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## Reparations

JheDienne Adams

*University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

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Reparations

JhéDienne Adams

University Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Honors College

Examination Date: 7 April 2021

Dr. Linda Frost  
Dean of the Honors College  
Thesis Director

Dr. Richard Jackson  
Professor of English  
College Examiner

Table of Contents

A Note of Thanks.....2

Poems.....3

Craft Essay.....24

Works Cited.....33

A Note of Thanks:

I need to begin with gratitude. Drs. Susan Eckelmann-Berghel and Linda Frost, thank you for your compassionate mentorship, generosity with your libraries, and tenacious support. Dr. J, thank you for using your decades of expertise to guide me as I learn the art of word masonry. Kirsten Hyde, words are inadequate to express the depth of my gratitude for you.

Mama, LaLa, and Aunt Janise, you are phenomenal. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

## Sunday School

There are times that I like going to church,  
and times when my daddy's special Sunday pancakes  
go down like sugar on stale bread, my favorite dress  
fits like a leash, and Mrs. Blue's solos  
fail to make me feel the Holy Ghost power.

I like when we watch the Jesus movies,  
but the Veggie Tales are annoying. Bob and Larry  
never read my letters on the show, and it reminds me  
that Santa doesn't read my letters, either.

Sometimes after church we have second church,  
because they're always making fish and spaghetti  
plates at that church it takes forever to get to,  
and so we have to go and sing and let the Spirit  
bring Revival, but it smells like pantyhose and doo gro,  
so I think the Spirit chooses to stay home.

## **Grown Folks' Business**

Today we fried chicken in the kitchen  
while the man you married drank his car  
into that mailbox off highway 56.

I liked to watch as the onion rings popped from  
brown to burnt. I liked that we were a team, splattered  
with hot grease and snacking on the crispies.

I always wondered how he got you to marry him,  
because you don't have a diamond ring like mama's,  
and y'all both seem too old for him to kneel.

That man was never more than his first name  
to me, never Granddaddy or Papa, only ever  
"Dean, my grandmama's husband."

I'm thankful I didn't make him a place  
like you did, it figures he would stagger  
under the full weight of home.

I think where you went wrong is that you loved him,  
grandmama, and made him a place beside you before the pastor,  
and on the left side of the bed, and in the frame on the wall.

I think what went wrong is that some man drank his way  
into your mama, then the summer of '56 he  
staggered under the full weight of home.

**Vows**

Wild phlox hugged along the chain link's base,  
Spanish flag palmed the porch's face  
while great granddaddy cropped cotton  
and his woman sang of hell and grace.

Against the cooling sun they'd shuck and mend  
together all of the minutes, days, and years  
measured in beans, collards, and prayers filtered  
through the moss thatch to the gospel ship.

## Withers

Bill Withers sang of the magic in grandma's hands,  
those rough-warmed healers of the lovely and of the tragic  
in equal share, never bare when their cloak is a coat of flour  
that is more likely the ashiness one learns is love for their  
children, whose bodies always shined like coin collection  
pennies.

Her hands clap in church, tap heavy against a tamborine,  
rap against a sifter to heap sweetness onto sugar since  
Life's bitter straight-up, baby, sometimes we have to give  
it a little help, and she makes life bewjewel her with the  
gems she mined, and seat her on the throne she bent and  
broke to build.



### **The 23rd Psalm**

I want, though the Lord is my shepherd.  
I lie in pastures already grazed by mouths  
that eat though they do not hunger.  
I am led by stale waters to drink the death  
bred in stagnation.  
I am restored, though my soul can't feel it.

I am led along the path paved with the blood of the righteous,  
whose deaths become life in God's name.  
Even though the valley sinks between the peaks of death  
and shame, their shadow fails to darken  
the way; God is there, hemming me in with his staff.  
That is supposed to comfort me.

He has set a table, and invites the rebels to watch  
me feast, christens me anew, and fills  
the chalice to keep me near.  
Goodness and mercy follow me to my  
place in the house of the Lord.

