his rum. That's when his second face grew. It would prowl low like a tiger while Abuela parroted hard words at him. Menacing, but never pouncing, until one night Abuelo's second face danced a blade so close to Abuela's that her pride slipped for just a second. In her eyes was the first real look I ever saw her give. But Abuelo held a look I didn't recognize. He stopped and stumbled away, ashamed. Never before did he weep as openly as he wept that night. Sounds of grief into the sky for the man he was becoming. I could never forget that sound. Nor that face. Nor Abuela's terror.

Roots

Words by Naomi Nesmith

(Part 3)

2. Color (noun): pigmentation of the skin, especially as an indication of someone's ethnicity; vividness of visual appearance resulting from the presence of brightly colored things.

The term African American confused me when I first heard it. I am not African, I thought. At the time I didn't even know I was black. My father was simply "pretty brown" to me. I knew this because I couldn't find a color in my knock-off Crayolas as deep and rich as his mahogany skin. My mother was Puerto Rican, but more importantly, she was high-yellow. And my brother was a tawny tan.

I never knew what color I was. I was born an odd red, then turned a jaundice brown, then turned a pale green-pink, then landed somewhere in the middle. I did not think I looked *trigueña* as mi Abuela suggests. I thought I looked sort of burnt.

Don't We All Deserve a Quality Education?

Words by Tristan Ward

At the most rudimentary level, education is known to open up the opportunity for social mobility. Horace Mann famously told the Massachusetts Board of Education that “[Education] is a great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance wheel of social machinery...It gives each man the independence and the means by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich: it prevents being poor.”

Horace Mann uttered these words in 1837 and emphasized that education is the mechanism to effectively even out the playing fields of poor and rich. It provided a path for the poor to access an avenue of social mobility. Even though universal public education has long since been realized, access to a universal *quality* education across all public school districts has not. Unsurprisingly, students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are affected the most. In fact, in 2019 Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Education Policy published a scathing report about the state of the Providence public school system, highlighting students' poor performance and an ineffective bureaucracy. The report stated that there were low academic expectations for students, subpar instruction, and poor school culture. The severity of the report led the Rhode Island state government to enact emergency measures, seizing control over the district and implementing measures to ensure that students were mastering core competencies, which include science, math, and English/language arts.

After four years and many attempted improvements, student performance on standardized tests still remained alarmingly subpar. According to the Census Bureau, Providence has a population of 189,563 and a median income of \$61,365, with the poverty rate being 21.3%. This data is critical to understanding failures in education, as school districts are largely funded through local funding mechanisms. If a region is highly populated and has an economically diverse population, adequate funding will often not be invested in students. Providence does receive additional funding since it has a

higher rate of poverty than its suburban counterparts in the state. Since the majority populations in Providence Public Schools are Hispanic and Black, these students of color are disproportionately receiving an inadequate education.

In contrast, according to census data, East Greenwich, a town in Rhode Island, has a population of 14,573, a median income of \$155,037, and a poverty rate of 6.4%. Thus, their schools receive more funding per pupil than their Providence counterparts. Students' performances on exams accurately reflect this disparity, with East Greenwich pupils' proficiency in core competencies being significantly higher than that of pupils in Providence. According to data from the 2021 SAT School Day, 92.2% of East Greenwich students met the benchmark for English Language Arts compared to only 48% in Providence. For the math section of the test, 66.6% of those in East Greenwich met the benchmark compared to a dismal 25% of those in Providence. Although standardized test scores cannot accurately depict a student's ability, it is a metric that Rhode Island uses to measure a student's proficiency, meaning there shouldn't be a stark difference in academic performance between districts in the same state. Unsurprisingly, students in East Greenwich schools are predominantly white.

The state of Rhode Island continuously fails to equip economically disadvantaged students with the knowledge to change their circumstances and to think critically about their world. Education is the “great equalizer,” but the state’s education system and policy reinforce the notion that only those with economic resources deserve a quality education. Since Johns Hopkins University came out with the report in 2019, the state still has power over the Providence School District. As the city of Providence and the state work to figure out how they will transition control of these school districts back to Providence, they must work to ensure that the next generation of students will have the opportunity to not only change their circumstances but the world as well.

On the Separation of Blackness from Beauty

Words by Karma Selsey

What does it mean to be beautiful? Walking through the makeup aisle at the store will tell you that to be beautiful is to be white, so much so that makeup brands across the board still struggle to formulate foundations for darker skin tones. A look through *People* magazine will tell you the same thing – in nearly 40 years of crowning the Sexiest Man Alive, all but five have been white. The dismissal of Blackness in discussions of beauty goes far beyond makeup and magazine covers, however. Those who do not conform to Eurocentric ideals are often the victims of inequities in education, healthcare, and the workplace. Eurocentrism has been deeply ingrained within our collective consciousness and as such has cemented whiteness as the gold standard for attractiveness.

While phrases like “beautiful” and “sexy” should be nothing more than widely applicable descriptors, questions arise along racial lines about just how applicable the descriptors actually are. It is common knowledge that these signifiers of attractiveness are not solely reserved for white people, and yet within the Black community there is an implicit acknowledgement that we are entirely excluded from the categories altogether. In referring to someone as a blonde bombshell or as tall, dark, and handsome, whiteness is a given. This lack of consideration reinforces Blackness as being an afterthought in conversations regarding attractiveness, which is a consequence of Eurocentrism. It also raises questions of what to do about this particular manifestation of Eurocentrism as a racially marginalized community – is there merit in trying to push back, or is this too trivial of a fight?

Eurocentric beauty standards place white Europeans at the center of what it means to be attractive. In addition to hair texture and skin color, facial features and even eye color all play a role in measuring beauty from a Eurocentric perspective. This is where sub-categories of Eurocentrism, such as colorism and texturism begin to develop, thus creating the notion that we as members of the Black community should strive for a greater proximity to whiteness. It is clear that stereotypically white European features are centered within a wide variety of communities. These standards are so pervasive that in 2019, the CROWN Act of California was passed to prohibit hairstyle and texture-based discrimination. Finding stories about workplace and educational discrimination based on hair is an easy task, as those who don’t wear their hair straight, even when that is not the natural state of their hair, are often deemed unprofessional. The inherent nature of whiteness as a key component of being palatable and therefore accepted by society, then, begins to make sense.

What still remains is the question of how we as Black people should respond to routinely being left out in this manner. Should we attempt to make our way into these definitions, or should we define our attractiveness in opposition to norms structured by Eurocentrism? Ideologies such as multiculturalism and Afrocentrism have been offered up as alternatives to following the dominance of Western culture by outright rejecting its dominance altogether. While we have yet to come to a consensus on what our path forward should be, what is ultimately evident here is that Blackness is in no way at odds with beauty.

Inside Soul Food Night at the Ratty

Words by Clarissa Thorne-Disla

Thursday, February 15th marked the 14th year of Brown's annual Soul Food Night at the Ratty. For the past 14 years, Brown has supported students in putting together Soul Food Night as a way to celebrate Black History Month for students and faculty members alike. Upon learning about the event's existence, a wave of excitement ran through me. Of all the events being hosted during Black History Month, Soul Food Night emerged as one that had high potential to bring our Black community together over food that is not regularly offered on campus. Advertised as a night filled with great food, music, performances, and vibes, the Ratty appeared full and lively with buzz. The high attendance cannot serve as the singular indicator of the night's success. How did students enjoy the food? Did students feel the night exceeded their expectations? Any surprises? And most importantly, did the event bring together the Black community?

Upon entering the Ratty at 6 o'clock, my main concern was building a plate before food ran out. The food lines steadily grew as the event went on, though luckily my wait was only about 3 minutes. Macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, fried catfish, cornbread, collard greens, sweet potato pie, and jerk chicken were all served. While 15 students were interviewed for this piece, surprisingly I was unable to gauge any specific favorite foods served. Responses ranged from the macaroni and cheese to collard greens with not one negative or harsh review. However, in collecting student responses, it occurred to me that the taste of the food did not hold as much significance to the event's triumph as I imagined. One student, Faith '27, expressed her views on the significance of serving soul food at the Ratty by saying, "It's so hard to get Black food around that I'm enjoying this more than I would be if I were at home." Her words were echoed by those around her as it seemed that whether or not the food lived up to their expectations they were grateful for the opportunity to eat food so central to our culture when at times it can feel impossible to find nearby. Another student, Maeva '27 praised the event saying, "In my house, we usually have African cultural food, so I haven't had Southern cultural food before, so it's new for me and it's good!" The food reviews from students were positively refreshing as they lacked the typical negativity so often associated with our dining services.

