

Vinyle Zine: The Execution of the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness

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Introduction

Vinyle zine, is a Black literary magazine pedagogically driven to increase cultural literacy within the African-American community. In order to do this, this magazine must have the foundation of Pro-Blackness as a driving force towards advancing Black people in the ways this platform can offer its service. *Vinyle* zine allows Black individuals to practice using writing and any art form as their medium of expression –a tool that has been utilized to extol African American truths and increase cultural knowledge. By encouraging expression in art and provoking cultural knowledge, *Vinyle* zine will continue to encourage Black artists and writers to use art as a form of truth, thus allowing cultural literacy to be engaged in creating a community of Black literary citizens who circulate knowledge about the world from their eyes expressed through their art forms. Transferring this engagement of self expression in art to a platform built on sharing and supporting local artists in a communal public setting (workshops, magazine publishing, and literary readings) this will then help in *Vinyle* zine's own mission of the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness –supporting the advancement of Black people in a culture-to-business networking style.

Vinyle Zine: The Execution of The Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness

“Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” (DuBois 38). It’s something spectacular and frightening about the first time you realize that you’re Black. The mirror is shattered of your innocence when running isn’t the same, laughing isn’t the same, eating isn’t the same: you begin to notice how you’re different –what the world teaches you about your difference. Pedagogy is most closely related to the teaching that happens inside of the classroom, but what about the classroom which takes place outside of academia. The harsh lessons one learns about their social class, what gender constructs are, or even the day a child finds out they’re Black. The world is a classroom and in proximity to this classroom are our educators: either parents, local communities, other authoritative figures who either uplift our canon or discourage it overall. There is an educational deficiency in the world. So, this pedagogy that happens outside of the classroom is relative to any community, (LGBTQ, gender, nationality) but the pedagogy of Pro-Blackness is a reframing of a lense within a large factory of anti-ness. Not everyone attends higher education, but they are still educated on the parameters of life regarding their race.

When I set out to create *Vinyle* zine, I knew that I wanted it to be a zine dedicated to Black voices, and Black voices only. It was at first an art zine that covered all the “arts:” music, art, dance, photography, literature. It was nice, until I found myself trying to analyze everything that I wasn’t exactly into—even if it were associated with Black culture. So, when *Vinyle* zine became a Black literary zine, the doors opened for endless opportunities of how I can still support Black people in creating art from their eyes, just now using words to articulate it fully.

Being Pro-Black can come in a plethora of forms: voting to protect our rights, stepping away from corporations and supporting small Black owned businesses or being in a Black

relationship, but the topics of how to be Pro-Black can become nuanced depending on the person. Nonetheless, the recurring voice of what it means to be Pro-Black resounds the same—supporting the advancement of Black people. I rebranded our mission to an esteem of Pro-Blackness: supporting Black people using literacy as an outlet for private writing in a public setting. In our first edition, I had submissions that I understood, and that we read together and understood. When I decided to bring *Vinyle* zine to a college campus, I had to consider the rhetorical choices that would go into uniting Black voices through literature to be felt for us and by others external to the Black community. I wanted people to understand that this is a Pro-Black magazine pedagogically driven to increase the cultural literacy in the African Diaspora. I knew that it would be a lot to unmask what all of that meant to me, and I therefore, wanted to emphasize that I do what I do for us. In simple terms, I support Black people utilizing literature as an art form to tell their stories, and therefore sharing it proudly amongst each other to be celebrated. That is *Vinyle* zine's mission in proximity to the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness: How to Organically Build a Culture-to-Business Network.

Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness

The teaching of Pro-Blackness is an authority driven role. Just as the teaching of anti-Blackness is an authority driven system: Pro-Blackness takes the confidence of an individual to surmount the anti-Black system of oppression that has plagued darker-skinned people for centuries. Teaching Pro-Blackness, is an authority driven role because it takes leadership, knowledge, a sentiment of acceptance of all that is Black without exclusion of bias, and a supporting activism which is astounding to fracture the canon of the anti-Black system. Anyone can be this authoritative figure of educating others on what Pro-Blackness is and how to emulate it for others to carry on. Anyone can be a representation of teaching Pro-Blackness, from within

and outside of the Black community. Amid being this individual who carries on this leadership of emulating Pro-Blackness, it is supporting all Black people: elderly, LGBTQ+, women of varying skin pigments, and much more.

As the editor in chief of *Vinyle* zine, I wanted to ensure that I embodied that authoritative figure through my magazine and what it stands for me as a Black woman. When I first created *Vinyle* zine with the intentions of it being a zine dedicated to only publishing Black people's works, I knew that this was something I am passionate about: having a platform to see myself and only myself represented in art. It was a goal as an authoritative figure to ensure I embodied Pro-Blackness in supporting the cultural arts of Black people, but also creating a platform which helps others see they too can show their support of the Black community in this way. It's an empowering facet, which is why this is part of the teaching of Pro-Blackness. Empowering others through their forms of art is a part of the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness for *Vinyle* because this is a digital zine that can be accessed anywhere digitally. The Black cultural literacy published here can be engaged by youth and adults. It's a zine where the agenda is to support the voices of Black life in constructing the world from their eyes. Our voices can oftentimes be represented by people who may have never experienced Black life but choose to construct Black life. Though, *Vinyle* zine pushes people within the African Diaspora to construct Black life through their art forms for other Black people to listen, read, and understand.

In the spring 2023 edition of *Vinyle* zine, we had our first short story publication depicting the complications and love of Black queer women. Cherish Collins, and I discussed on the phone the annotations I marked and the message behind her story, "Chocolate Roses." She had several of her friends and family read the piece, and some colleagues cried relating to the message of the couple depicted in the story. Though, people in her collegiate setting did not exactly understand the meaning behind the story. They wanted her writing to be more explicit in

the complications of Black queer couples. Though, she rebutted her characters were lesbians during the early twentieth century, so being as outward with their sexual orientation wasn't the reality. But she also followed up with she cannot go everywhere with her literature to explain its meaning. Instead, she and I found solace in her subtle hints at the way she depicted the closeted lovers, "In the shower, Patsy would hold Irene closer than she'd dare to in public" (Collins 25). The next line depicted the couple stealing a kiss before anyone would see the two in the public shower room of the circus. I understood. During the literary showcase she prefaced her reading of the story with how happy she's finally found a home for the piece. This was a highlighting moment in our push to encourage stories authentic to Black life, and being supportive of the endeavors writers choose to create when depicting Black life. Given our mission, *Vinyle* zine will continue to teach others that supporting the art of Black people is supporting the voices of Black people. Allowing people to maintain their voices in writing is a part of *Vinyle* zine's mission behind executing Pro-Blackness.

Defining Pro-Blackness

When I first began drafting my thesis in 2019, there were hardly any articles related to the term Pro-Blackness. Content regarding the matter of Black empowerment, Black unity and social movements existed, but finding sources and academic papers on the term and how people defined it was hard to find when I began to try to define it with academic research. I knew what it was, and what it meant to me, but aligning myself with other voices to discuss the subject mattered most to articulating what I define as Pro-Blackness, what others define as Pro-Blackness, and how *Vinyle* zine teaches Pro-Blackness. Contemporarily, the term Pro-Blackness has come with its limited perspectives from a sea of voices internal and external to the Black community. When I first began writing about the term Pro-Black, social media was my idea framing of the word due to the digital activism that took place. From the topics regarding Pro-

Black on social media, I agreed with the valuing of Black life, and not being reduced to dehumanization through brutality and death. The acceptance of all Black people no matter what their personal choices are in life is vital, because sub-oppression has been an internal virus to unity of the African diaspora. In addition to defining Pro-Blackness, supporting the overall financial and social withstanding of the Black community is also another defining matter of Pro-Blackness.

Cyndi Suarez is the editor in chief of *Nonprofit Quarterly*, and her article, “Defining Pro-Black,” gives the power to the public by documenting different conversations on what people Black and non-Black consider to be Pro-Black, how the term makes them feel, and what the public thinks is needed to obtain this new-aged Pro-Blackness. Although the definition of Pro-Black is described in this essay as the support of the advancement of Black people, a definition is evidently similar in Suarez’s article: “the key characteristic of pro-Blackness is that it deals with power. In, fact pro-Black means not only directly dealing with power but also **building power for Black people**” (Suarez 2). This is the overarching definition of the term Pro-Blackness in Suarez’s article which shapes the discussion around what Pro-Blackness is, and how it will be achieved. Complimentary to this essay’s definition of Pro-Blackness, supporting the advancement of Black people is a recursive step of building power for Black people because both cannot survive without the other. For power to be built for Black people, an everlasting support of this advancement must be conceived to ensure that power is obtained and maintained—thus solidifying the goal of prosperity. In relation to *Vinyle* zine, teaching each other how to support one another as writers is a part of the literary citizenry to begin with building power, and granting everlasting support. The building of power begins with having the platform, *Vinyle* zine, to publish Black literature. The everlasting support and even aiding of power comes from the people who want to share their writing in this space that only publishes

Black literature. In continuity, a public responder to the conversation of Pro-Blackness, Shanelle Matthews, also fleshed out examples of what building power for Black people means in advancing the social structure of African American citizens:

At the root of what I think pro-Blackness is about is advancing policies, practices, and cultural norms that allow Black communities to be self-determined and for us to govern ourselves. To have enough economic, social, and political power to decide how, when, and where to have families.