## Life

is the pair of jeans you  
should have taken to Goodwill  
years ago to beat the spreading  
of your thighs and the swelling  
of your hips.

is the time in eighth grade  
when they bought a valentine and put  
Teddy Haskin's name on it  
so they could laugh  
without knowing that you'd already turned  
him down.

is the girl who taught you  
to do eyeliner just right--  
not that kohl shit the emo chicks caked on--  
so you thought you were friends,  
but you just weren't \_\_\_\_\_  
enough to be invited over when others  
were.

is the softened butter you slather  
onto fresh-baked biscuits,  
before you smother them with  
sausage guilt you can't wait to  
inhale, it's scraping the fork  
along your plate once, twice...a fifth time  
to replay the squeaking shriek  
that will scream you to sleep.

## Agency

The mirror's glare settles hot  
on spots longing for  
a cold, sharp bite.

Inner thighs, lower stomach,  
elbows, curved breasts, chin--  
too supple to the pinch.

Glass seeps from my eyes,  
life bleeds from pointed  
knife. Relief pools  
under my feet.

### Gentrified

First they came like any guests should,  
all manners and “what can we bring?”  
feasted on crowder peas and cornbread  
hot out of the skillet and got jolly drunk  
on sweet tea until “Steve and Karen would just love this place!”

Then asking turned suggesting turned  
telling, telling, telling me

“Oh, you really do have the best view in this neighborhood, and if only you fixed those cracks in the sidewalk...have you ever considered a fence--but not like white-picket-fifties, more like urban-rustic nineties--and just around the front little yardette, of course...have you seen that show on HGTV where they take the run-down houses in neighborhoods where the people are like--oh, umm...well, they make them look super nice and it is so incredible!..have you thought about how stunning the kitchen would be if you redid the cabinets, but you know the countertops have to match...you should really think about replacing that linoleum with the real thing, Mrs. Annette, and you know we could do this so well and *God* we’ll definitely have to check the plumbing because Steve and Karen’s contractor ran into a nightmare when they did their place on MLK just a few blocks over a fresh coat of paint on these walls would work wonders and like how long has it been since you had the pipes checked Jesus H. *Christ* the contractor said that we’ll have to gut the basement and the real estate agent said that the market is great for buyers right now but don’t you worry we’re prepared to make an offer for  
way more than *this* place  
is worth.”

**Pick It**

A confident heat seeps from the skin  
wrapping a body heavy with knowing,  
light with refusal to rest in passivity.

Achy knees locked to silent quivering  
still hold the scarecrow blushed sweaty,  
steady post to spite a stubborn flock.

A stream of voices, a sultry roar more  
felt than heard, the deep blue of a bass  
from the tinted cool of music smoke.

Today, zoom in on the lynchpin lodged low  
and pick it from the flesh, picket for now,  
for anyone's home-made-filtered trend.

Throats sang raw in support of the scars  
that carve generations of battle for home, for  
aching arms of those who need the same.

Tomorrow stand and sway in the warmth,  
harvest the centuries of overgrown thorns,  
bend to one, grasp its base, and pick it.

## **The Soldier**

Some people have to die, need to give their  
all to the right things so that the weak  
can wake up and live free.

I'm one of those people. My name is Finnigan.  
It means I'm fair, it means I'm pure, and  
born to do the hard and holy things.

Some people just don't get what is going on around  
them. They are tucked so tight into chaos  
that they can't turn their own damn neck.

Chaos is what we have let take over this country,  
and it's God damned, because the first thing our Maker  
did was bring order to the chaos.

I was bringing order, a holy thing, and people  
can't handle that. That's why the Bible says  
the gate's narrow--everybody ain't made to be holy.

It breaks my heart how my people--good people--have  
just gotten rolled up and over by that evil  
love-whoever-be-whoever-live-however shit.

So, I did the godly thing, did my part to master the chaos.  
I brought order, see, 'cause I brought the sword  
of God down upon the heads of his enemies.

Some people believe this is a Christian nation, and so  
I know that hell is waiting for them. We are no longer a

city on a hill 'cause we've razed it to the ground for sinners.

I am the white defender, sent by God, like the fire  
Elijah called down from heaven. I am  
the fire of God, and I've always known it.

The fire of God is fair, which means it's pure,  
and trusted to do hard and holy things. Shadrach, Meshach,  
and Abednego weren't burned in the fire--it saved them.

The fire refines, it's the Holy Spirit, it's God's scythe,  
it's me. I'm the fire. I'm the scythe, willing to set the  
wheat free from the chaff, I submit.