By the end of the night, it was clear to me that students were more interested in being amongst one another than finding the best food on campus. The food allowed students to come together over a shared love but opened the door to a bigger, better space for celebrating Black culture.

While many of the students I spoke to only had good things to say about the food, the performance and musical portion of the night were certainly met with even more unanimous praise. Oja dancer Nya spoke about her experience performing at the event: "It felt like a reclaiming of our power and influence on campus." Her words speak to the importance of Brown's Black dance culture and its ability to make Black students across a variety of ethnic cultures feel seen. It can often be uncomfortable for minority students to enter predominantly white spaces on campus. However, with the help of dance groups like Oja, Black students entering the Ratty on Thursday night could instantly feel the life and vibrancy of their culture wrap around them like a hug.

In terms of how the event met my expectations, I would say the high energy and the gloriously high melanin levels filling the Ratty surpassed any expectations I'd set for the night. However, it should be said that the one thing I was not expecting to see was the presence of non-Black students. All students I interviewed noticed the pockets of whiteness failing to blend in; the annoyance stemmed from the amount of physical space being consumed. Additionally, I noted that at times of high excitement during performances, non-Black students could be found exchanging curious glances. It seems Black students would prefer to see fewer non-Black students during the event. This was certainly a blip in a few Black students' perception of the night, but in no way did it ruin the festivities. It is safe to say the night was extremely successful in bringing our Black community together. However, a question emerges regarding the frequency at which these events can take place. While our Black student organizations are committed to holding space for us year-round, this event at the Ratty felt different. The public nature of the event sent a message to Black students that the celebration of their culture should be shared with the entire community, regardless of the reaction of non-Black students.

What it Means to Be a Black Activist

Words by Arrissa Tachie-Menson

Activism.

A term deeply intertwined with the history of minority communities, especially members of the Black community, in the battle for freedom against various systems of racial oppression.

We've witnessed and celebrated Black activists from all over the world, from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the United States to Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Yet, the ongoing Palestinian genocide has ignited global engagement in protests and various forms of activism, including members of the Black community who see parallels between the genocide and their racial oppression through slavery and colonialism. These circumstances have consequently sparked a dialogue concerning Black people's involvement with activism against the oppression of other minority groups, both on social media and Brown's campus, and whether we are responsible for aiding and assisting.

While recognizing and reflecting on this dialogue and our systemic oppression, there's one question that comes to mind: What does it mean to be a Black activist as a college student?

A starting place to evaluate this is through the significant role Brown's Black Student Union (BSU) plays in fostering unity within our community.

As Jada Wooten, a current senior and co-president of the Black Student Union, expressed, "Through [the] BSU...the idea of event planning and organizing Black students here at Brown to me, that is radical and that is a form of Black activism because this university was not built for us. It was built by us and I also think within [the] BSU my definition of being a Black activist is expanding community engagement efforts."

She continued, "Even rest is radical when thinking about Audre Lorde and Black feminism, so I don't think there's one definition at all. Even for me, what a Black activist is can look like different things depending on the day and where I am at on my journey."

Jada's interpretation of what it means to be a Black activist speaks to the deeper role that we all play as Black students on Brown's campus. Activism is often glorified as requiring work on the front lines by engaging in rallies, marches, and protests. But we fail to recognize that hosting, planning, and attending events

are forms of activism in their own right, especially at a predominately White institution like Brown. At every opportunity given to us through our commitments to Black organizations, classes regarding Black history, and even our connections with each other and Black faculty, we consistently find ways to build, strengthen, and reform our community. It is also possible to argue that as Black students and leaders in Ivy League spaces, we participate in activism every day by serving as a beacon of hope and proof that Black people can and will excel in elite and prestigious spaces. Even little actions such as writing, art, performance, reposting informational posters, and educating ourselves on the past and present issues of our society and campus are forms of activism that should be acknowledged.

Aside from these daily acts, a large part of Black activism is a deep understanding of the past and how it has led to our current societal issues. "It's important to know your history and what people have fought for before you, but at the same time, it can limit us from imagining new things...it's important to know the past but also how we can grow from the past," Jada expressed. The possibilities of ways we can use our knowledge and talents to mobilize and engage in activism are endless and go beyond what has been conveyed throughout history. While acknowledging our history, it is crucial to note the creative ways we can use our gifts to participate in activism.

A major aspect of Black activism is the involvement of all age groups within Black communities, emphasizing the necessity of intergenerational movements that allow us to build solidarity with each other and notice the reoccurring historical patterns within every generation's struggles. But this may not be visibly reflected within the current "Black@Brown" community. "I feel like in the Black community here there's already a disconnect as we are not often in the same orgs and there's not one organizing unit and most of us aren't connected to [Black] graduate workers and the work they are doing," Jada voiced.

The beauty of being a Black activist is realizing how valuable our community is as a support system for undergrad students, grad students, and faculty members. While we may lack an official unit for organizing at Brown, this should not discourage individual efforts or opportunities to collaborate to build a more united front

in achieving social and political change.

As we define the various aspects of Black student activism, we must recognize one of its biggest hurdles: our involvement in other social movements. My first exposure to discourse on the crisis in Palestine was through Black social media channels, which I thought represented how empathetic Black people were to other people's struggles. However, after having conversations with close friends about the genocide, I grew curious about how to respectfully identify the intersectionality and boundaries that Black activists should have in engaging with other social movements.

Jada also expanded on *The Intercept*'s coverage of exchanges of police training tactics between law enforcement officers in the U.S. and Israel. "Ultimately [we need to] recognize the same systems of oppression working against us. When it comes to Palestine, the IDF officers trained to kill people in Gaza are [trained with] the same [tactics] that they are training [American Police Officers with]. Recognizing the system of oppression while not taking over is a matter of listening to on-the-ground organizers. It is important to have intersectional definitions of the issues we are facing but at the same time center the voices that are most impacted in any work you are doing."

As racial minorities with extensive histories of oppression tied to European colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and more, we need to have the capability to recognize how our histories may potentially align with one another. Especially for Black activists and individuals worldwide who consistently face various encounters with oppression throughout their lives, our ability to empathize with other ethnic communities exhibits our desire for not only us but for everyone to gain racial equality. While doing so, we must be remembered as Black activists to amplify the voices of those directly affected by the injustices and use established tactics to rebel against these systems of power.

Black activism cannot solely be defined as one idea or concept as we have a rich history from the past and present of Black individuals illustrating what it means and the multitude of ways to engage in it with our talents. From leading protests to posting current events on social media, we all can become a Black activist during our time at Brown and beyond.

Thoughts of My Being

Moving throughout the world with the lens of a Black Woman

Words by Zahira Branch

Figuring out my place
place?
to?
Forming and creating safe spaces that I can exist in is exhausting.

however Existing in those spaces gives me a breath to blossom.
Gives me time to breathe in the support and offer others the same.

I am always seeking other Black Women

Finding my village
Are all of them the
same?
Should they be?

Connecting and confiding in Black Women can be freeing.

Exploring those spaces provides safety to dream.
Influencing how I think and speak about myself and what I can do.
The definition of a Black woman is in a constant state of change. Each individual redefines the experience.
Finding Black Women is soul-filling

Black Women have been defined by others throughout history. This will no longer happen.

Label me or don't.
Try and Fail.