There's also an element around governance. What does it mean to be able to determine how our cities exist? (Suarez 2)

Matthews's examples reflect a power system that has been socially stripped from the Black community either due to their lack of knowledge on how to permeate these social facets, and therefore improve their own standing in an economic climate built against the advancement of Black people. In the examples Matthews provides as key elements to the roots of Pro-Blackness, power must be obtained for Black people to advance. The list of Matthews' examples supports Suarez's definition of Pro-Blackness, building power, and how by building power through the means of having a hand in the system that governs us, a cycle of support and success can be achieved in the Black community. This is Pro-Blackness because the advancement of Black people is a necessity in proximity to the lack thereof power Black people have in their society. In relation to *Vinyle* zine, these definitions aid the mission behind why *Vinyle* zine publishes only Black literature: to give Black people a platform to tell their narratives their way. It is a reclaiming of power to be able to see one's own life the way that it is, and then articulate it in language for it to be published by others who possibly share the same experience. It is necessary for us to reclaim our power through our narratives to not let the only narrative that succeeds us as one crafted external to the Black community. This perspective reflects the leadership of the

individual that is needed to confront the battles of anti-Blackness, “to challenge the systems of oppression but also to carry forward what has been intrinsic to our communities” (Suarez 4). In this quotation from Suarez’s public responses, taking back control against the governing system that oppresses Black people by having a hand in the social structure can help build power for Black people, and therefore support the advancement of Black people.

Through these definitions of what Pro-Blackness is, *Vinyle* zine embodies Pro-Blackness by giving power back to Black people to tell their narratives as raw and unfiltered to expose their truths. We do this by supporting the advancement of Black people in every facet for them to ascertain power: whether it is knowledge, giving Black people a platform for expression or supporting businesses financially. This is how we support the advancement of Black people and give them power.

History of Pro-Blackness

James Baldwin was an American writer and social activists during the Civil Rights Era. He was homosexual, and oftentimes wrote about sexual oppression in his literature. But nonetheless, he was accepted by other Black activists who understood oppression and that surmounting oppression could not survive with sub-oppression. During this era, several Pro-Black movements shaped the unity of the Black community: Black is Beautiful, Black Power, Pan-Africanism, Civil Rights Movement –and each had the overarching theme of coming together to prosper. The movements were geared towards unifying the Black community and did not seek to disapprove or deter specific groups from supporting the advancement of Black people. I speak indefinitely when I say you cannot be a true Pro-Black citizen if you’re willing to cast out others within your own community because of social differences. This ideology echoes fondly to another correspondent from Suarez’s article regarding the identification of embodying

Pro-Blackness contrary to sub-oppression. Shanelle Matthews explains how with the advancing cultural epidemic of supporting Black people, the difference between these monumental Black liberation movements and contemporary is the inclusivity of how to *be* Pro-Black. For Matthews:

One of the major distinctions between the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement of the sixties and seventies and this current iteration of the Black liberation movement is that our leadership is decentralized and queer- and women- and nonbinary-led. Some people would say, “What does that have to do with being Pro-Black?” Well, if Black people are nonbinary, transgender, and/or women do not have power in your movements, then you cannot proclaim to be [P]ro-Black, because you are only [P]ro Black for some. (Suarez 8)

The major takeaway from Matthews’ concluding statement is that this Black liberation movement of Pro-Blackness revolves around an age of acceptance needed to support all, give power to all, and unify all. In doing this, this can contribute to the teaching of Pro-Blackness by building an inclusive space that advocates for the rights of all included within the African diaspora, unifying, and then seeking to surmount oppression together. This can become a positive cycle of how to exude Pro-Blackness for one another, and therefore model it for others to embody how to support the advancement of one another and embrace power amongst each other.

I think of this in relation to the literature *Vinyle* zine produces. The concept of accepting all as a means of Pro-Blackness because support and acceptance go hand in hand. We cannot truly unify through any means if we do not accept our brethren for who they are or what they identify as, which is why this is a factor of Pro-Blackness. *Vinyle* zine proudly situates itself as a platform for cultural expression, where people can come as they are, and share what they want. The only catch is that we are Black people telling our raw and unfiltered stories from our eyes,

with the idea that someone else within our culture may also understand. When we accept all, we can support all. Therefore, pushing this agenda to continue to model what supporting Black people looks like for other Black people to cast a web of unity within the Black community.

Vinyle zine allows its writers to share their work in order to be supported for sharing it.

Additionally, allowing Black people to come together publicly and share our work amongst each other with the simplest job of supporting one for sharing their authentic self.

Teaching Pro-Blackness

Pro-Black vs. Anti-Black

Vinyle zine embodies the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness by giving power back to Black people to tell their narratives as raw and unfiltered to expose their truths. The Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness comes in supporting the advancement of Black people in every facet for them to ascertain power: whether it is knowledge, giving Black people a platform for expression or supporting businesses financially. This is how we support the advancement of Black people and give them power. This framework of Pro-Blackness comes from the juxtaposed system of anti-Blackness which has been the building blocks of colonialism and systemic oppression of people within the African diaspora. Anti-Blackness is tied to the moral entrenchment of white power, whereas Pro-Blackness is tied to the stern gripping and retaking of Black power. Just as the teaching of anti-Blackness has been a systemic virus contributing to antagonism and fighting the ascension of the Black community: Pro-Blackness must hold the same weight yet of the opposite sphere for creating a system which does an immaculate dubious effort to fight for the equal rights and support the advancement of Black people.

With addressing the teaching of Pro-Blackness, one must understand the facets shaped against it. I wanted to understand the concept of anti-Blackness versus Pro-Blackness more to flesh out how *Vinyle* zine stands as a stock contrast to a narrative of unsupportive faculty

agendas against the Black community. In an essay published in *Moving Towards Antibigotry*, from The Boston University Center for Antiracist Research's Antibigotry Convening, Janieve Williams-Comrie and several other research associates examine the historical and contemporary contexts of anti-Blackness and its effect on the African American everyday life. In Williams-Comrie et al.'s essay, "Anti-Blackness/ Colorism," they define anti-Blackness as, "the beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimize, and marginalize the full participation of Black people –visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent" (Williams-Comrie et al.). This definition is the summative experience Black people have faced by oppositional people who do not support their advancement in any shape which could be threatening to this institution. This definition is critical to understanding how with Pro-Blackness, anti-Blackness exists as a motive to continue to deconstruct, devalue, and demoralize any advancements Black people pursue that could result in them attaining power. Because *Vinyle* zine's mission is to pedagogically increase the cultural literacy within the African Diaspora, this is a stark contrast to the motives of our actions. We stand to engage in knowledge created by Black writers, to give support to Black writers, and encourage them to continue to do this cyclically.

In this essay as well, a key element is addressed regarding the sub-oppression of anti-Blackness Black people will begin to emulate towards one another. These sub-oppressions come in the form of questioning one's own identity (am I beautiful despite not having blonde hair and blue eyes), the colorism behind lighter skinned and darker skinned tones, and other internalized oppressions that stemmed from generations of anti-Blackness. Though one concept that is important in divulging the way to walk against the wind of this all is unifying despite differences. Williams-Comrie et. al explore the nature of anti-Blackness causing division in social class, healthcare systems, executive powers, and even Black people taking these anti-

Blackness ideologies and sub-oppressing one another through the same tactics. Though, unity is explained in the final paragraph regarding how to fight against anti-Blackness within the Black community:

We are not free until we are all free. As such, Black liberation and the liberation of all oppressed people, is essential to the liberation of our society as a whole. When discussing Black folks and the impact of anti-Black racism, we must also include our trans [s]iblings and queer family. We have to include our Black family who use wheelchairs. . . We have to include our Black indigenous family, Afro latino/a, and Black family within the diaspora. (Williams-Comrie et al. 80)

This quote exemplifies that the way to combat anti-Blackness is unity, and when speaking of unity for Black people, all groups must be included within that narrative. This is important because Williams-Comrie et al. highlights that the fight is not only privy to one specific group who needs liberation, but all groups are included in this proclamation. As this section is titled Teaching Pro-Blackness, unity for all and freedom for all is a massive component in surmounting oppression for Black people. The teaching of Pro-Blackness begins with addressing one's humanity no matter their cultural, mental, or social background when the common denominator is the marginalization that brings everyone together. Ignoring these distinctive elements that could make one sub-oppress another, the Black community can begin to unify all, advocate for all, and expect liberation of all groups who are marginalized or oppressed.

I enjoyed reading William-Comrie et al.'s articulation of Anti-Blackness and how it plagued the Black community. One of my main takeaways was the awareness to ensure *Vinyle* zine stands by supporting its writers, and businesses. The idea of sub-oppression, or "crabs in a barrel," is a scary truth that has plagued the Black community: the idea of Black people intentionally not supporting Black people. When I created *Vinyle* zine, I had in mind to have a

platform full of literature that Black people write because only Black people can truly understand the depths of everyday life within a marginalized group. If no one else supports our literature or themes of writing, we will because we understand. This ties into *Vinyle* zine being a Pro-Black zine which supports its writers the entire way of leaning into their truths, to create deeply poignant tales that reflect the world from their eyes. Our mission is never to censor or be unsupportive of the literature we help publish, but to truly encourage Black people to create their works of art.