My name is Finnigan, and I can hear the Holy Spirit  
in my ears, this is Pentecost, and I am speaking in  
a tongue that your soul recognizes--turn if you can.

## PAST DUE

Would you like your pharmacist to fill RX for Li due for a refill?

To fill...not to feel--but habit makes me pause, and for a moment  
the day tastes gorgeous on my tongue, and it buzzes in my eyes.

Sun and wind flirt their banter, make love on my satin-sheets skin.

Everyone deserves everything, and I can give it all to them, I can  
wiggle and jive till they gorge on tacky-sweet bubblegum giggles.

I can dream--but not sleep--when the night yearns for my lullaby.

Each movement is spun from my all, and deploys me to the next.

I can, I can, and all I cannot ever do is bottle me up and bind me.

But I always trip, snag on the divots between wary brows and slide

down those tear-dewy smiles, until what I cannot catches my fall.

Mold crawls around the edges of the left-overs I haven't needed  
to heat and the sun smirks its rejection, proudly refusing to let  
me feel its shine; she mocks me with the taunting, teasing wind,

who has made a sport of spinning up my nose too fast for me to pull  
all that I need, and my skin's threat is a strike; it longs to unpeel  
itself and leave the bones with nothing to hold them but  
red-and-white meat,

and leave the blood with nothing to rush up under or  
bead along, and I can already feel the panting sweat as it dampens  
my neck and dresses my lip and licks the elastic of my sports bra.

An inhale.

I wouldn't--couldn't let live that drunken, child's dream.

I wake the screen and close my eyes as the blue bar blinks:

Y-E-S.



**Admiration, 1955**

From *Separate Pasts* by Melton McLaurin

...sad reality was that my  
sexual contact with Wade's  
    black girls was entirely limited  
to the realm of fantasy. No matter how I  
yearned to advance a serious proposition,  
    squeeze a breast or pinch a thigh,  
skills I had learned with the right girls...  
I could look--but never touch--dream--but take  
    no action to make the dream  
come true. black girls remained  
OFF LIMITS--which was safer for me, really;  
    the system that split me from them, hard as  
this wooden counter, kept me safe with my fantasies,  
protected me from the kind of rejection that would  
    force me to remind us all what black girl  
bodies are for.

**Recycle**

I am tired of life in these bones. I will use them for something better, take me apart from ankle to ears, using a pinch, a wrench, a scalpel, a saw to squeeze through cartilage and wind loose the joints, to slice away tendons and flay flesh through to marrow; I'd scrape the scraps into a pile, shave off all that meat and muscle, keeping the masses of fat to melt down into soap, into candles, into salve, but the meat and the muscle...those shouldn't be left to fester--no, I'd feed the wolves, let them rip through my madness 'til it coats their teeth and mats their fur, they'd swallow me down in no time, too quickly for me to pray from within their depths...so that done and through I'm left with the frame, and I say let the split remnants be gorgeous, creepy fragments made new--yes, they should have a chance to be what they could never while holding me up and together--so let the femur find joy as a beam for monkey bars, let it relish in the grasping of those small, sweaty palms; and the sternum should have a chance to make something...make music, oh, let the sternum be the fluttering from a flautist in the high school marching band; and could the fingers cleave to drawers and small cabinets, could they be the point of contact for people to open doors to what they desire, from the mundane like toothpaste to the treasures like someone's great grandmother's emerald brooch; and I don't care much, truthfully, about what becomes of the ribs--no, they worked quite well as a cage, so let them remain as such, let a bird beat its wings in vain against that craggy ivory pen like my heart strained each day to burst the thing to splinters.

## Shed

I knew Santa wasn't real  
 after the eighth Christmas when I rummaged  
 through my stocking for white skin and  
 came up with brown hands empty. Then that summer  
 I watched the sun flick diamonds  
 into the pool as I sat  
 under the shade, refusing to let the icy-hot rays  
 draw a deeper brown from the skin I ached  
 to shed.

I learned we didn't fit right in my mama's dream house  
 when the cop  
 stopped me  
 as I walked toward the cul-de-sac  
 where I'd learned how to ride--and brake--on a bike;  
 the first time my last name meant nothing,  
 drowned by a current of heavy AC and muffled scanner  
 as it slipped on brass and snagged on velcro—  
 a city cop outside his limits  
 whose glance lodged jagged doubt low in my throat  
 and burned me blacker in the reflection of his sunglasses.