There are shades of me and I can see them all.

told through connected haikus

Melanin is rich
Curly hair frees and excites
Sun sparkles with joy

Falling leaves and protective styles
They bounce and sway across my back
The change confuses them

Thoughts of home-cooked food
Dreams of cornbread and turkey
I need a break soon

White snow, White Santa
White faces in White spaces
What I need is Black

Warming of the air
Microscope on me again
MLK or Rosa Parks

There is diversity,
Within our diversity
There are shades of us

Durags under hats
Bonnets at night to protect
Creativity in my roots

Freedom of hair
Free me of labels
Blackness is Fluid

Moments of My Existence

Words by Zahira Branch

On Blackness

Words by Nelsa Tiemtoré

We, the orchids

black orchids of love
peppering the soil with grace
and we multiply

chocolate skin

my skin is a cool chocolate, coated by hues of black and brown
red undertones swirling to create a masterpiece of perfection
further highlighted by the rays of sunlight that tickle my skin
my skin, softened with cocoa butter and shining with fragrance,
is the skin of those who came before me and those coming after
it is ingrained with memories, promises, songs, dances, and lessons
the skin i'm in is a comfort, a testament, a praise, a sense of jubilee
my skin stretches and coats every bone and muscle, sheltering me,
providing a sense of peace and love that i truly cannot explain
every mirror i look into, reminds me of the beauty of my chocolate skin
the culture, the heritage, the ancestry that springs from me
my ancestors dreams and hopes that keep inspiring me

melanated

melanated and celebrated, i feel liberated
from the crown of my tresses to the soles of my feet
to be melanated is to hold power
sometimes it also means that you're feared, revered
misunderstood and misconstrued
yet my melanin is gorgeous
melanated and elevated, i am dedicated
always growing, learning, frolicking
my melanin can never be eliminated
to be melanated is to walk in boldness
to always fight to be heard and to be seen

more than black

more than my blackness
i'm multidimensional
pull back my layers

Black Clothes: The Diverse and Expansive World of Self-Expression

Are clothes exclusively a form of self-expression? Do they need to have an inherent significance to be important to the wearer? When it comes to Brown, students express themselves in many diverse ways through clothing, yet also use clothing to represent much more than self-expression. Clothes can have a profound significance, becoming a beautiful display of whatever the wearer desires to be seen in and connect the clothing to, culminating into a means of self-determination and calling for as much or as little effort as deemed necessary. But what's also interesting is that clothes don't have to be significant to be loved by the wearer. These two ideas of clothing coexist and come together at Brown, where students have diverse wardrobes that spill out with clothes both outwardly significant and seemingly ordinary.

One traditionally significant use of clothes is to represent one's culture and home. Students celebrate their Blackness and represent their heritage by wearing cultural garments at events such as the AfriSA cultural show, which can make them feel more united with their specific community as well as Black people at large, or just wear their cultural clothing around campus or even keep it honored in their dorm. Some of these clothes are even students' favorites, due to the memory of receiving them and being able to connect to their families through them. Rita '27 says that her favorite item is a shawl that she received from her great-aunt during a visit to her homeland, Ethiopia. She loves it due to how comfortable and cozy it is, but even more so because her great-aunt was so pivotal to her and her family's upbringing. This shawl today is a reminder of both her great aunt and her heritage. Students like her keep these stories with them, using these garments as much more than a piece of cloth. With these stories, students can find their way back home, whether that home is ancestral, where they were born, or where they feel at peace. Through these clothes, students have found unique ways to honor their culture and families.

In a similar vein, some students associate certain clothes with the memories that they made with friends and chosen family. The memories contained in these

fabrics can prompt students to reminisce about certain experiences that they had with friends away from Brown, as well as general life outside of school. This reminder can be simultaneously therapeutic and melancholic, as friends are remembered happily yet dearly missed. When it comes to Rohey '27, her denim skirt not only is fashionable but also symbolizes the best days of being home and some of her favorite memories with friends. This skirt was something that her friends pointed out and offered to alter for her, and it connects to the best parts of their friendship. The skirt is deeply tied to the memory of thrifting with her closest friends as well as spending entire days with them. Just like clothes can be associated with certain days of the past, the skirt reminds her of wonderful pieces of home and allows her to reconnect with the best of her days before Brown.

Another way that students surpass the boundaries of what clothing can be is by wearing items that are not traditionally considered clothing as a means to make something from their home and culture a part of their life and closet. Instead of viewing their culture through the lens of the West, these students choose to observe the world around them through the lens of their home and culture. These special items are symbolic of something that few others can understand, such as with Alex '24. He uses his Haitian flag as a garment, as wearing it makes him feel prideful and fulfills his identity and connection with his community. He combats notions that some teens in Western society are concerned, including consumerism and fast fashion, and uses this cultural lens to fight against these ideas both through his heritage and a the flag.

Students redefine clothing through metaphorical means as well. Rather than seeing items not traditionally worn as clothing, Daniel '27 sees clothes as much more than items that we wear. He takes a more spiritual approach to the clothes that he wears, citing shoes as his favorite, as they not only are extremely customizable and unique but are also associated with being in the position one is at in life and viewing the world through their perspective. He also associates differences in shoes with no two people truly being the same, and

the principle that we shouldn't judge one another because of this. To him, shoes can act as a medium to explore the concept of mindfulness, mental well-being, and non-judgment, because they physically and emotionally ground us. These concepts tie together one's shoes and their way of being and staying present.

Certain styles of simpler clothes are unmatched, and students find themselves drawn to items due to their distinct and priceless look. With Jachin '27, the idea that his favorite hoodie can be put with anything and still look flawless is what has earned it the spot as his favorite piece. This is a reflection of the idea that clothes that are stylish and beautiful don't necessarily need deeper significance and they can be just as worthy without it.

This idea that deeper meaning and visible significance aren't requirements for something being deeply cherished is one that we should apply to all aspects of our lives.

Clothes as statement pieces, both within and outside of the fashion world, are also found to be favorites. As fashion is subjective, many students have favorite clothes that are very beautiful to themselves, and that is all that matters. Clothes can also be used as a political and social statement. When it comes to the conflicts all across the globe, students often show solidarity with those who are suffering by wearing clothes associated with the culture of their respective people, providing them with social and sometimes

Words by David Jesse Mathis
Art by Sydney Johnson

monetary support.

Personality is something that clothes can contribute to, and fashion can be enriched by people's personalities. This loop is demonstrated all across Brown and is a way to examine how students express different aspects of themselves and their personal taste when it comes to fashion. The Black students here at Brown and beyond have so much passion and person-



ality around their lives that it bleeds through into their clothes and presentation. This passion creates beautiful people, both inside and out, who curate their appearance and are intentional about their everyday actions.

Clothes can be spiritual, personal, communal, cultural, connecting, or none of these things at all. All of these accounts and ideas present that clothes can be seen as much more than physical items to wear, but can be just as valid without extending beyond their physicality. And with this, students demonstrate the true versatility of clothing as a means to represent so much, or nothing at all.

Finding History

Discovering a Lost Heritage

Words by Kevin Carter

It took me a while to realize where I was.

For one, it was dark, and an extensive shroud of fog was spread across the field. The only thing I could make out was the dead grass strewn across the desiccated turf below my feet. To make matters worse, it was freezing cold, and the occasional shriek of a crow only made the distant symphony of cicadas even more ominous. It was only when I stumbled over a rounded rectangular ditch that I realized where I was. Trenches. Suddenly the smell of blood filled my nostrils, and I began to scream in panic as the dread of warfare latched onto my soul.

"Hello! Is anybody out there!"

That's when I saw the silhouette of a man who appeared to be having the same terrifying experience. Lost in this remote, vacant battlefield, looking for someone, waiting to be found. He was pacing around restlessly, but when he heard my voice he suddenly stopped. For a moment, I choked up. Then I filled my lungs with bravery and called out to him again.

"Who's there?" I said.

Slowly, he turned in my direction and spoke. "Please, find me. My name is — "

"Timothy!"

My head shot up in surprise and my arms flailed reflexively, sending papers and DNA tests falling and flying all around me. I had fallen asleep at my desk again, and my sister woke me. But she hadn't called my name. I adjusted my glasses, which had begun to slide to the bottom of my nose, and spun my chair to face her in my discombobulated condition. "What did you say?"