Education

To be Pro-Black, one must understand that education is power, and a Pro-Black person will support that endeavor of a person becoming more knowledgeable. One of the first special ways Pro-Blackness needs to be circulated is education, and the omission of sub-oppression. Education is perhaps the first form of regaining power, since it is the first thing stripped away from the African American—their identity. Knowledge is power might sound cliché, but it is in fact something that any person can make their own in defining what they want success to look like for themselves: whether it is in knowing their heritage, knowing economics and financial literacy, or knowing subject matter which will advance their expertise in each field. The proof of knowledge for Black people is explained in Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, where he recounts his experiences of the power struggle between a slave owner and enslaved person to keep them ignorant, and therefore under control. This is shown in Douglass's stay with the Auld family. The wife of the slave owner, Mrs. Auld, had been inexperienced in the trade of slavery and began to teach Douglass how to read and write. Once Mr. Auld found out about her lessons with Douglass, he forbade further instruction of Douglass stating it is "unsafe" to teach an enslaved person to read:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. . .if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. (Douglass 20)

In this quote, Douglass was shedding a light on how education is intentionally stripped away from the Black person to further the educational deficiency. This example reflects power: the one who holds the knowledge holds the power. Douglass's slave master was making a general commentary on how to ensure enslavement is continued, through the ignorance of the one who lacks the education the former knows. Once a slave becomes educated, they will no longer be controllable, so power would be lost for the slave master. This shows an anti-Blackness opposing Pro-Blackness, because oppositional forces want Black people to remain ignorant in terms of knowledge, and therefore keep them deficient in education, and thus insufficient in power. Countering this example is Douglass' deduction of why education is necessary as he reacts to what he overheard from Mr. Auld:

I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. . .I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. . .That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. (Douglass 20)

Douglass is explaining his revelation of the power of knowledge to the Black and any oppositional force against obtaining this merit, in this case, his slave owner. He is explaining how as a child he understood the severity and the truth behind Mr. Auld's warning towards his

wife in instilling ignorance within the Black man to control him—Douglass understood wit as the key to sovereignty. He understood then that education would be his pursuit in surmounting the oppression the “white man,” or any oppositional force pursued to keep the Black man ignorant, which in the long haul proved to be beneficial for his career as an orator and abolitionist. Douglass’s analysis of Mr. Auld’s words, and his newfound consciousness to become educated is Pro-Blackness because it supports the advancement of Black people in terms of education, and education in this example, is a symbol for power. Douglass explains simply how anti-Blackness thrives off the ignorance of the Black person, and how the only way to combat this form of anti-Blackness is educating oneself no matter the circumstances. The anti-Black logic of Mr. Auld revolves around the want to ensure supremacy remains in the slave owner’s hand by keeping Black people powerless in ignorance and unsupportive of any educational endeavors. Though, Douglass’s reflection is an illuminating perspective of how education and supporting the pursuit of knowledge is power for the African American, and therefore Pro-Blackness.

This idea of knowledge is central to the creation of knowledge we promote in *Vinyle* zine through the narratives, poetry, music, and art people construct to tell their point of view of the stories, and the viewer or listener perceiving it and becoming more clairvoyant. We encourage Black people to read and exchange knowledge through expressional writing. This is called cultural literacy, where the reader or listener becomes more literate in that culture’s narrative. This cultural literacy at *Vinyle* zine is tied to our exuding of Pro-Blackness because of the exchange of supporting this creation of knowledge for any reader or listener to gain an understanding of Black cultural literacy. To execute this exchange of knowledge, we held a book drive for a Title I elementary school in a predominantly African American community. Knowledge will forever be powerful and a physical relation to that is literacy. As this is a Black

literary magazine, it was only right to gift students with literacy as Christmas gifts. During *Vinyle* zine's book drive, we collected over 500 books to give to each child. Every child in the school received one book. This cause was supported by the fact that students are reading below their grade levels, and educational deficiencies have been even higher since the pandemic. The gift of knowledge is timeless. The day of the book handout to the kids, the students asked the librarian were the books donated their books to keep. They each were excited to learn that they did not have to return them after having read them as they would when checking out books generally from the library. After winter break, I received an email from the librarian, and she told me how students were excited about what they had learned while reading their books. This community service event is an example of *Vinyle* zine's Pro-Blackness because we are supporting the advancement of Black people through literacy, even as youths. With us being a literary magazine, gifting students in a predominantly Black area with books shows our want to increase knowledge and literacy in our adolescents, and therefore contribute to teaching what Pro-Blackness looks like.

On Cultural Literacy: Black Art as the Signification of Black Thought

The rawer and more unfiltered someone is in telling their stories, the more we know. As *Vinyle* zine gives artists a platform for creative expression, we allow artists to channel their Pro-Blackness in a narrative critical and truthful to the Black experience. A reader external to the Black community could read a message within a piece of Black media and simply not understand due to the lack of awareness of the point of view that Black artist have experienced or simply because it takes time to understand something that may be eye opening. This is often found in music where the messages and stories hidden within it are not so easily mulled over, but the true Black expression within that artist's experience can be eye awakening if someone truly stepped

into their shoes for a day. Music can be just as raw and unfiltered in depicting the Black experience as a Black horror story, an essay, or play, but it is necessary to express our truths for those who do and do not understand. *Vinyle* zine gives any artist that chance to tell their stories because we author our own narratives, and it is powerful to do this –to hold the pen and control the truth. In Layman’s terms, if they did not know, now they know.

In relation to this being a Black literary magazine, *Vinyle* embodies Pro-Blackness through its literary citizenry. With this being a platform for Black people to write the world from their eyes, I’ve had to study the world from the eyes of past Black writers to appease the cultural literacy of articulating Black life. Henry Louis Gates Jr. came to mind in relation to how signification is a tool of power for powerless people. I analyzed an excerpt from “The Signifying Monkey” and how its context is relevant to today where Black art is a signification of Black thought. For Black people and the art they write, it isn’t all about doing art just to do it, but it’s taking control of one’s own narrative to regain a power or sort of control over possible undermined circumstances. I wanted to examine Gates’s work because I think that his allusion to truth utilizing animal figures was intriguing. How does the classification of where these animals stand on the food chain or totem pole alter the way they see the world. I think this was relevant to the title of the work: “The Signifying Monkey” and how the monkey’s perception of the world and others who think that they control him shape his signification and witty responses. In his work, Gates references a list of ways to extol truth through different languages the signified can understand to create a new means of understanding, the signifier, so distant in thought, can bend to resonate with the signified’s experience in life:

“Signifyin(g) “can mean any number of things.”

1. It is a black term and a black rhetorical device.
2. It can mean the “ability to talk with great innuendo.”

3. It can mean “to carp, cajole, needle, and lie.”
4. It can mean “the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point.”
5. It can mean “making fun of a person or situation.”
6. It can “also denote speaking with the hands and eyes.”
7. It is “the language of trickery, that set of words achieving Hamlet’s ‘direction through indirection.’”

The Monkey “is a ‘signifier,’ and the Lion, therefore, is the signified.” (Gates 1635)

In these examples, the Monkey regains its power becoming the signifier instead of the signified once it utilizes a form of language the original signifier cannot understand. The signified takes advantage of language, of physical satire, of irony, to create a new language of perception to where if the signifier is unable to see their perspectives through humane needs, the signified will reclaim their power of their own devices utilizing the wisest choice to bring the signifier to the margins. In this way, *Vinyle* zine takes the voices of people from all walks of life and allows them to articulate their life from their eyes, other Black people can resonate with because they too understand having lived and experienced it. It is a powerful creation once one invests themselves in their art to comment on life external to their circumstances, which is what *Vinyle* zine encourages writers to do. As the signified creates their language from their experiences in adversity from the environment they’re engulfed in, they intertwine a witty imagination to discern what is the best way to show the signifier my relation to power in proximity to them. As the Monkey is a representation of the witty-oppressed character looking for ways to reclaim its power, Gates bridges this character as an archetypal figure for Black people utilizing their creativity through their power of language to gauge how to surmount oppression stating:

The Monkey is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason, his

Language of Signifyin(g) standing as the linguistic sign of the ultimate triumph of self-consciously formal language use. The black person's capacity to create this rich poetry and to derive from these rituals a complex attitude toward attempts at domination, which can be transcended in and through language, is a sign of their originality, of their extreme consciousness of the metaphysical. (Gates 1637)

From the signified's capacity of imagination in conjunction with their environmental perspective of reality, a creation of language is birthed in a nuance of signification, extolling a reclaiming of power which only the equally marginalized can understand the significance of its meaning.

Within this birthing of thought, discernment becomes the presentation in which how to paint the image as vividly and clearly to reflect the creator's perspective of reality—a perspective only some may utterly understand. The discerning of colors the creator chooses to form around the imagination is the beginning process of signification: how to create this artwork of humanity as purity or anarchy from a broad or narrow perspective. These colors can be as wild as red and bright as orange to alert the signifier what needs to be rectified, or the creator can choose warm colors to contrast a harmonious more passive approach, or even a combination of colors to reveal a grander picture unlimited to direction. *Vinyle* allows its writers to create and discern their vehicle of choice for what they are signifying in their art form. The freedom of Black writers utilizing their pens to create a powerful message about the world from their eyes emulates a sense of the powerless having their power regained. The vehicle of choice for Black writers is encouraged at *Vinyle* zine, because we are allowing writers to paint raw and authentic pieces of art as they articulate the world from their eyes.

The Monkey signifies in its witty remarks what life is like for him, and the Lion cannot see past its own veil, and it does not understand the Monkey's adversities. For Black writers, art is a signification of Black thoughts. How Black people see the world, and how others cannot

understand this, but more importantly, the need to keep writing and articulating this viewpoint because it is a necessary outlet for them to regain their power. “The Signifying Monkey” is also relative to *Vinyle* zine because I encourage submissions from people who have a story to tell, and now need an audience. I’ve gotten personal essays from people that were too private to be published, almost a diary entry, and that’s when I realized that this platform and the voices published come from a state of being powerless in a society that strips one of their identities. But, there’s a love, and a power in authoring your own life through a pen. No matter the form an art takes for Black people, it’s a signification that comments on an issue in the everyday life of Black people. Unfortunately, not everyone understands it. I think that is another cajole of the signifying monkey when the lion who is almighty does not understand the powerless Monkey’s cunning wits. It’s a lens of identity only Black people can understand because we all have the same ability to walk in each other’s shoes. Since not everyone can take a walk in our shoes, the best thing to do is use signifying to our advantage in our art: music, poetry, fiction, personal essays, sketches anything. It’s seeing the world from a lower sense and uplifting oneself through the arts contrived to empower self and others.