I saw one nation squirm out from under God  
 when that blue knee pressed the life from Mr. Floyd's body  
 and sent southern trees sprouting up  
 through fifty dirty, wind-whipped stars.  
 Damn t shirts and hashtags and magazine covers--yes--  
 everything but  
 justice for Breonna  
 while we harvest strange fruit:  
 tear gas and riot gear, compassion fatigue,

hoarse voices under aching arms,  
scraped knees carrying straining backs,  
feet stutter, pressing out stripes  
once white now red,  
seeping black blood shed.

### **Black Women Live on Trial**

Black women live on trial.  
Theirs is the defendant's chair.  
The prosecutor is their son,  
daughter, neighbor, employee,  
supervisor, state, nation, God,  
mother, self. They never rest.

Black women live on trial.  
The judge seeks proof of their guilt,  
takes evidence each morning from within  
the mirror. Black women live  
on trial, and the defense is tired;  
there is no precedent to argue from,  
no favor in the long history of the law.

Black women are born on trial.  
Our skin is robe and shackle, our  
case before the highest court  
is sealed as we are smeared  
together in our mother's womb.

Black women live on trial.

## Envy

Rachel Dolezal realized that she was trapped in a white woman's body, so now she perms her hair and makes melanin out of self-tanner and answers only to Nkechi Amare Diallo. If I met Nkechi I would scrub her back to Rachel, and rub her raw, red face back to white. She wants to choose what she thinks she knows of my pain, my prison, some less threatening shade of my skin. She didn't ask us if we wanted her, doesn't care that she didn't earn our identity.

Now we kind of get to be beautiful, and there's some makeup that I can wear without seeming like I stepped out of a casket or walked off the stage during my middle school play. Meanwhile, they wear panties made by Rihanna, but Michelle is still a monkey. They leave their men and make lemonade with Beyoncé, but Serena is still a man. I want a vote on whether Rachel Dolezal gets to be Nkechi Amare Diallo, because I'm registered. She wants to be oppressed in ways that get people celebrated in clickbait, and land them seats on talk shows, and lead to puzzling experiences one might include on a Wikipedia page. But she can't have the oppression that reminds you that your country hates you and that your name could be the next hashtag or call sign for a justice that we can't get to stick all the time.

She should live the life that everyone agrees should be preserved in the body that everyone agrees should be protected, and answer to the name that people don't count on her to tailor to the length of their investment. Rachel should be glad that she was named for the woman that Jacob made himself a slave for, but she would rather weep the tears of the sister he didn't want, and whose love he didn't care to earn.

Mostly I hate Rachel Dolezal because she is passing. I am locked into this body, and she made one as close to it as possible, and people let her live in it. We're supposed to be black and beautiful and proud now, but sometimes I want to take a walk in my neighborhood, and not worry about whether the new neighbors will assume that I belong to the only black people they know. Someday I'd like to interview with a company that won't include "satisfies diversity requirement" in my unofficial job description. I want to drive too fast and only worry about a fine, I want to shop and not be suspicious, I want my anger to be mine and not every black woman's, I want to sleep.

Nkechi Amare Diallo realized that she was trapped in a white woman's body, so she permed her hair and made melanin out of self-tanner and left Rachel Dolezal in the past.

## **Middle Ground**

It's four in the morning, and I can't sleep  
because that guy on twitter was unconvinced by the argument that  
systemic racism causes insomnia in the  
black community.

He warned the fellas not to trust everybody called  
doctor these days, said that he ain't buying into  
the narrative, said there's no way that  
systemic racism, a thing so shapeless, so sensationally vague,  
is the cause of epidemic sleep loss.

I bet his mama was proud that he took a stand against  
the narrative, that sloppy liberal ploy to make shameless  
whiteness a criminal offense. My senior year of high school  
she told me that my standardized test scores  
do big things for my demographic. Then

I couldn't sleep.

I wonder if they realize that they tweet and teach  
from deep inside the dream, if they have ever considered  
what they'd see if they cracked open an eye crusted with slumber.

Could they do it? And wake to the place where I squirm and sweat between  
their lead hate and the bloodied faith of those whose  
bones buttress the dream at its peaks? Could they  
see me gasping and raging and weeping and bursting  
from that desk in her classroom? Would they hear my fingers  
drum as I type and retype, scribble and scratch a sober rebellion  
against their drunken dream?