My sister had her hands on her hips and her lip curled tight in an exasperated expression. "Get your head in the game, Darius. It's the name of the ancestor we were looking for. You know, the one that nobody claims to know about?"

I sat up in my chair and began to reorganize the mess I had made from my sister's jump scare. "Right," I muttered. For a strange moment, I could almost recall the person from my dreams mouthing the exact word, Timothy.

"That's it?" My sister pried, expecting a bigger reaction. "Our first breakthrough in weeks, and all you have to say is right? Uncle Jermaine isn't gonna believe this — "

"Listen," I said, cutting her off before she could get any further into her tirade. "I know this is gonna sound crazy, but I just had this dream..." I recalled all of the details of my dream for her, and much to my surprise she was invested.

"A battlefield," she whispered. "Darius, do you know what that means? What major conflict was going on at that time?" Soon, my eyes lit up with hers. We had a lead. Our ancestor was a Black man named Timothy who fought in the Civil War.

"I'm going to have to call up Uncle Jermaine again. He just helped me figure out what his name was. This is going to be huge."

She dialed our uncle's number, her excitement nearly tangible as she waited impatiently through the rings. Even as it went to voicemail she didn't skip a beat, shoving the phone into her pocket and reaching for the car keys. "Never mind that. We're just going to go straight to the source." I stared at my sister in shock at how seriously she was taking my dream. "What're you waiting for?" she inquired as she walked out the front door. "Shotgun is all yours."

Uncle Jerome was a good man; he had agreed to help us in our ancestral research endeavors because he too was motivated

to learn more about the history that our parents and siblings seemed to have given up on. After months of research, the three of us had been able to piece together six generations of our family history. Unfortunately, over the past month, we hit a roadblock. No one seems to know where our family was prior to the late 19th century. But if my dream had any truth, it could potentially explain the mystique behind this. When we arrived at his house, my sister urged me to recite my dream again before discussing her thoughts on its significance. Uncle Jerome responded with a toothy grin, alluding to his own discovery.

"You aren't the only ones who've been doing their research," he said.

He left and returned with a stack full of dingy cotton rag papers with horizontal and vertical writing overlapped on each page. This made the pages hardly legible, not to mention that there was no way to tell if they were in chronological order. But, there was one detail that was paramount – a signature at the bottom of the page, that matched the name we were speculating. My sister gasped in awe.

"Is this how you found it? Jermaine, this is incredible!"

I picked up a piece of paper and eyed it curiously. "There is a date," I announced. It took up the least amount of space on the page, but it was there, in the top right corner. Which meant that we could order them and put it all together.

I brought my sister and uncle into a group hug as tears began to well up in my eyes. "We did it, y'all."

2 weeks later...

At last, we finished ordering and interpreting the journal entries of our great ancestor, Timothy. There was so much information that the materials practically made an autobiography. That same night, I lay staring at the ceiling, wondering if there was any chance that I would dream of him again on the battlefield. I turned out to be right about one of those things. I dreamed of Timothy, but we were no longer on the battlefield. Instead, we were in a sunlit park with immaculate vibes, food, and tons of family. It was a reunion. I felt my sister and my uncle beside me as Timothy told me about how he was born into slavery and fought in the Civil War for his freedom as well as the freedom of his family, all while being engaged and expecting a son. When he finished his story, he sat back and observed his surroundings, appreciating the peace, love, and fellowship that surrounded us

Then he looked me in the eyes. "Thank you for finding me, Darius."

Before I could muster up a response he began to fade away, a brilliant beam of light enveloping him and leaving nothing but particles of sunshine. And as I watched him go, I noticed everybody in the park was doing the same.

When I woke from the dream, Timothy's story began to register with me. I began to think about the awful life that he had to live, being born into slavery and facing the physical, mental, and emotional degradation that coincided with being a Black slave in antebellum America. Then, having to fight for his freedom and experiencing the brutalities of war only to die before reaping the fruit of his labor. I felt a tinge of guilt for not having known about his sacrifice for so long. But then I began to think about the valor, conviction, and honor with which he fought, and I felt a sense of pride and gratitude surging through me. Most of all, I felt motivated. Timothy had done his part, and now his legacy is cemented in our hearts and minds forever.

Now it's time for me to do mine.

Floating

The Ocean Between Nigeria and America

Words by Ayoola Fadahunsi

5,357 miles separate my two identities. I am Nigerian and a Black American. The vast Atlantic Ocean separates Virginia from Lagos, and I can't help but float between both - untethered.

Moving back to the United States at the age of seven has allowed for formative and defining memories from a childhood in Nigeria to take shape, thus forcing me to contrast life in Nigeria with life in the U.S. But at age seven, my numerous attempts to untangle complex-juxtapositional-analyses on life left my young mind struggling to understand where my identity fit within the seemingly binary margins.

Nigerian-American is the first title with which I introduce myself. Nigerian comes first. It is what I am, but I have always pondered, can it stand alone? Should it? But, the American that follows my cultural identity and heritage provides me with a sense of confirmation. I am American after all, but can that stand alone? No answers follow these incessant questions of identity, only echoes of guilt. This guilt, I have now learned, comes from external pressures to choose. Pressure to maintain my Nigerian culture, taking caution not to lose language, customs, and traditions in translation as I live in the United States. A desire to fully be a part of the Black American community, but not neglect other aspects of my identity. This guilt often leaves me isolated, standing shakily on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean.

But the sea level is rising, and I soon find myself
floating — again — untethered.

It was at seven years old that I first came face-to-face with the notions of race. A childhood in Nigeria surrounded by only Black people inspired an uninhibited perception of my place in the world. It was comforting. And although other forms of division cleave Nigerians in different directions, the color of my skin never forced a hyper-awareness of self.

During second grade in America, I was made aware of my identity as a Black person. Through learning the history of Black America and simply living, I would learn what it means to be Black in America. Grade school history books served as my first grounding in Black America. I read eagerly, soaking up all the knowledge I could comprehend, finding numerous figures to look up to, and learning who from the past forged the path for me. It was these narratives, and life as a Black child in the U.S., that reformulated my identity and expanded my perception of self. My identity evolved from a little girl in Lagos to a little Black girl in Virginia.

As I grew older, I soon began to learn that it was not only the ocean that separated Nigeria from America, but B L A C K did too. A striking difference between my life in Virginia and Lagos was the color of my skin. And thus, I had to reformulate myself with an "othered" identity. Of course, I knew I was a Black person, but it was the first time when the world made it known to me too. The first time the world made me perceive it from a point of view rooted in systemic violence. At first, it was hard to reconcile this uncomfortable difference, and my newly expanded notions of identity were followed by unshakable questions of belonging. How could I be born in a country that did not accept me with open arms?

These questions of belonging and acceptance are amplified when I land in spaces that are not Nigeria or America and the uncomfortable binary gnaws deeper. In these spaces, I feel untethered, in a liminal space.

In the past, I have tried to tether to one identity in these situations. In Europe, where my blue U.S. Passport holds more weight than my green Nigerian one, I gladly anchor myself to my American identity. When in Ghana, I bring out the green - a sense of continental camaraderie emboldening me. Even social spaces force me into these binaries. My identity configurations can only be likened to a chameleon as I adapt form for my audience. But doing this mental gymnastics my whole life has gotten tiring and draining. My personhood is not confined to rigid boxes.