Representation matters and so does the identity of who is constructing the narrative because it is a sweet spot of an intersubjective understanding only marginalized groups can understand, nurture, protect, and let manifest into any art form for another Black person to learn from. The narrative of Black life has always been ebbing and flowing between who is telling it and the positive and negative depictions of the Black identity. From the antiquated nature of African life through art carved walls, griots orating generational tales, to enslaved African Americans resounding together through hymns—art has always been indoctrinated to convey our identity and our stories that needed to be told. For the lens within the Black community, storytelling has always been a critical component to depicting Black life, or in the context of

Black art as Black thought signifies that our creation of art is an intentional reflection of Black life.

I began to take theoretical work that broke down Hip Hop as a form of art for the powerless. I picked up this book, *Hip Hop Culture and Rap Music Aesthetics in the Post-Civil Rights South*, during my senior year of college at my alma mater, Clark Atlanta University, because I recognized one of the authors as my Humanities professor, Dr. Courtney Terry. The title drew me to the work, and because *Vinyle* zine's website has monthly playlists for artists's music to be discovered, I knew including it in my studies would be profound. In reading the academic essay, "More than Country Rap Tunes: Hip Hop's Impact on the Post-Civil Rights American South," this essay represented a grand scheme of ways to analyze Hip Hop and rap culture in an academic essay anthology. The essay collection covers Hip Hop culture in the south and the ways rappers comment on the new era of freedom without freedom.

The contributing editors of the essay, "More Than Country Rap Tunes," Courtney Terry, Regina N. Bradley, and Stephanie Y. Evans, discuss how the form of art, Hip Hop, is constructed as more than just musical melodies—but a harmonious vocation of Black life and what it constitutes for their narrative. They open with a quote from W.E.B. DuBois stating, "[W]hat have we who are slaves and Black to do with Art?" to expound upon this rhetorical question with why Black people create their stories, and for whom they are creating it for. To answer in relation to *Vinyle* zine, it is a zine which publishes Black literature by Black writers. We write for us. We create for us. In simplicity, it is a zine where people can utilize art as an outlet to express their every day experiences.. *Vinyle* zine's notion of cultural literacy that is, "Black art is an extension of Black thought" (Terry et. al). Black art isn't just constructed for the sake of doing it, but it is meant to signify the relationship of Black people in proximity to the world around them. Art is utilized as a tool for Black people to regain control of their narratives in

using an outlet to compose what life is like for them. *Vinyle* zine encourages Black artist to channel their thoughts into their art as this adds significance to the Black cultural canon.

The idea of cultural expression is present in African Diaspora art, especially Hip Hop, because it is a voice for the signified to reclaim power over their environmental circumstances. Hip Hop has become the contemporary spiritual vocation of art for Black people who need an outlet for real world application of their everyday lives. The reason why Hip Hop exists is due to the idea of “freedom without being free.” Terry et. al discusses in the essay how post-Civil-Rights southerners experienced the feeling of the movement’s successes but questioned the authenticity of the movement’s legacy due to the lingering aftermath of white supremacy and racism. The result of this movement prompted the Hip Hop culture to spin a culture dedicated to a dialogue critiquing the nature of freedom without being free –their withstanding position in society. As Hip Hop has become a form of critique on Black life, one must ask how is this art, why is it representative of Black thought, and how can we control the narrative?

In simplicity, it is a natural facet for Black people to be storytellers, because our lives are almost a veiled cinematic film, which is screened to everyone, but only few can truly understand. Some of those who can understand are those who have lived that experience within that very same environment, and walked in the same shoes another has. Others relay the message through secondary information, recalling friends of friends who had experienced this either within the discourse community or external to the signified’s discourse community. Still, Black people utilize Hip Hop as art to reclaim the narrative, “providing a counternarrative to southern Black experiences that do not dismiss the Movement’s efforts but also strive to exist outside of the arch of the Movement’s reach” (Terry et.al). Meaning, that Hip Hop is a signifying vehicle to express Black people’s thoughts on this ideology of fighting for freedom, but still feeling shackled within

a society which does not want them to thrive. It is a concrete narrative of a world they see from their own two eyes.

This is relative to *Vinyle* zine because music is a form of art which Black people utilize as a tool to invest expression. I think music is relative to this being a literary magazine because we interview musical artists about how their art forms articulate their souls. I like to get to the core of “doing art for art’s sake.” Asking questions regarding why Black artists create and their processes helps me to network and know who I’m working with, but it’s an exchange for me and the musical artist knowing why they do what they do. In many ways this is a feature of the Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness of teaching each other to support one’s creative process and wanting to learn about it for viewers to learn how to possibly begin their own art journey. It takes a lot to invest in one’s art, but it is a necessary outlet, just as necessary as it is to support. I think this is a part of the literary citizenry of reading and writing Black literature, and therefore forging *Vinyle*’s mission of Pro-Blackness in supporting the advancement of Black people. We support in terms of the arts.

In *Vinyle* zine, we commit to analyzing Black literature in all forms and deciphering the message behind the text. We analyze Black musical artists in relation to where they come from, the messages they’re sending to their listeners, and how they are constructing this message which will leave an imprint on their career and the Black community’s soul. In the Spring 2023 edition, one of *Vinyle* zine’s poetry editors, Sarah Subero, did a song review of “BLK Girl Soldier” by Jamilla Woods, which she described as, “a love letter, an anthem, a history lesson that embraces the themes of unapologetic blackness and female empowerment” (Subero 16). Subero goes on to describe the background information of Woods and how her Black woman anthem was inspired by other Black artists such as Erykah Badu, Toni Morrison, and Kirk Franklin. This line-up of inspiration helped Woods educate in lyrics the disparity of Black life and why it is necessary to

take control of our narratives to empower one another. Subero continues in her article of why Woods's song is powerful in her writing, and therefore critical to be heard and understood by the Black community:

The song echoes with the themes of power, oppression, and triumph within the Black community, with a special emphasis on the Black woman. Despite BGS' intense topics,

Woods chooses to end on a hopeful note, repeated over and over till the song fades out:

“No, no, no, she don't give up, up. (Subero 17)

Vinyle zine stands by articulating the truth in the life of Black life in music, poetry, art, prose etc. This song review is an example of how we must become literate in Black culture to articulate Black life. Subero's song review of “BLK Girl Soldier” shows the necessity of being aware of the tribulations Black people face, articulating the adversity into an art form (music), and then analyzing the meaning behind the song in proximity to Black life. Creative arts are a necessary endeavor which is a part of the Pro-Blackness of supporting the advancement of Black people. Articulating our truths and supporting those who articulate their truth through their art form is part of the teaching of Pro-Blackness. Us supporting Black people constructing their narratives from their two eyes is an empowering endearment, and a grandfathering for others to take control of their own lives and do the same.

Culture-to-Business

Pro-Blackness is a holistic endeavor, which is why *Vinyle* zine measures its Pro-Blackness through the power we give our artists and the ways we support the advancement of Black people through the art they create. Support goes a long way in terms of Pro-Blackness, and supporting the creative movement goes even further. I was gifted a Langston Hughes anthology

titled *The Best Short Stories by Black Writers* from writer and Professor, Anthony Grooms. The anthology features artists such as, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and more writers who provide some of their best works in this anthology for Black writers from Black writers. This anthology was inspirational for me because of the Introduction from Langston Hughes. In it he discusses the exigency of why he curated this anthology to highlight these exceptional Black writers.

“Why aren’t there more Negro writers?” Or how come So-and-So takes so long to complete his second novel? I can tell you why. So-and-So hasn’t got the money. Unlike most promising white writers, he has never sold a single word to motion pictures, television, or radio. . .He is not in touch with the peripheral sources of literary income that enable others more fortunate to take a year off to go somewhere and write. (Hughes xii)

The idea of creative loafing is a tug-of-war game for the everyday Black person who must weigh what is of value to them. Black people cannot properly take the time to craft their crafts for arts sake because they must fund themselves, with the hopes someone will eventually support their endeavors. But, it is not automatically a guarantee this will happen. When Hughes crafted this introduction, more than likely he was signifying the intentions of supporting other renowned authors who need their works more publicized and seen on screens for more to understand the Black narrative from a Black artist. The bridging together of these stories was him showing his support within the Black community to establish our support of one another in our creative pursuits—even if no one else values our creativity. The Black creative has the relentless desire to do their art, because it is a necessary outlet. It must be done to let the dream of their art see the light of day, and the dream can disperse if they are not successful in their endeavors of their creative pursuits. I think when Hughes was drafting this Introduction, he was commenting on the

need for people external to the Black community to support Black writers, but if all else fails, this anthology is an example of Black people supporting Black writers.