It's the goddamn ship, and I can't sleep.

I see bodies like boomerangs, hinged at the hips,  
breasts pressed to backs, tears pasting cheeks to necks that smell like  
stale fear and seamen and vomit and lazy death, and I can't think because my  
mind can't imagine the shapes their tongues made, cannot generate  
from this middle place the language that carried the past to its end  
on those ships. Could I learn, and do I need to? Would learning help  
me live the life I owe to theirs? I can't think, and

I can't sleep.

It's suffocating in this hot half-place  
that they don't have to buy into because it's too big to be real, too  
dark to be seen, and too pervasive to touch.  
But I tell you it screams from the pit in my stomach that grows bigger every day,  
hums through my fingertips, and hammers cold fear  
into my chest steady into the night. I tell you:

I can't sleep.

## Shoreline

I think about Elijah, physically gaunt and spiritually gorged, taking refuge in a cave, and being accosted by the still, small voice of God. The prophet who beckoned the heavens to deal in fire and drought got washed in the cool breath of his Lord. It must've felt like a hangover, I imagine. Isaiah must have been upset, might even have felt offended, but that is what I know of God: steel, sober commentary. It's like God can't really be bothered to stir me up, wouldn't spare a ram or do some pyro-theatrics on a random shrub to make me see him. Bored, settled God has to be good enough for me.

That's why it occurred to me that, if I were healed, it would come like realizing you're near the Gulf of Mexico. You aren't close enough to see the water, but if the windows are down you're breathing it, the salty, supple air fills the car. So, that's what is so upsetting. I had spent weeks away from sleep, too full to eat, needing nothing and wanting everything--and then it was static. My head was free from thoughts, my body numb to sensation. It was still, and silent to the brim. A vacuum, and it was gorgeous. And through that sealant that muted everything else bubbled the thought: is this how it's supposed to be? Is this how it is for all those people whose lives aren't tuned to the key of pain?

I didn't know how I stumbled into relief, but I slathered myself in it.

It was glorious, and so of course it couldn't last.

But it would have made sense, you see. I knew that if I were to be healed, it would come like a bondwoman turning left instead of right, and finding herself in a place where she was treated as more woman than bound. She wouldn't trust it at first because she hadn't lived so long by believing the reality of everything gorgeous and glorious. She'd expect someone to recognize her from a "RETURN TO OWNER" flyer, and to be snatched back, rebound, as chattel. She'd be able to breathe it, but she'd keep walking until her feet touched the waves.



## **Reparations**

What is freedom, anyway, when it comes  
down to a debt unpaid, and the price is  
your mother's pride and your  
grandmother's peace.

What does freedom really mean when its  
body feels like a widow's dream, and the time  
it takes to restore its hue is soft and quick  
as morning dew.

When does freedom serve the free, if they  
arrive only by mystery, and how they got there  
festers so long that it turns the birds off  
greeting song.

If freedom for me means holding up my mother's chains  
for the world to see, then what is life in  
darkness for me if it keeps her from seeing  
that she is not free?

Jhédienne Adams

Dr. Linda Frost

University Honors Thesis

12 April 2021

## **Narrative Essay**

### **Context**

From April to May of 2020, I watched people flail in light of confrontation with truths I learned along with other childhood lessons, like how to make words from letters and sentences from words. For a while I scrolled through different media and news articles, unable to invest fully in the volatile combination of fear, exhaustion, anger, and hopelessness that led people to organize protests and boycott various establishments and otherwise continue the apparently endless fight for Black social justice. I realized in mid-June that my struggle to be as active a participant as my friends and neighbors was rooted in a sense of familiarity with the nature of this moment. I watched clip after clip of footage from protests all over the nation--carefully avoiding clips of lives being shot or choked or otherwise wrung from their Black bodies--and read the words of people I respect and admire. With every bit of information came a slow but consistent revelation: this had all been done before. I thought of the Red Summer of 1919, Tulsa in 1921, 1964 and the involvement of children in fights for justice, Los Angeles in 1992, and

Ferguson in 2014. With each connection grew deep inside me the same concoction of fear, exhaustion, anger, and hopelessness that I couldn't quite reach before. I had arrived.