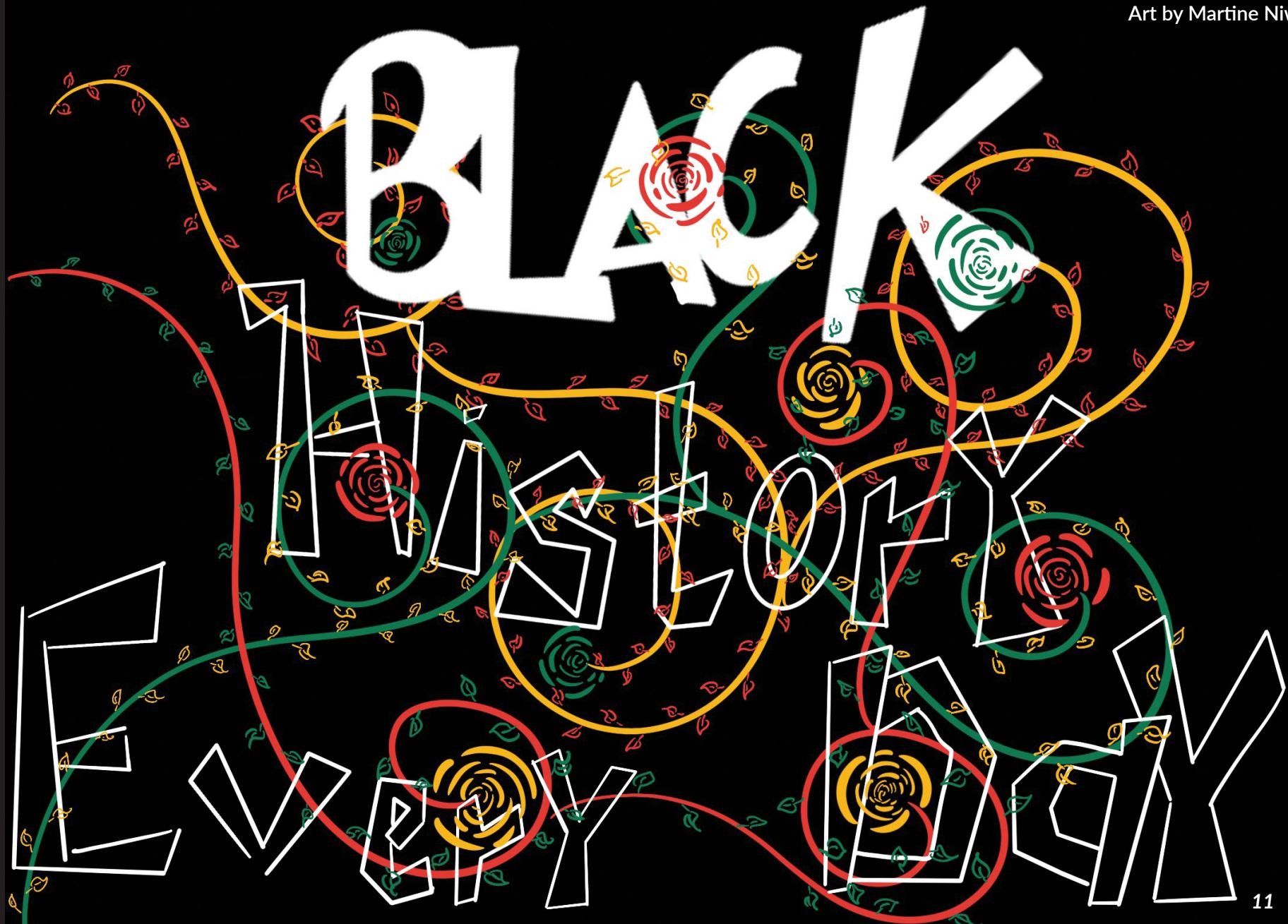
The more I tethered to one identity, the more strained my own personal relationship with myself became. One side was always being neglected, pushed aside only to be revealed in times of convenience. What a disservice to the fullness of who I am when only one half becomes the whole.

As I reflect this Black History Month, I know that my celebration would be fraught if I did not acknowledge all the parts of my being that make me Black.

Now I don't see myself just floating on the waters, but I see myself floating in the air, hopping on the islands, and swimming through the Atlantic from one side to the other. Because home is on both sides of the sea, and it is comforting to embrace both.

I untether myself from society's demand that I choose one, embrace one, and hide the other. I untether myself from rhetoric that I am not — enough. I untethered myself from harmful binaries that incapacitate the fullness of life's experiences. The Atlantic connects America and Nigeria, and the ocean will be the only distance I allow between my identity.

Art by Martine Niwe





Echoes of My Ancestors

Words by Jazlyn White

Art by Lyric Johnson

"There were days where I'd be exhausted after only working for a few hours," said my father. "Even early in the day, the sun would just make it so hot."

He tended to the animals and occasionally the crops, and although he described these summers as laborious, he did so in a way that nurtured my childish innocence. The stretches of grass turned into dirt roads that spanned for miles before turning into the pavement. These were mystical stories in a land far away from concrete. Only when I was twenty and came home from college did he remember the water fountains with "colored" signs.

Truthfully, I cannot remember when I first recognized the voices of my ancestors in literature. Over five years ago in my tenth-grade English class, Toni Morrison's *Sula* was my introduction to Black literature. The rich and complex world Morrison built for her characters was intriguing. From Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" to the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, I felt comfortable within the Black imagination and began writing myself.

I write eloquently as an academic, allowing grammatical and syntactical pillars to frame me. Although I was still in a classroom, I found it exhilarating to challenge myself to see literature as pages with infinite histories, meanings, and voices, all while being praised by teachers for my curiosity. This encouragement led me to study English in college.

At Brown University, Black professors read all forms of the n-word aloud, an experience that always made me nervous. However, I never believed that invoking the slur was unreasonable.

Literature, too, began unsettling me. My father never curses, like the rest of his side of the family. Meanwhile, my mother and grandmother use the n-word casually. Living in public housing, also known as "the projects," allowed them to reconcile with their blackness more than most. The very community that developed their life-long black pride also reminds them of the systematic oppression they endure. To them, the n-word became all-encompassing; it could signify an affectionate greeting or severe annoyance. For these reasons, I let it slide off my tongue, too. Among my Black friends, the n-word is a distinct curse word that, once said, is followed by bashful giggling.

I took a creative writing class where the first novel we read was Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. Void of continuity and narrative, the intentionally awkward novel placed historically Black colleges on the same pages as men wearing white hooded

cloaks. In the novel, the South transcends time and space, thrusting the wealthy and well-spoken Not Sidney from his Atlanta mansion into "Georgia" (Everett 46). There are "troubling truths" that Not Sidney knows instinctively, without ever being told, like the "flashing blue bubble atop a black-and-white county sheriff's patrol car" and a certain inflection on the officer's tongue as he says, "hey boy" (Everett 47).

Without ever being told, I realized that my ancestors are like any other story motif. I continued reading for thirteen more pages until Not Sidney approached a "shack right out of every hillbilly's origin fantasy," that "might have had a rustic charm" (Everett 60). There, Not Sidney meets a woman named "Sis," a name that "ain't short fer nothin'" (Everett 60). I stopped reading the dialogue between her and Not Sidney, skipping over these lines until I found a place to retreat within the narration.

Maybe Percival Everett—and countless others—intended to evoke such a reaction from me? I felt these depictions of Black people represented a primitiveness. Unable to naturally invoke these sounds, I considered these voices incommunicable—delegitimized and reduced to fragments. I felt and acknowledged their sense of otherness.

Being Black has signified losses for me that are replicated in these moments, though. Through stories, my mother's and father's oral histories achieved something that literature could not until now. Stories told at bedtime were once left untold. They will remain censored in some way, too.

The cultural identity I have assumed is influenced by living in New York, a region where many Southerners—escaped or emancipated enslaved people and their descendants—fled. Once my family was granted freedom, obstacles to documenting their lives and history persisted. I always mourned the lost photos from my mother's childhood. My grandmother, a single woman at the time with four children, fled an abusive husband in her early twenties. Even with welfare, she got evicted from the first apartment in which she lived without him. According to my mother, they squeezed into another Brooklyn apartment with their cousins afterward before moving into public housing.

As I read apostrophes that shorten their words, imagine extra syllables on their tongues, or notice vowels used interchangeably, I will no longer interpret my apprehension as aversion. Instead of skipping these lines, my eyes will linger over their words until they can resound off the page. In these moments, the voices of my ancestors will be entirely their own: shortened words to represent lost histories—my mother's photos, the details forgotten or withheld by Black storytellers—and our dialect to represent what we know without being told. These are words that do not require my voice.