In relation to *Vinyle* zine, Pro-Blackness is a holistic term. The way *Vinyle* embodies Pro-Blackness is within the power of the Black dollar. We spotlight Black Owned Businesses (BOB) and finance them by taking the money earned through purchases made from *Vinyle* zine's services and putting them towards a BOB. *Vinyle*'s services include technical writing services where I take any form of writing and copyedit for a business. My most successful endeavors has been copyediting websites for Black Owned Businesses. Another one of *Vinyle*'s services is selling t-shirts. The t-shirts are meant to resemble the pages of a text and *Vinyle* zine's black and white themed colors. From the services we provide, we've used this money to fund the literary prizes of the prose and poetry winners for the college edition of the zine, as well as purchase one thing from a BOB each month to spotlight and do a review of their product. For the community service Title I book drive, we ensured to include books from Black authors to support African American writers. Additionally, to supporting Black writers financially, we write reviews of their works (*The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas and *The Water Dancer*) and even analyze/review music and films which also comment on Black life from Black artists. It is the need to convert this cultural literacy to a culture-to-business network and show support of the art movement of Black people. To create this culture-to-business network, we must allow Black creatives the space to be the artist that they are, as raw and unfiltered as they can be. From there, we support their works by reading and or writing due to inspiration and engaging in the literary citizenry of our fellow Black writers. This is the mission of *Vinyle* zine's Pedagogy of Pro-Blackness, to organically build a culture-to-business network of Black people taking their art and supporting one another in their creative endeavors through this platform.

Epilogue

In the future of content creation, I see there being an exclusive access to narratives that Black people will know and Black people can craft out. The narratives will be potent that everyone will want to get a piece of the action and help author the narratives because they are stories, true stories, horrifying stories, vivid representations of us. For us by us. It will be an enlightening experience of cultural representation, and a literacy as profound as the backstory of the one who holds the pen. But it isn't exactly enlightening, because nothing is new. We aren't "woke" to a society that has been the same for centuries. Instead, this is a Renaissance, where what is authored is a tailored response to a world from our eyes. It is a personal tailoring so unique, so vivid and bright—an aesthetic thrill for the naked eye to experience. The Aesthetic Renaissance. It is grade A top-notch shit that is quality over, saturated overused quantity of the retold stories which can no longer add to what's already been done.

The Aesthetic Renaissance will be of the culture, in the same school system Black people learned about themselves—and they will teach to the students who are of this same pedagogy. The world will be the beacon of canvassing for artists alike to create and respond to. Everyone will be in attendance for this Aesthetic Renaissance to take place. It will be a school of thought where Black people are able to contribute to the Black canon and sustain it through supporting the endeavors of others who understand every voice matters. Artists will thrive, Black artists will thrive.

I wouldn't go as far as to say the Aesthetic Renaissance consists of only Black creators' content. No. This era of art has been ongoing for years into the twenty-first century with instant gratification and user experience being at the core of content creation. But, Black people will

have their oars in this era. *Vinyle* zine will have its stake in the Aesthetic Renaissance. Pro-Blackness is an approach to pedagogy outside of the classroom, just as our identities are taught from the world, Pro-Blackness can be too. *Vinyle* zine will be a platform to help support artists being artists who craft raw unrefined works that Black people can truthfully feel and relate to. This in turn, helps to build a communal literary citizenry of supporting art endeavors through our platform of Black voices having a place to share the world from their eyes.

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Practicum: *Vinyle* zine Spring 2023 Edition

Attached below is the digital publication of [Vinyle zine's Spring 2023 edition](#).



VINYLE ZINE

Spring 2023

Appendix

Attached below is a form of Culture-to-Business networking: *Vinyle* zine's Store Front. The selling of these shirts was used to fund the Prose and Poetry winners for the *Vinyle* zine Spring 2023.



Appendix

Attached below is a form of Culture for Service community service event. The community service event was held by *Vinyle* zine's interns where we conducted a Women's Empowerment community service event for Women's Month (March 2023).



Appendix

Attached below is a form of Culture for Service community service event. The community service event was held by *Vinyle* zine where we conducted a Book Drive for a selected Title I elementary school (December 2022). We raised over 500 books—every child received one book.







VINYLE ZINE

Spring 2023

Acknowledgements

*Vinyle*zine is a Black literary magazine pedagogically driven to increase the cultural literacy in the African American community. With this being its first college edition, the need to get Black voices together was a mission I am happy to see come to fruition. The range of voices of the students centered around gender, identity, outward appearances and facing adversity. I hope this edition remains in the heart and souls of the students who helped publish, as well as who helped curate *Vinyle*zine the college edition!

I want to thank everyone who has helped me produce this edition of *Vinyle* zine, you'll never be forgotten, and this will not be the last time.

As always, I do this for the love. And I love you, just as much as I love myself –if not more.

-

KRF



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**HOLD YO'
HEAD, GUARD YO'
HEART**



"What You Can B" **by Janika Jackson**

All my life I've
believed that many things will
come to you once you
develop a drive and decide to dedicate
energy and
forcefully forge towards
generating an historically
honest, idyllic
initiative and impressive
journey towards
kicking-off to
living your life as a
monumental
necessity and
ooze optimistically into a
powerfully potent
quest and
radiate intentionally as a
sensationally ongoing
transformation of the
ultimate raison d'être
visionary and
worthy
x-factor in order to leave the optimal best of
yourself in this world as the most exceptional and possible
zealous being that you can b.



DEFAULT SETTING/CLOSED by Kapri Washington

how much should i open up to you?

like a good book eager to share its prose
or like a rose
petals blossoming, bright red, in those
warm, June days
or like a door
creaking with warning as you open it more
should i open like an eagle's wings
as i watch it soar
how much should i open to you

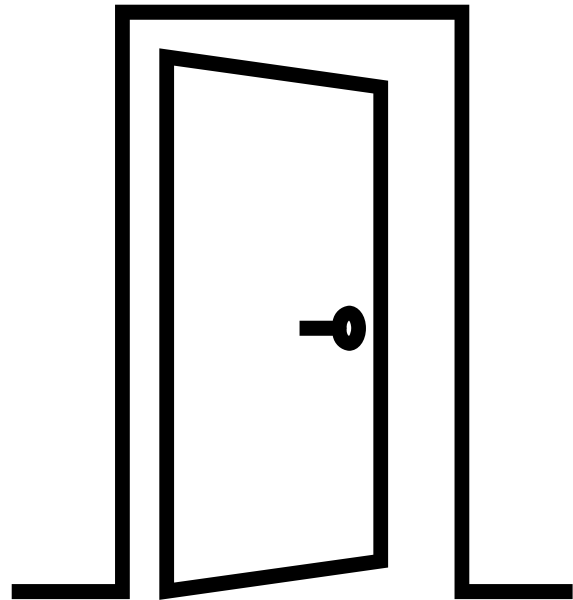
should i tell you my fears
could i trust you enough to show you my tears
or share with you my foes
how much should i open to you

i'm bashful like morning shadows
i'm complicated, not black and white
like my grandfather's dominoes
but someday i'd like to be vulnerable with you
like the parts between my cornrows

your thoughts please?
how much should i open to you
should i take the lock off the windows
of my chest and let your love breeze
in-- a warm caress

i'd rather open slow and steady
not fully comfortable with you 'til i am ready
'cause God only knows
if I let my heart get used to your touch and you
drop
it

i'll permanently close



"Frame" by Serenity Hill

thick
round
wide
robust

lips
thighs
nose
breasts
hips
stomach

nude
naked
vulnerable
reflection
mirror
betrayal
suffering
touching
feelings
hatred