To be a Black woman means to live each day in equal parts pain and beauty. Black women are burdened with the knowledge that each choice, from the way we speak to the way we dress to the way we walk, is seen as some indication of the nature of all Black women; we also know that we are the benefactors of countless others who have carried that burden with grace, and that we are invited into that stunning, unique legacy of strength and faith. This project is my endeavor to study connections between past and present with sobriety.

### **Some of the History**

A lot of the primary research focused on personal narratives written by men and women who grew up in the Jim Crow South. Though the legacy of the freedom struggle means that my childhood in a recovering South looks far different from that of women like Ann Moody, some of the lessons she learned about race persisted through *Brown v. Board*, the Civil Rights Act, and the panafrican movement to inform my own development. The historiography, or secondary source research, helped me to analyze such processes, and informed the voice in several poems.

To date, historian Jennifer Ritterhouse and other scholars have drawn attention to children in the South who came to understand their societal role as determined by Jim Crow. Research surrounding childhood in the Jim Crow south highlights how racial lessons operated over several generations, how dependent Jim Crow was on the distinctions between white and Black. Perhaps more important is the ubiquity of the childhood lessons intended to train children to maintain and fortify the precarity of Jim Crow's societal structure. Work like Ritterhouse's and personal narratives like Lillian Smith's and Melton McLaurin's illuminate the realities of a mid-twentieth century understanding of white identity in the South that informed, and continues to inform, modern understandings of identity for Black women.

## The Poetics

Throughout the writing process, I focused most on shape, language, tone, and rhythm. I enjoyed experimenting with line size and stanza length. The relationships between these elements are clearest to me, and so they were critical from the beginning, especially when my aim was to write from several points of view. In most first drafts, in an effort to commit to the character, I would go to the extreme:

**“Babygirl, children are to be seen, not heard,”  
mama’d say to me at least once  
each Saturday noon,**

**and I knew--all children do--just where  
to hide unseen, so I could hear  
mama ‘n ‘em talk,**

**and I learned that grown women had a lot to say  
when they felt least seen and heard,  
so I’d listen,**

**and listenin’ learned me every word mama said  
a child’s ears “ain’t meant for hearin’,”  
words about daddy:**

**“That no-good man I can’t stand lovin’,  
and I just cain’t seem to hate.  
Y’all, I swear**

**his drankin’ll kill me dead, but still, instead’a  
leavin’ that no-good man, I stay  
‘cause’a that child**

**God gave to him and me, but damn  
him to hell, and me as well  
‘Cause his love**

**of that bottle is bigger than his love  
for us, but I won’t run ragged,**

**my child wonderin'--"**

**I couldn't hear more; I went and prayed  
my ears stayed too young to know  
Grown folks' business.**

This poem was one that I wrote independently from the project, but considered including as part of one of the characters. One of the challenges of writing from characters that each represented a different generation, was the effort to construct language that would help to date and orient the speaker in a way that made them noticeably distinct from the other characters in their "family line." This poem would have been assigned to the middle character, who I named Hallie. Hallie was born in the early nineteen seventies, a critical turning point in the expression of the Black family. Conversations about Black manhood came to a head as Black veterans returned home from the Vietnam and Korean wars. The struggle for civil rights had become more characterized by a militarization that was previously unique to the emphasis on masculinity in the years following the first world war, with the growth in popularity of leaders like Marcus Garvey.

In the midst of war abroad, domestic conversations about the importance of Black women had been sparked domestically, characterized perhaps most effectively in 1962 when Malcolm X asked his audience to consider, "Who taught you to hate yourself," and asserted that "the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."<sup>1</sup> It was an expectation that the Black woman would be disrespected, unprotected, and neglected by white America; X's was primarily an indictment on Black men. And as Black veterans returned home,

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" Speech in video format, accessed online via Alexander Street, Original Release Date: 05 May 1962, [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C2785586](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C2785586).

discussions about domestic manhood and fatherhood were intensely linked to the systemic infantilization of Black men. This is the context into which my semi-fictional Hallie was born. Hallie was semi-fictional because the prevalence of themes I'd studied in historical research were also manifest in the life of my mother.