My mother and father raised an excellent reader. The only child of a teacher, I have counted, spelled, and read for longer than I can remember. My hands would trace the rows of bright-colored plastic bins in my Kindergarten classroom, observing the letters printed on the front that indicated the books' reading level. I quickly outgrew those books, and by sixth grade, my English teachers stopped testing my reading comprehension. I was probably reading at a high school level, and these white women knew it but saw no reason to push me beyond the classroom's limits.

My family members read like it was congenital. Stephen King crossed generations in my household. Beginning in the 1970s, my maternal Grandmother affectionately passed down novels like *The Shining*, *Carrie*, and *Jaws* to her children before watching the movie adaptations. Decades later, my mother and I watched these movies, contributing to my current love for blockbusters and horror movies. As the books' spines grew thicker to hold hundreds of pages instead of tens, the words continued to invoke a sense of comfortability. The texts I knew were all-American classics, But they were colorblind—somehow a universal, yet exclusive, image of national being.

Because of this colorblindness, there was never a reason for me to consider when, how, where, and—perhaps most importantly—the means through which an unknown number of my ancestors acquired the ability to read.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported that, by 1950, only 8.9 to 12 percent of "Black[s]" in the South were illiterate—a sharp decline from 48 percent fifty years prior and 76.2 percent in 1880 following the emancipation of slaves.

Both sides of my family, paternal and maternal, lived in Georgia until moving to New York City. My distant relatives—great-aunts, -uncles, and -grandparents—grew up there, only migrating sometime around the early twentieth century. Being from the South, specifically "down south" as we call it, became an integral part of our blackness. Suspended in memories like ten-hour road trips or the beginning and end of summer, "down south" will likely never be more to me than a euphemism, a mere representation of family history.

My father, born in 1964, spent summers in the South working with his siblings on the land his grandparents owned. Though I have never seen it, I have heard endless stories about the rustic farm, the water, and the bathroom outside. He endured Georgia's blistering sun through childish eyes, only gradually remembering details about these moments and revealing them to me.

Forbidden Fruit

Words by Yenée Berta

Love is the venom that moves gently

Love is the venom that moves gently
 Sticky Summer drives and Marlboro wrappers alike
 Holding my breath until my breath held me
 I knew nothing else but of this suffocation

I knew nothing else but of love

The flames of fury weave themselves into fulfillment
 For every puff of smoke, there is a purple-lipped smile
 For every word discharged in acrimony, there is your soft voice
 Easing me back like a rocking chair.

"Chérie"

Lingers above the dining table conversation
 Darling
 Dear
 Honey
 Baby

Come home

Describe the feeling of falling back in love
 Sam Cooke whispers Chicago skies into my ear until I slumber
 I jumped in the puddle you told me not to
 Scraped my knee and you started crying with me
 I don't know any other kind of love

"Fuck the world"

but leave some bubble gum outside my door just in case
 Lure me back into Eden
 Sip on spirits in a coffee mug

And Eve asks,

What is forbidden?

The fruit in its wholeness,
 Or just my lips

Love is the venom that moves gently

wired like a filament, [meant to be] 3D printed to perfection, there are
pieces to peel off
mistakes to chip away

I am an
Anchor, grounded
A paperweight waiting for wind to flow beneath me,
wings

Heavy and wanting to fly
Reaching for stars

I was created with vision in mind,
Layered
to build
a project with care
melted and fused and bones and glue,
a piece of a much larger puzzle

the machine is still printing me out
Unfinished, Unseen, Unknowing of what I will become
i'm stretched and spun like wool
circling and cycling and close to snapping but
Staying firm

Rooting for Everybody Black?

Words by Justin Blake

We root for everyone Black, right? As we enjoy Black History Month, this thought has been bouncing around my mind often. Do we have a responsibility to stand with our brothers and sisters all the time? How far should our racial solidarities carry us in support of any one person? It's a complex issue, and in the world of social media, not only does everyone have an opinion, but it seems like everyone we follow has the same opinions as ours'. It isn't completely unjustified for Black people to align with each other. For centuries we have been marginalized, painted as the villain, as savages, and as subhuman. It's natural to want to uplift our Black brothers and sisters.

When evaluating public issues, on one side, some believe that the racialized nature of American society and the court of public opinion make it essential to take a supportive stance against the wall of criticism facing a Black public figure. In no way am I saying that identifying the racialization of journalism is wrong. On the contrary, I think it's essential for us to look at all angles, assess the biases of our sources, point out blind spots, etc. However, we need to balance our approach. On the other side, some respond to controversy with a "guilty until proven innocent" approach. There's no smoke without fire, right? Again, it's great to be skeptical, but often, proving innocence is impossible; it's pretty difficult to change someone's mind once it's made up. This kind of bias can blind us to information that challenges our point of view. Social media makes this extremely difficult since it's almost too easy to get stuck in our echo chambers. As such, it's important to be measured when we see controversies regarding Black public figures. Allow me to use three examples that illustrate circumstances in which it is acceptable to "root for everyone Black."

Over the past couple of months, Jonathan Majors has gone from one of the most beloved, up-and-coming actors to a man exiled, dropped from the MCU with all his projects on standby. His domestic abuse trial has dominated headlines and timelines, and the guilty verdict has only sparked further debate instead of drawing a definitive conclusion. Apart from this issue being an example of when "siding with everyone Black" is not the appropriate approach, it also highlights the nuances of reactions when the public figure is male-presenting versus when they are female-presenting. Black men all over the internet rushed to Majors' defense, proclaiming this case to be just another example of white women "entrapping" or "endangering" Black men, turning Majors into the talisman of the belief that Black men are under attack by society. I'm not going to get into how true this statement is, but the fact that a convicted domestic abuser still garners significant support, even after being found guilty, is a problem. Is it true that courts have, in the past, unjustly convicted Black men of crimes, especially when committed against white women? Yes, the Central Park Five comes to mind immediately. However, assuming this defensive stance, presupposing racial undertones that significantly affect legal proceedings, blinds us to the truth. Jonathan Majors is not a hero, and glorifying him as one invalidates those who are actually wrongly convicted. Let's do better.

The case of Claudine Gay is much more complicated. The former Harvard University President resigned about a month ago due to rising plagiarism accusations surrounding her coursework. This time around, it's a lot more nuanced. Accusations against her were undoubtedly leveled because of her refusal to condemn students protesting against the ongoing genocide in Palestine. There was underlying racial animus, especially with Gay being the first Black president of the most prestigious university in the US. However, her plagiarism did not warrant the level of criticism she received. Of all the Ivy League presidents who sat before Congress in October, she was condemned most harshly. In this situation, aligning with Gay is, in my opinion, a lot more justifiable than with Majors.

My last example is someone who's seen as a Black hero by most, with an impact surpassed only by titans like MLK and Malcolm X: Barack Obama. As the first Black president, he represented a significant step forward in the quest for racial equality. However, Black or not, for eight years, he was the head of an institution that continues to wreak havoc around the world. He was not only complicit in the bombing campaigns in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and other countries in the Middle East, but also an active participant. When people are oppressed, we must maintain solidarity, even when their oppressor is one of us. If anything, it's more important than ever. Of course, some of the criticism Obama received was straight-up racist, especially the discourse surrounding the validity of his birth certificate. In this sense, it's fine to back him, but we must be critical, particularly when we are in positions of power.

In conclusion, I don't think this clarified anything, or provided any kind of template to navigate Black issues critically. I never intended it to. I hope this simply shows the need for nuance when navigating issues involving Black public figures. As we continue to celebrate Black excellence this month, let's make sure to be careful who we're so quick to praise.

More than WaterFire: *An Interview with Providence local, Mr. D*

Words by Kalie Minor

The first time I walked into Smalls Paradise, I knew I had stumbled upon something special. Off the corner of Olney and Pratt Street, hidden from the all-knowing eyes of Apple Maps, it takes a curious pedestrian to become a patron. Once inside, visitors will be amazed by how much can fit into the seemingly tiny storefront. The building is packed, floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall, with antiques. If you encounter the store's beauty, you can converse with the co-owner, Mr. D — that's Dennis if you are old enough.