help me
save me

I do not know whose skin im in

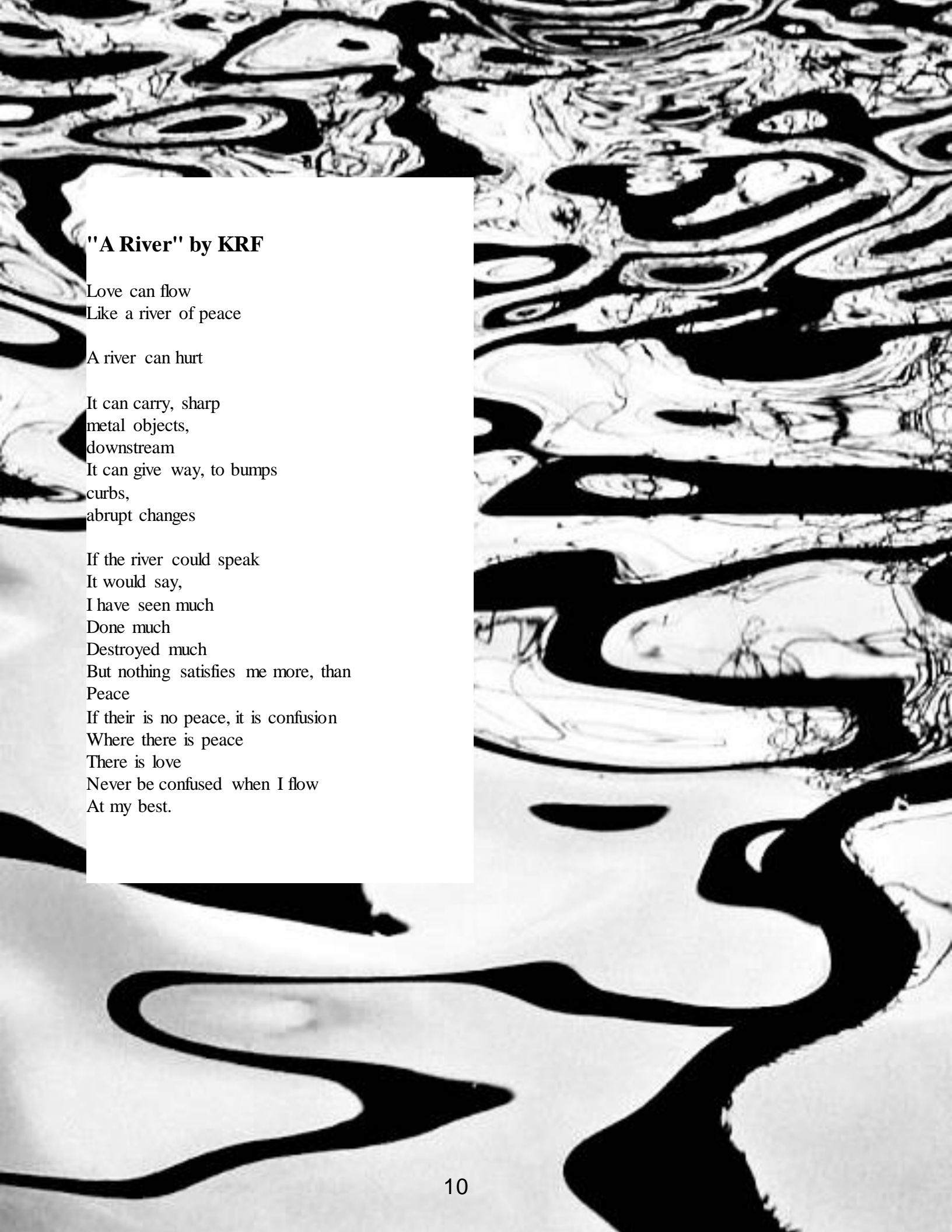


"But They Never Asked Me Who I Was" by Jessica N. Collier

This reminds me of summer days,
in Hot-lanta during the 90's.
When we used to form a circle as friends
scream out loud,
"Shabooya-Sha-Sha-Shabooya Roll Call!"
As we rock our hips to the beat
Clapping,
and stomping our feet.
Who can be the loudest in their intro,
we would all think.
Sometimes,
it was about word play,
other times,
it might've been about your sway
or just the way,
you would --showcase
who you were
Who you were proud to be.
Silly thing, is
whenever it is my turn,
to talk about me,
I keep it short
I keep it sweet,
but #SayYoName is asking me to go deep.
Honestly,
I have never been asked thoroughly
about who I am.
I just normally exist,

Hiding the depths of my talents
and love
for safekeeping in the abyss.
Roll Call! They would shout,
Born at the intersection of Coca Cola place
And Butler street
is where I was born
and where I came to be
I viewed this as a challenge,
introducing myself metaphorically.
There I stood proudly,
as they continued to shout.
I grew soundly
At times,
words did not come out
Visions of my Georgia roots running,
Outstretched, beyond me

to the unsolved mysteries of the "Big eas-y."



"A River" by KRF

Love can flow
Like a river of peace

A river can hurt

It can carry, sharp
metal objects,
downstream
It can give way, to bumps
curbs,
abrupt changes

If the river could speak
It would say,
I have seen much
Done much
Destroyed much
But nothing satisfies me more, than
Peace

If there is no peace, it is confusion
Where there is peace
There is love
Never be confused when I flow
At my best.

"School Lunch" by Serenity Hill

Warm grilled cheese, tomato soup
Milk I wont touch, a side of frozen apricots
A vegetable I refuse to eat, apple sauce
Ice cream costing seventy-five cents
I give her my lunch number, only six digits

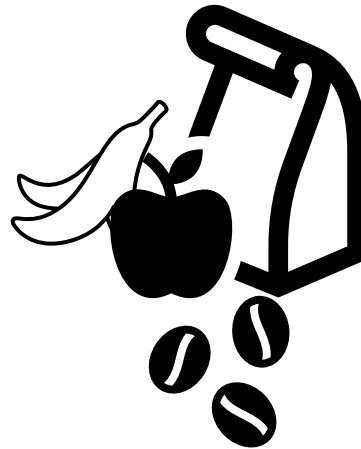
At the table already are
Homemade sandwiches
Fresh cut fruit
Smoothie prepared that morning
Salty, savory chips
And a sweet treat for desert

Familiar faces different from my own
I, an imposter among the others
Different, but trying to feel the same

An outsider within
An anomaly

Maybe was it the time?
Was it money?

Or did I feel so unsure because of my skin?



"BULLETPROOF" by Kapri Washington

cry black man, it's okay, cry
and when you done releasin' that salt water
i'll be there to wipe your eye
i'm saving all my love for you
you ask me why?
cause i pray you'd do the same for me and i
know that if you speak truth too loud
like Malcolm
if you live too fast
like Nipsey
if you put your hands up in self defense
like Oscar Grant

YOU'LL DIE.

or if you don't do anything at all except try to live
you're still too dangerous
so you might as well tatt' "thug" across your chest
like 2Pac, the son of a Black Panther
you might as well rock a 14K gold cross
across your heart like him too

just let me find you one that's bulletproof

"10:42" by Serenity Hill

i search for the unimaginable.

a desolation which consumes me,
an unseen touch or
familiar smell,
or a song the soul cannot forget
but longs to recall,
trying
to fill this void.

well, it devours my very essence.

the mind's gaze, stranded in this
abyss.
the expansion of my lungs
ignites the force,
the will, to bite back damp eyes.
for there is a longing,
a yearning,
intellectually, spiritually,
physically.

this "it"
unnamed,
unclaimed,
will i find?