The poem above, which I had originally entitled "Grown Folks' Business," treats several of these themes, and at the forefront are tensions in the Black home between mother and father and the impact of these tensions on children. Like with other poems I had written from the perspective of a child, dialogue is the central form of communication in this poem. Children perceive, and may not always have a mastery of language that allows them to bring shape to their personal experiences; however, the simple, real-time observations or commentaries of a child are an effective means to illustrate more complex developments.

Also of note in this poem, which remains true of the collection, is that the speaker is a Black girl who was raised in the South. I chose to utilize heavily dialectic language to highlight a specific region. Most of the women I studied grew up in the southeast, and though dialects vary within that vast region, the characters in the poem above can be recognized as people who live in the southeastern United States. The tone that the speaker's mother uses is also informal and confessional, designed to help the reader understand the kind of environment these conversations happened in. Black women have constructed a community of sharing in which they feel safe. I wanted to show the dynamics of relationships, and a large part of that is the communion that Black women have created.

One of the two poems in the collection not written from the voice of a Black woman is "The Soldier," a poem with a purpose that made getting the voice right especially important:

**The fire refines, it's the Holy Spirit, it's God's scythe,**

**it's me. I'm the fire. I'm the scythe, willing to set the wheat free from the chaff, I submit.**

**My name is Finnigan, and I can hear the Holy Spirit in my ears, this is Pentecost, and I am speaking in a tongue that your soul recognizes--turn if you can.**

This poem's speaker handles identity in intriguing conversations with the speakers of the other poems, who are also considering the relationship between a person's individual and collective identities. The eleventh stanza of the poem, which is the first of this excerpt, marks a shift in the tone of the poem. At this point, the eerie, calm articulation that characterizes the first ten stanzas becomes a more frantic, vehement declaration. I achieved this by working with punctuation and line and sentence length. Some sentences are staccato and burst-like, while others are a bit longer, and more proclamatory. It was important to me that this speaker's voice and style were distinctive in the collection, and that they would contrast quite dramatically against the other speakers, even while invoking the same God that appears in the prayers and considerations of the other speakers.<sup>2</sup>

There are few things that I have come to value as much as the revision process. The poem "Middle Ground" is in itself a testament to the power and importance of revision. This poem was one that I wrote in a direct message on Twitter, and sent to one of my childhood friends. Since then it has been revised seven times, and has found a true shape and voice. The end of the first draft read:

**I wonder if they can even see my place,**

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<sup>2</sup> It often disturbs me how terrorists and targets often call on the name of the same God. In research for other projects, I have seen evidence of how important faith was to fueling the tenacity of bondpeople, and later in governing the actions of abolitionists, and even later in informing strategy in the mid-twentieth century struggle for civil rights. Meanwhile, slave holders and traders, then proslavery sympathizers, and even later, those who constructed Jim Crow legislation manipulated the Bible until its contents seemed not only to justify, but to encourage violence against Black people. I wrote "The Soldier" after the 2021 shootings in Atlanta, which suspect Aaron Long justified with a perversion of the Christian faith.

**here, where I wriggle and squirm between the weight of their exasperated detachment and the bloodied faith of those whose bodies were broken in the construction of The System? Can they see me gasping and raging and weeping and bursting while I type and retype, scribble and scratch out my responses to the lessons I learn from my place pressed in the middle of this thing? This thing that they don't have to buy into because it's too big to be real, too dark to be seen, and too pervasive to touch? But I tell you it screams from the pit in my stomach that grows bigger every day, hums through my fingertips, and hammers cold fear in my chest steady into the night. I tell you: I can't sleep.**

Initially, I wrote the poem in a single block of lines that were all approximately the same length.

The poem had single-line spacing, and I was sparing with punctuation. My aim at the onset was to help readers experience the uncomfortable, awkward breathlessness that the speaker describes.