You'll find him sitting among the stacks of antiques, listening to classic jazz, reading, and ready to ask you about where you come from. Maybe it is because I have always had an affinity for antiques or could feel the potent history the store held, but when Mr. D first asked me where I was from, I knew I could not let my first visit be the last time we spoke. So, after a couple of visits, I sat down with Mr. D, though we mostly stood as he showed me treasures, collectibles, maps, and the like.

One thing you should know about Mr. D is that he is a walking library of history, always prepared with more information than you can listen to at once. Within our first moments of speaking, the questions I prepared for him began to seem less relevant. Instead, I listened as he wove stories of Providence's history into his own; I only interjected to ask about anecdotes. As he showed me pictures from a recent Black history exhibit hosted at the Rhode Island State House, he told me about the towns of Hardscrabble and Snowtown. "That's where they had two race riots." He continued, "They don't teach the Rhode Island kids this either." That is another thing about Mr. D; he will tell you the most heart-wrenching fact about this city and nation while maintaining his easygoing demeanor. He has had enough time to grapple with this history, while for the rest of us, its novelty makes it both fascinating and freshly painful. When I got on my computer after our interview, I wasted no time before researching. Snowtown was an integrated town, nestled where the Rhode Island State House sits today. In 1831, after white sailors began a fight in the neighboring town of Olney's Lane, shots were exchanged, and upon the decree of "Kill every Negro you can!", Snowtown, a part of Olney's Lane, and the thriving Black and racially diverse communities they housed, were decimated. Hardscrabble touts a nearly identical story. The state remembers them with a small stone, hidden in Roger Williams Memorial Park, which reads, "*The site of Addison Hollow, where the first nineteenth century Blacks purchased property and the site of the first major riot.*"

In addition to his fascination with the past, Mr. D shared a complex and compelling family history. He was able to craft his lineage by leaning on census data and family stories, rejecting the mainstream digitized databases that, for someone as well-versed in the world of paper and oral traditions, are often overwhelming and unreliable. Two distinct discoveries came from this search; the first regarded his indigenous background. There was excitement in his voice when he told me this — the information likely newer than the other pieces of

history he'd curated over the years. He discussed the violence waged against tribes like the Narragansett and the legacy of colonial violence in this nation. Through his narrative, I began to understand how these histories are not isolated from Mr. D, but how Rhode Island's history and this man's identity intersect. To witness such history and see it in the antiques that filled Smalls Paradise and Mr. D's words made it feel even more important.

Afterward, Mr. D shared that he descended from the family of John and Chad Brown who founded Brown University and bought extensive property in Rhode Island to establish their industry and wealth. He explained that if you go back to the 1700s, the Brown name works its way into many Black Providence families. In this way, the Brown legacy exists in the descendants of enslaved women of whom the family took advantage. These descendants have been and continue to be displaced from their homes around Providence as the University expands its property ownership.

We returned to this topic multiple times throughout the interview because of his consistent critique of Brown's tax-exempt status that makes housing unaffordable for the Black and low-income communities local to the area. His irritation did not extend to Brown students; however, he addressed the isolating nature of College Hill, and students' apprehension to leave the comfort of campus. There was an urgency in how he expressed his desire for college students to explore more of Providence, one that I began to adopt myself. "There's a lot of beauty here," he said amidst the antiques and the sunny yet frighteningly cold weather.

The more I asked about the antiques, the more history I learned. Lined on the shelves were ceramic jugs from the 1800s. There were African busts with copper that oxidized into a sage green that Mr. D found in a vintage African art magazine. Black caricature figurines that he collected from a series of trips to the South were also present in small numbers. Each antique told a story that Mr. D recognized as the history of Providence and Black life.

As Black students at Brown, we have become integrated into Providence's history. We should look further than Prospect and Hope Streets and aim to understand the city's history. The care with which Mr. D studies and collects the history of Providence enables him to draw direct connections from past to present. Although adopting this responsibility could be daunting, it is also inspirational. Mr. D's fascination with local history calls to mind the personal histories of everyone on College Hill — of every student at Brown. One cannot help but think of their past when they speak to him, the legacy they are leaving, and the people who brought them to where they stand today. Our lives, family legacies, hometowns, and the artifacts that memorialize them are pieces of Black history that are often forgotten. This history is kept alive by people like Mr. D, and if we choose, we can keep it alive as well — and even pick up a ceramic figurine from the 1930s on the way.

Loving My Heritage, Unconditionally

Words by Natalie Payne

Upon my return to Brown this semester, I had the opportunity to attend the 27th Annual Black Solidarity Conference at Yale University. I went as part of a group of 16 Black student leaders from Brown, all hoping to be enriched by the keynote speakers, social events, and workshops offered under the theme: "Transforming Silence Into Action: Mobilizing With Care in the Black Community." I gained immense insight into the ways that we can continue to uplift ourselves as a community, even having the opportunity to hear the awe-inspiring words of Minnijean Brown-Trickey, one of the Little Rock Nine who helped desegregate Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas in 1957.

On the conference's final day, I attended the Protest & Organizing Panel, featuring Emmy-nominated journalist Kahlil Greene and freedom fighter and writer Brea Baker. Both speakers shared their experiences on how they got involved in activism and how their activism journey has transformed over the years. Baker's experience resonated with me the most, especially her experience growing up as an African-American in the very multicultural, multiethnic, and multiracial atmosphere of New York City. She spoke about feeling different when everyone seemed to know exactly where they came from and how she could only trace her lineage as far back as the States, not Africa nor the Caribbean. She later emphasized the importance of deconstructing the notion that being African-American, referring to those having ancestral connections to slavery as it existed in the United States, was boring or lacking in culture.

It was at this moment that I considered my own experiences. Growing up in an area similar to New York City, my classmates often hailed from countries all over the world. I related to my peers, but with a caveat that I worked to hide for a good part of my life: my father was Guyanese-born with Trinidadian heritage, while my

mother was what I referred to as "just American." Anytime anyone asked me where I was from, I proudly stated that I was Guyanese and Trinidadian, completely attempting to hide the existence of my African-American heritage. It was only when people asked if one parent was Guyanese and the other Trinidadian that I offered up the explanation of my full background.

Despite my attempts to separate myself from what I once considered to be the "boring" aspect of my cultural identity, my life has been wholly shaped by the long-standing influences of African-American culture within my family and the country at large. Growing up, I listened to the old-school jams my parents played in the car including the Temptations, Jackson 5, 112, The Supremes, and Jodeci. One of my favorites growing up was the R&B group New Edition. I often joke that I knew them before "The New Edition Story" came out and many younger people found them back in 2017. However, my upbringing did not consist only of old-school R&B and soul, but also the musical influences of my Caribbean heritage. I can still hear the soca music blasted by my dad on Saturday mornings throughout my upbringing, adding to the beats we grew to love for years to come.

Black movies and television shows were another influential part of my connection to the culture throughout my life. From a young age, I enjoyed watching Moesha, Tyler Perry's House of Payne, The Parkers, Family Matters, and of course, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, alongside so many others. Among my favorite movies are The Best Man, Brown Sugar, House Party, Sister Act, and Jumping the Broom. Often in a quest for a rush of nostalgia, I find myself rewatching those TV shows and movies to transport myself back to those moments when I first watched them.

Food is another aspect that has constantly connected me to the African-American community and

culture throughout my life. Soul food, derived from the innovation and resourcefulness of enslaved people despite the conditions of slavery, remains one of my favorite things to eat. From tasting my mom's spin on soul food to grabbing dinners from Maggie's Southern Kitchen near where I grew up in New Jersey. A dinner with chicken prepared any which way, macaroni and cheese, and sweet potatoes has become my comfort meal.

As I consider how my life experiences are shaped by my connections to my African-American heritage, in addition to that of my Caribbean heritage, I realize my compartmentalization of where I come from undermines that very principle. My African-American heritage is something to be celebrated, to be proud of. While I may not be sure of my exact ethnic or geographical lineage on my mom's side, I can rest assured that I come from a people bursting with culture. I come from game-changers who took a hopeless situation and sprang out the musical, culinary, and media influences that still mold us to this day.