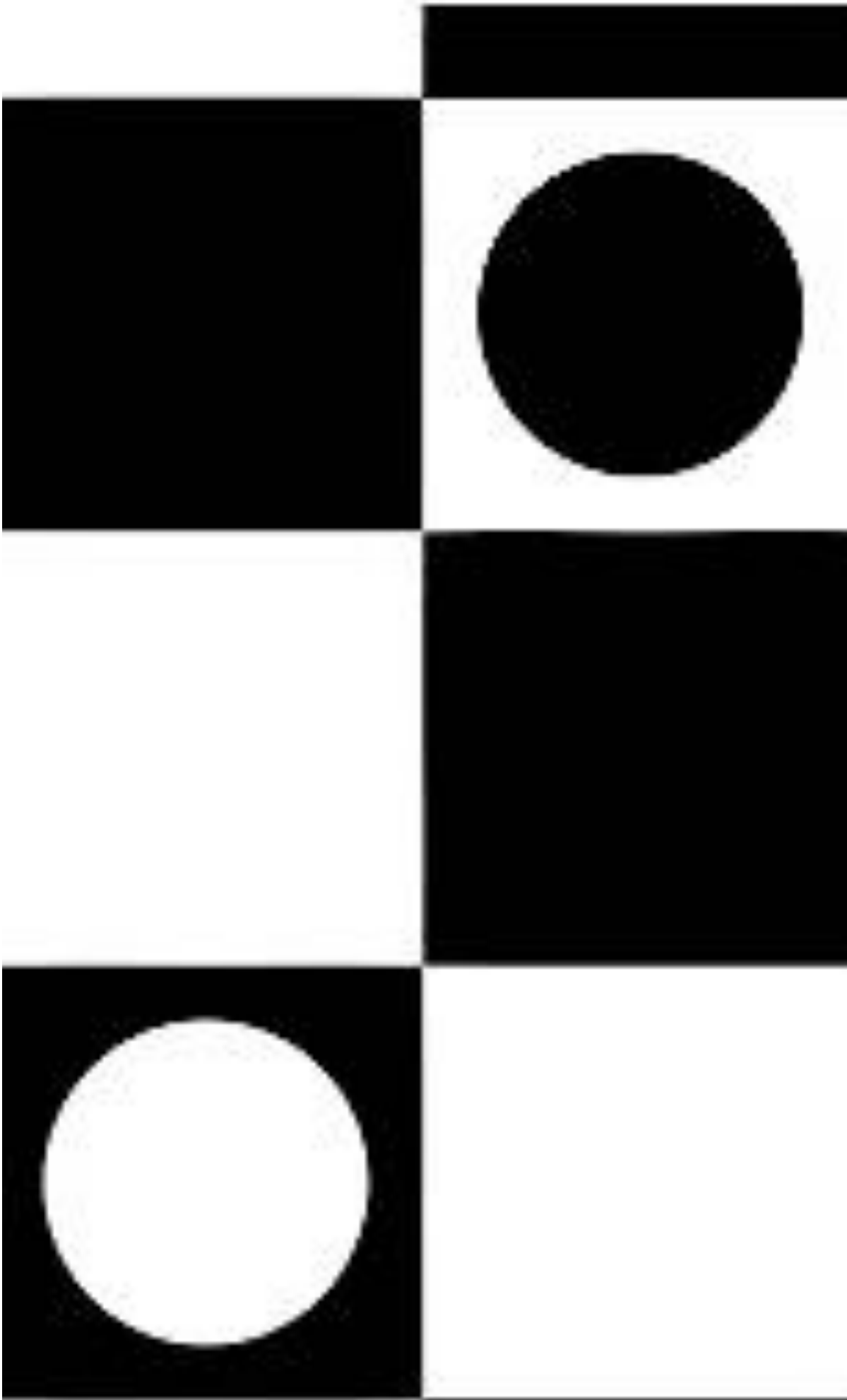


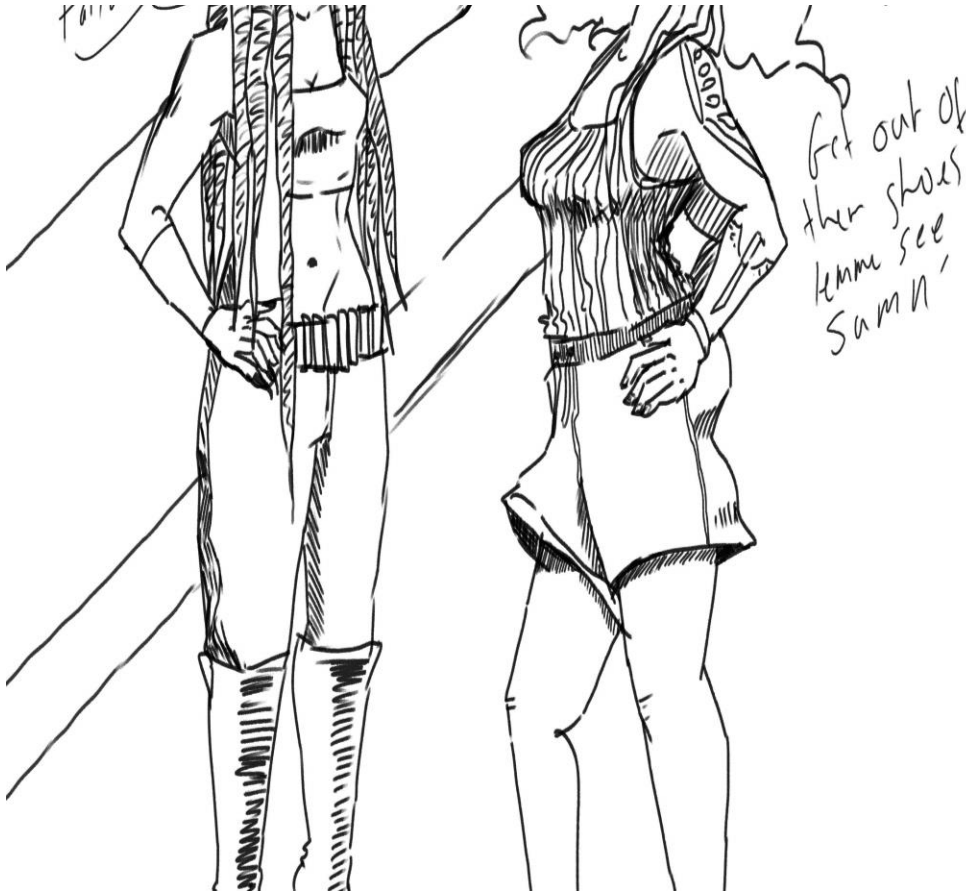
"Skin" by KRF

have skin, that I think no one can see

When I try to look up
The sun looks down on me
I try to run away
But the sun outruns me
Tarring my flesh
As sable as can be
Internal — external —
Ambirace, I want in society,
I try to fit in
But woe, there it is again,
My skin
Rooted — a “minority”
When I go to accept the beauty that I see
I get angry
and wish there could be,
My eyes an imbedded mirror not denying it
I want to see a portrait more
Of humanity, equality, passion
Knocking at all our door
A chance to understand sometimes
What it is I’m fighting for
A chance to understand that their is something more
What would happen if I disregarded my skin?
Would my ancestors disregard me?
Or would they uprise within
Bringing me back to reality
Illuminating my propagated fallacy
To tell me that that isn’t me
They would say:
“Look mama,
your purple is as thick as cornbread
As finely grained as the meal
Ignoring us is a battle downhill.
You complain about the summer,
But turn around, now
Hunch — bend.
Feel the heat of the race they call sin
On a summer’s day
Complain now
About tar skin
About sable
About darkness
We the people, who are loved by the sun
Copper burning
As rooted as cane
We the people
With molasses skin
Girl! Caress this air with the sway of your hips
Speak with conviction
When you use your full lips
When they ask you to sit down,
Your hair will remain standing
As high as the highest crown
Never hate the sun,
For it loves you
As tar as sable as the race you are
You are a human
You are a divine craft
And never will that be untrue.
14 Come home
We’re waiting for you.

FFSSORP





Scathing Yet Soulful: The Themes and Effectiveness of “Blk Girl Soldier”

Song Review by
Sarah Subero

Ever since girlhood, Jamila Woods has enveloped herself in the intimate patchwork of Black culture.

The Chicago-born singer-songwriter had her start as a poet and graduate of Africana Studies and Theater Performance Studies from Brown University. Inspired by household names such as Erykah Badu, Toni Morrison, Kirk Franklin, and Gwendolyn Brooks, Woods imbues her music with the educational roots and poetic stylings unique to her upbringing.

Her 2016 song “Blk Girl Soldier” is no exception.

“Blk Girl Soldier” (BGS) is multi-faceted. It’s a love letter, an anthem, a history lesson that embraces the themes of unapologetic Blackness and female empowerment.

At the beginning, an echoing chorus of young girls says, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom,” before the song unfurls into a blanket of synthwave tones and heavy, hearty drums-beats. Woods’ satiny voice, juxtaposed against a grungy, full-bodied percussion makes for a memorable earworm that sings the praises of Black people while biting back at century-long oppressors and hardships.

“They want us in the kitchen // Kill our sons with lynchings // We get loud about it // Oh, now we're the bitches,” Woods sings out, fists clenched, face furrowed in the music video. BGS doesn’t hold back with its razor-sharp criticisms of the way the “gov’ment” handles crimes committed against the Black community. “We go missing by the hundreds // Ain't nobody checkin' for us // They love how it repeats.”

Woods’ most potent weapon is her ability to educate through song: to relate the wrongdoings of the past to the struggles of the present. Her admonishments are as caustic as they are soulful, with a sassy delivery that emanates power, prestige, and sophistication.

History is not all BGS dishes out, however. Woods saves plenty of room for Black love, specifically for women. She decorates the chorus and bridge with casual name-drops and nods to the influential giants of the Black community. Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Assata Shakur are crowned with the title of “freedom fighter,” and Harriet Tubman is championed as a force so powerful that the government sees her (and others like her) as a threat.

BGS has a multi-layered purpose. It serves as both a history lesson and a love letter—a celebration, a thank you, and a rebuke. Woods imparts knowledge as a means of empowering the Black community, all while spotlighting the callousness of a country hellbent on “treating [them] like a sin.”

The song echoes with the themes of power, oppression, and triumph within the Black community, with a special emphasis on the Black woman. Despite BGS’ intense topics, Woods chooses to end on a hopeful note, repeated over and over till the song fades out: “No, no, no, she don't give up, up.

TA-NEHISI COATES' POWER OF MESSAGE TO THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The Water Dancer Review by
Jazmine Bryant

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer* is a novel about a young African American boy, Hiram Walker, and his quest to reclaim what was taken from him by the institution of slavery and those that enslaved him. Like most African Americans, Hiram has had his family, language, and much of his culture stripped away from him. Through Hiram's story, Ta-Nehisi Coates depicts a shared experience that not many in the Black community have the courage or ability to discuss, which not only allows them to learn more about their history and the stories of their elders, but also inspires them to learn more about themselves and reclaim what was taken from them many years ago.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Hiram Walker is an admirable and relatable character. From the beginning of the novel, Coates depicts him as someone with wisdom beyond his years and circumstances, a person with strong morals, and an incredible sense of loyalty. More than that, though, Hiram is a young Black man born and brought up in slavery. As many African Americans hear from their elders old enough to remember, Hiram is used to seeing families broken up, people sold, beaten, and worse. However, one thing that makes Hiram different from the other characters in the book is that he remembers. Hiram remembers everything that he has ever seen, heard or experienced—all except his mother and her sister, the water dancers. Similar to the way we, within the African Diaspora, pass down hymns, traditions, and practices, the people around Hiram pass down their memories of his mother and aunt to him. Through them, he is able to begin picturing his mother, aunt, and their water dancing, more clearly. However, through his White father and experiences with his older White brother, he is able to learn about the harsh reality of his status in the world—one that many enslaved people had to face early on, especially those who happened to be biracial. Over the course of the story and as a result of these experiences, Hiram becomes interested in and determined to take part in the Underground (Railroad), and this is where Coates' creativity comes into play.



While Hiram is on a mission to find those that he and those around him have lost, Coates seems to have been on “one to not only shed light on the harsh realities of slavery and the impact it left on Black families but also to give his readers hope and show us the magic of remembering. In *The Water Dancer*, the way to the Underground is found through memories and objects imbued with the strongest of them—the stronger the memory, the farther the Conductor can take you. For Hiram and his loved ones, this means he has been blessed with the gift to use his memory and these items to save those he cares about and reunite them with those they have lost.



For us, Coates’ readers, this serves as a reminder that while our past may not be filled with the best memories, it is filled with those necessary to keep our ancestor’s dreams, ambitions, traditions, and successes alive. It is through our memories, shared histories, and oral traditions, that we connect with those we have lost—the people and the culture. In that way, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *The Water Dancer* is more than a fictional novel inspired or influenced by historical events and real people; It is a reminder of how far we have come, how far we will go, and how important it is to hold on to the memories we do have for as long as we can.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PASTS' CONVERSATIONS WITH THE PRESENT

Film Review by Serenity Hill

“The film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is an ode to the hardships and struggles of not only Black 1920's musicians, but all Black men and women. The film showcases religious skepticism, violence against African Americans, and how white people view Black people only as a means to a beneficial, whether sexual or financial, end. Despite the film's focus being the recording of Ma Rainey's music and the relationship between her, the band, and the industry, it is the character of Levee Green, played by the late Chadwick Boseman, who encompasses the Black experience.



Levee was first introduced to the audience as the band's talented and conceited trumpeter, as he had a knack for writing and curating music that resonated with the crowd. In spite of his talent, he was very troubled due to his trauma. In an emotional scene where Levee questions and curses God, the audience is given a look into his past. He detailed when white men came onto his family's land and viciously gang-raped his mother while she cried out to God to help her. He asks, "Where was God then?" It was not uncommon for white men to assault Black people without consequences because they did not view them as people. Later, He describes how he was unable to do anything despite his efforts because the white men saw her as nothing but something to have and take. He explains how in response, his father sold their land and later came back to murder many of the men who assaulted his wife before he was killed. It can be inferred that Levee, following this, felt a responsibility to his family and to find a way to make a living, thus turning to music.