The first draft was not only a stream of consciousness style, but was more confessional than I felt was helpful. In the most recent iteration of the revision process, I developed the connection between the speaker's understanding of her position, and the historic Middle Passage:

**It's the goddamn ship, and I can't sleep.**

**I see bodies like boomerangs, hinged at the hips,  
breasts pressed to backs, tears pasting cheeks to necks that smell like  
stale fear and seamen and vomit and lazy death, and I can't think because my  
mind can't imagine the shapes their tongues made, cannot generate  
from this middle place the language that carried the past to its end  
on those ships. Could I learn, and do I need to? Would learning help  
me live the life I owe to theirs? I can't think, and**

**I can't sleep.**

In the end, I utilized spacing to consider where the speaker might find a place to breathe. Breaking up the poem into stanzas allowed me to develop ideas by section, and the varied line lengths contribute to rhythm, and highlight the function of alliteration at certain points. The connection to the Middle Passage allowed me to work with more concrete images to help the reader feel, as opposed to the first draft, in which the more abstract language made the reader



have to construct something of their own. Of course, there are poems that employ abstraction to invite the reader to participate by taking agency over what the poem will say to them; for “Middle Ground” it is more important that readers have a clear connection drawn between past and present.

Ultimately, the poetics of the project are a reflection of what I have learned of poetry, and also help me to identify potential areas of growth. The collection is a work in progress, and I have already begun to experiment with form. I am currently working on poems that are set on sheet music. The refined collection will hopefully show a development in the included voices that more holistically celebrates the beauty of Black American women, and testifies to both the truth of a collective identity, and highlights the nuances that make each woman’s voice unique.

### **The Final Project**

This project is titled “Reparations,” because even before the official emancipation of people bound in Confederate states, politicians and philosophers were engaged in discourse about whether or not there was a price to pay, if so, who should receive reparations. Another essential factor of consideration was once it was determined whether or not there was a price to pay, and after the party owed had been identified, who would be expected to foot the bill? Contemporary to the Emancipation Proclamation, talks of reparations imagined previous slave owners as the beneficiaries, but modern discussions argue that the debt owed is to the dependents of the bondspeople whose lives and bodies were commodified and exploited. The discourse about monetary reparations is important and provocative, but my experiences and research led me to believe that in a way, modern Black women are paying emotional, psychological, and even physical reparations. These reparations are unofficial, but real, and though they are often burdensome, the process of paying reparations to our foremothers makes us full participants in a unique communion.

This thesis is the final interaction of a project that has changed several times. Initially, I attempted to perform an historical examination of personal narratives written by women who grew up in the Jim Crow South. When the project became creative as opposed to traditionally historical, I set out to construct personas from which to write. The thought was that I would develop three characters, and write a number of poems from each of their perspectives that would engage with various themes that I found in my earlier research. There is a lot of me in these poems, there are truths about my experiences, and there are impressions of the experiences of others that are not fully mine to write. I dissolved the other characters because I saw them too clearly in my own family, and to produce a powerful combination of academia and therapy isn't worth illuminating things that the women in my life and in my blood are not ready to bring into the light.

The majority of these poems are written in the voice of some kind of me, a young, Black woman who was born near the turn of the twenty-first century. She is trying to make sense of a history that remains largely unknown to her, to reconcile with her understanding of how much or little change she can and should expect to be responsible for, and to honor the legacy of tenacity in women who had every reason to give up hope.

There are two poems in the collection that are not written from the perspective of a Black girl or woman. At first, I wondered about the ramifications of including white men in a project that focuses on Black women. I asked questions like: "Haven't white men been given too much power over how black women are perceived by society, and by themselves?" But these voices make contributions that must be considered. "The Soldier" is unique because it engages with a theory on mass shooter demographics and epigenetics that inspired the ideas for what would become this project. "Admiration, 1955" considers the function of the white male gaze, and the power of segregation in shaping a teenage boy's sexuality.

I did not read her work until later in the writing process, but Pamela Uschuk's *Blood Flower* heavily influenced how I reimagined several poems during revision. *Blood Flower* is primarily dedicated to Uschuk's family. It honors their legacy. I wanted this project to honor the legacy of Black American women, and so I implemented some of the components present in Uschuk's work. She has a particular ability to construct themes using language and imagery that serve as motifs throughout the course of the collection. But she manages this in a way that avoids redundancy, and draws the reader further into the collective narrative. Her poems manage to take both the personal and the political--two categories that, when handled poorly, alienate the reader--and includes enough of the universal in them so that each reader can find their connection to the work.

This project is not finished. I hope that what began as an experimental but earnest effort to honor the legacy of Black American women will ultimately become a rich collection of poems that illustrates the embodiment of Black womanhood. I would like to become a more skilled poet so that I am able to bring the research to center clearly, and to introduce readers to the experiences of women who fell victim to the violence of abstraction, but whose legacy can never be extinguished.

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