Through Brea Baker's words, I'm reminded of the importance of reclaiming our beautiful narratives. It is through our continued recognition of the obstacles traversed by our ancestors that we receive the chance to not only appreciate their contributions to modern-day culture but also be eternally grateful for their sacrifices that have led us here. Without my ancestors who persevered through the unimaginable circumstances of enslavement, paved the way for our continued fight for civil rights, and put in place the foundational values that continue to influence my family today, I may not have had the opportunity to experience life the way I do now. Without them, I may not have been given the chance to realize my wildest dreams, including the one where I attended Brown University.

Words by Emmanuel Chery

"Let's be honest. The only reason they just take what you say is because you're Black and gay."

These were the words uttered to me jocularly by my friend, White, when I discussed my frequent participation in my English classes. It was a disjointing moment for me — one I initially tried to address jokingly, to which she responded by doubling down. Black History Month, though as regular as any other month, is a good time for us to reassess what allyship entails, and if the people we choose to surround ourselves with are *actually* allies. It is also a time for us to remember how standing up against racism, whether through protest, introspection, or simply addressing microaggressive comments, are all important, and lead to being surrounded by anti-racist establishments.

Intent vs Impact:

At institutions like Brown University, which are especially depicted as "liberal" or "progressive," it can be difficult for people entering these spaces to feel as though they are guilty of participating in or perpetuating bigotry. One can feel that, in personal association with minorities or institutions supposedly committed to uplifting minorities, they are absolved of any fault. Many students at Brown, especially those coming from large metropolitan areas across the country and world, feel further distanced from discrimination as they have experience and prior exposure to the level of diversity present on campus. Conversely, for minority students coming from less diverse areas, Brown can feel like a surplus of diversity, and thus a space free of the kinds of discrimination of which their pasts were full. Yet people presupposing a cultural comfort with other identity groups, either from a majority or minority perspective, can lend itself to allowing discrimination to be swept under the rug.

When looking at the comfort non-Black people have surrounding Black culture, it is evident that it can be as familiar to them as their own cultures. Through several popular cultural appropriations and appreciations, Black food, music, dancing, and fashion have broadly dispersed through American culture. With American political and economic influence in the global sphere, Black culture disperses itself across the world to places even with very few Black people. From this popularity can arise an ad hominem rejection of racism accusations. Beyond the typical "I have Black friends" response, now people can point to their love of rap, hip-hop, streetwear, and perhaps even Madea, as a piece of false evidence for their non-racism. Yet, as understood by the concept of internalized racism, Black people, too, can perpetuate the anti-Black racism they have received from the world despite their literal Blackness. So how would familiarity with the culture make a non-Black person not racist?

One could argue that Black people are to blame for this issue continuing. Many people, including myself, can experience microaggressions, or simply aggressive racism, and choose not to seriously address it in the moment or afterward to not make an issue or create tension. Especially for those coming from predominantly non-Black areas, part of social survival came from choosing not to dwell on discrimination to maintain friendships or avoid being written off as derogatorily "woke" or a "social justice warrior." When jokes or statements like these are commonplace or encouraged, one can become desensitized to the moral failure of the offense. Yet, it becomes a question of whose job it is to deliver anti-racist rhetoric to the masses. Is it the role of every Black person in modern society to correct interpersonal racism they experience or witness on a day-to-day basis, stopping to explain to people why something they believe is harmful, or where things come from in history, or why, no, saying it with an "-a" versus an "-er," or in a song does not make it less bad?

Commitment to opposing anti-Black racism as an ally outside of the community requires active work, learning, and restructuring the paradigm delivered to oneself by the government, the news, and the media. Yet the work of Black people becomes even more draining as we are often asked to explain to or teach our peers, our friends, and our families, which certain beliefs lend themselves to problematic ideology. It can be exhausting being surrounded by people who are either unwilling to listen, or who decide their learned allyship is to be solely informed by the minorities around them.

What White Allyship Means During Black History Month

The willingness to talk out this comment with my friend was a choice, not an obligation, I made because I respected her and wanted her to grow. But as a reminder to Black people this month, it is only a choice; it is acceptable to not invest energy into teaching people why they have missed the mark in their statements and jokes, to take space, and to use distance to communicate why things said and done are wrong. And as a reminder to allies this month: it is not the job of the Black people in your life to teach you about blackness, but it is *absolutely* your responsibility to learn if you believe yourself committed to anti-Black racism.

The Modern Day Blues Woman

Words by Fara Odunlami
Art by Martine Niwe

It has been said that there was a lure in Blues. A special kind of interaction between singer and audience, almost congregation-like. One where the Mother of Blues herself can stand tall on stage and sing a call and the whole crowd responds with the same energy and reverence that a pastor would use to ask a congregation who is the mightiest.

The prowess and charisma of Black female musicians, however, is not just a thing of the past. Even today, we have a figure that resembles a modern-day Blues woman. Most people can name their favorite female artists with ease, but there are still certain music industries that struggle to promote them.

The 1920s-1930s Harlem Renaissance was a period that marked a revival, or in many ways, the first period in which a Black cultural mecca existed in the United States after slavery. It was a “golden age” for African-American art, music, and writers with a specific focus on Black life, artistry, and stories. The Blues created a way for Black musicians to propel themselves in a post-slavery, post-reconstruction world.

Blues is a genre of music that is said to have roots in the South before its commercialization and spike in popularity in the early 1920s. The popularized version of Blues was a modernized resurgence of the rural version sung by the so-called “founders.” People like Muddy Waters, BB King, and W. C Handy are seen as staples for the Blues genre, leading the music style into the mainstream. However, it would be impertinent to omit the role of women in the genre’s resurgence. The Mother of Blues Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Lizzie “Memphis Minnie” Douglas are only a few of the female Blues musicians of the time who dominated the genre.

Thus, the discussion of the Blues woman begins. A “blueswoman” can be defined as a working artist; however, this definition only brushes the surface of their experiences. Although blueswomen were allowed to gain success in the music industry, her role as a working woman distinguished her from the traditional image of a woman at the time. She had to gain respect from her male peers to be deemed a legitimate musician and had to showcase her sexuality as much as she did her talent. She was a woman who, interestingly enough, was looked down on by other members of the Black community. A woman who played a role in creating an image of Black womanhood that completely contrasted female depictions promoted by organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs whose focus on Christianity and respectability politics ultimately perpetuated the suppression of Black female identity.

The blueswoman is not just a figure but a representation of non-traditional Black womanhood that has been bled dry of personal individuality. Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were unique artists with vastly different lives, but they were labeled as blueswomen. They sang about sexuality and love but also highlighted the struggle of belonging to the Black race while also being Black women in the United States. Smith and Rainey were complex individuals who, despite being successful, still dealt with racism and misogyny within the music industry.

This all-to-familiar phenomenon prompted me to ask myself, is there a difference between the 1920s blueswoman and the 2020s female rapper?

Today, the Black community is torn between those who love hip-hop and others who despise it under the belief that it will ruin our community. This division in Black art and music portrayals seemed eerily familiar, especially when reading about Blues and the Harlem Renaissance. Despite the hundred-year time difference, the success and struggle of female rappers in the music industry parallels that of female Blues singers.

Both figures are oversexualized and rely on respect from their male peers to achieve legitimacy. Both receive hate from members of the Black community because of their role in establishing mainstream depictions of Black womanhood. And finally, their artistic expressions are both limited as though using music to send a message is exclusive to male artists.

Every Black History Month, we are given the tale of the fight for freedom with the strange assumption that these efforts had a united front. We think about the story that we’ve been told: historical Black figures like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass were able to pry us from the dripping maws of racism and “save us once and for all.” But when we compare this narrative to the present day, what seems so prominent and inescapable is the division within the Black community. Whether it’s between gender, sexuality, politics, religion, culture, or class, we as Black people conduct ourselves as a fractured community more often than a united one.

It might be a while before the Black community can come together. This would require us to stop enforcing a social hierarchy and instead recognize and respect our differences. I believe that we have tricked ourselves into thinking that prejudice is a part of humanity rather than a generationally learned habit. It is only through a mixture of purposeful and unintentional action—artistry and politics alike—that we will finally be able to grow as a community.



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