Being a talented musician and composer, Levee tries to convince Irvin, the studio's manager, and producer, to record his music, knowing this is his opportunity for a big break. Irvin tells Levee that his music "is just not what they are looking for right now" but is willing to buy it from him for his troubles. A disappointed and angry Levee eventually agrees to this. The audience learns that Irvin takes the music he told Levee they did not think would sell and gives it to a white band to produce and sell. Before this, Ma Rainey, played by EGOT award-winning actress Viola Davis, references the mistreatment of Black artists, stating that the white music industry does not care about her. They only want her for her voice; once they have that, she will be worth nothing to them. Both of these scenes show how white people only saw value in Black people whom they could take or benefit from. Once they could no longer do that, they saw no need or importance in Black artists.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom gives a glimpse into the struggle of being Black in America, both past and present. The issues this film's plot focuses on are not just in the past; creative theft, sexual abuse, and religious criticism are still prevalent in the African American community. This film's ability to tell the history of Black Americans while simultaneously speaking to present-day struggles makes it a must-see movie.

CHOCOLATE ROSES

By Cherish Collins



“When you get this old you start hoping for death,” she thought to herself as she lay in bed, staring up at the trees hanging above the skylight and the birds announcing the arrival of the morning sun. Irene was now 86 years old and bored. She had lived many lives and done so much that she felt like there was nothing more to be done that interested her. She rolled over under the weight of the down-filled duvet on her king-sized bed, way too big for one woman, and reached for her cellphone. As she picked it up, she remembered the day she got that phone. She and her best friend, Patricia, or Patsy for short, went to the store together to get cellphones. Patsy was set on trading in their old flip phones and trying out “Those smartphones with the touch screens,” as she said. “There’s just something about a cellphone with a touch screen and that lady you can ask everything that I gotta have,” she said. At the time, Irene was less than excited to jump onto the next wave of new technology as she had just gotten the hang of the flip phone, but Patsy insisted, and Irene couldn’t say no. They walked into the store with their old flip phones, strolled up to the register, placed them on the counter and told the man they were ready to trade those in for smartphones. He gave them a confused look, laughed a bit, then smiled and asked who wanted to go first, and Patsy’s hand shot up.

Irene now slid her finger across the glass screen of the small phone in her hand, searching for Patsy's name in her contact list. "Somehow this was easier when it was all on paper," she thought to herself. Once she found the contact she sat up in bed and hit the call button. She held the phone up to her ear and waited, she counted the rings. Six, seven, eight, nine, "Heeeeyyyy... It's Patsy. Well not really, just the voicemail. Guess I'm too busy to pick up, so leave a message or try again later." There was a pause, then a beep. "Hey Patsy, I don't know why you got that darn phone if you never answer it. Well anyway, I miss you like crazy, lady. I'll never forgive you for going without me, but hopefully I'll be able to really give you a piece of my mind soon. And change that damn voicemail." She hung up. Placed the phone next to her on the bed and sighed. She looked back up at the skylight, the sun steadily rising somewhere on the side of the house. "Maybe, maybe I'll finally get to give you a piece of my mind," she said before getting out of the bed, sliding Patsy's fluffy red slippers on, then throwing the matching robe over her shoulders. She took a moment and squeezed herself in the robe, burying her nose into the soft, red fabric that still smelled like her. "Oh Patsy, girl," she thought before making her way to the bathroom.

Under the warm water pouring from the shower head in the glass-enclosed shower of the bathroom way too big for one woman, in this house way too big for one woman, Irene remembered the showers back at the circus. There wasn't much else that a black woman could easily do in the fifties, so she and Patsy decided to join the circus. At least that way they could travel. Both Irene and Patsy were thin, limber, dark-skinned beauties in the fifties. Even with their beauty, brains, and extremely high marks from the colored typing courses, opportunity had yet to be waiting outside their doors. Due to their complexions and hourglass figures, any circus was willing to take them, but most were only looking for one woman, and they were determined to go as a package deal.

One day, a German traveling circus had come to Baton Rouge and the owner found both Patsy and Irene irresistible. He signed both of them up as soon as they finished their proposal, and they were set off with the troop by the end of the week. Herbert, who Patsy called Herb and Irene called Bert, decided to market them as exotic twins from “Africa”, all the way from the depths of the Congo. He’d dress them in animal prints and little pieces of lingerie with leaves stitched onto them. The strong man, Curt, would play the drums while Irene and Patsy would do their “African Dance” that they composed from dances they’d learned at juke joints back home and church shouting. Later on, they added in some belly dancing and calypso they’d picked up on the road. After shows, they’d shower together to keep each other warm under the cold water spurting out from the old rusty shower head that the troop would set up at their stops. In the shower, Patsy would hold Irene closer than she’d dare to in public. When Irene would worry about someone walking in Patsy would say, “Well, I’ll just tell em’ I’m cold and gotta keep warm somehow. They better mind their own anyway,” then she’d kiss Irene before she could protest further. On the road and even before, they were joined at the hip, but not like the sisters they were marketed as.

Irene stepped out of the shower and finished prepping herself for the day. She ate her breakfast and went to the garage, selecting a pair of keys off the hooks at random. She stood inside the garage and looked down at the keys in her hand, noticing that they went to the old, black 70's Monte Carlo that Patsy had gotten her for her birthday back then. Over the years it had gone through so many internal modifications at Patsy's insistence, that only the body was what remained of the original Monte Carlo. "Just as dark, as shiny, and as beautiful as your skin," Patsy said with that drawl of hers when she had presented Irene with the car and a single red rose. "You know you can't afford this, you fool," was Irene's response as she admired the car her Patsy had saved for and spent most of her savings on. When Irene got in the car, the new radio lit up and started blasting the old blues station that Patsy insisted on playing only in this car, which Irene hadn't been in since she died. "You was forever holding onto the past, lady."

She pulled out of the driveway and was on her way. She arrived at Sherman's funeral home, parked the car as close as she could get it to the door, and went in. A man in a suit that fit way too tight greeted her at the door.



“You must be Mrs. Freeman,” he said.
“Miss. I ain’t married and never was,” she said.
“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that.”
“Don’t be.”
“Well, what can I help you with today?” he paused.
“Irene.”
“Irene. What can we help you with?”
“I’d like to pick out a coffin and make some funeral arrangements.”
“Sounds great. I am sorry for your loss. When will the funeral be? Will you be having the body sent here?” he asked as he led her to a small room with overstuffed couches, old red carpet, and a mixture of coffins and caskets lining one long wall. The room was well lit and smelled like potpourri. It was a showroom for the dead.
“Well, I’ll try to see that they send you the body when it’s ready. And I don’t know when the funeral will be but hopefully soon.”
He looked concerned but she continued. “Can I leave a guest list with you? To contact for the funeral. I won’t be around to do it, seein’ as I’ll be in that box.”
“Oh... yes, of course. You can leave a list and we will handle everything, but there is an extra charge for that, you know.”
“Well you can have the money. I’ll be dead. Won’t need it anyway.” She laughed, almost like it hurt.
“Fair point.” He went to get a catalogue from the table in the corner, opening it on his way back to her. The old floorboards creaked beneath the carpet. “Did you have anything particular in mind? Most people like the mahogany.”

“

want glass. Clear glass. Like that movie where the lady turns into a vampire. I wanted that since I saw that movie years ago.”

“Glass?”

“Yep, so everyone can see my pretty dress. I got it all picked out already. You can put me in the ground in that mahogany if you want, but I want to be dolled up and displayed in glass in my white gown, like I’m somebody’s most prized possession.”

“That sounds lovely. And the lining?”

“Does it matter? Since I’ll be dead. Not like I’ll know if its uncomfortable or not.”

He laughed. “Well, yes, but the color, the texture. In a glass coffin all of that will be on display as well.”

“Oh.” She walked over to one of the display coffins and fingered at the stitching. “Well I want red. Dark red. That was Patsy’s favorite. And velvet, she loved velvet. I want it to be plush, look like I’m layin’ on a cloud.”

He flipped through the book and showed Irene samples of their red velvet and few of the shapes they offered for glass coffins. “We’ll need to get your measurements, of course. Have you thought about a location? For your final resting place?”

"I already got a plot. Right next to my Patsy. I'll write it down for you. I feel kinda bad I'll be laying up in that nice mahogany and all she got is that old pine box. But that's what she wanted. That darn pine box. Patsy always got what she wanted. Even in death. Even got to go first." She paused and there was silence under the whistling and light thumping of air running through the old vents. She continued to finger the stitching in the coffin in front of her. "Can I try it out?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"The coffin. Can I get in one? See what the padding feels like."

"Umm... sure." He looked around for a step stool but settled for a short chair from the corner to help her into it.

She got into the coffin, laid back, placed her hands at her sides and closed her eyes. She waited a moment then clasped her hands together at her chest. "I wanna look like this. With flowers in my hands. I'll try to die with them open to make it easier," she said, eyes still closed.

He scribbled her request onto the pad in his hand and helped her out of the coffin. They finished making the arrangements, she left the guest list, plot location, and wrote a check for everything. When she got home, she wrote a note with the name and number for the funeral home and instructions to call in the case of her death. Her neighbor, Bett, checked on her every day since Patsy died, except for today since she told her that she'd be out.

Bett would call the police every time Irene didn't answer the door without previous notice. Bett and Patsy had become good friends over the years and she felt obligated to check on Irene for Patsy's sake. So it was likely she would be the one to find the body and the note. Irene placed the note next to her bed. Took the chocolate rose, still in the box it came in when Patsy gave it to her on their last Valentine's Day. She lay back on the bed, placed her open hands, on top of the box that now rested on her chest, looked up at the stars shining through the tree branches above the skylight. "See you soon Patsy," she said and closed her eyes.

In the morning, the sun was shining brightly through the skylight, beaming down hot onto the bed. Irene opened her eyes, moved her hands to her sides and sighed.



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