

Black Birds: Works of a Woman Unfolding

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Abstract

This article is a collection of performance poetry pieces which provide autoethnographic insight into racialized experiences of African Americans. Topics explored include colorism, classism, relationships, racism, corporate work, shifting identities, hair colonization, and other topics. These pieces are meant to be performed as a way of interrupting and speaking against hegemony.

Keywords

Colorism, racism, identity, performance, poetry

... For a Dark Skinned Girl

He said: You're pretty cute
... for a dark skinned girl
And I almost smiled
And ran to the nearest mirror to take in the moment,
But it had come to me as loaded as a revolver pointed
square at my face.

My beauty had been qualified by a brother within my
own race
Who stopped to pay tribute once he had gotten close
enough to my face to distinguish my features
I had blended in with the darkness of the room so he
had to get close, just to be sure.
And when he did, he smiled.
And I almost smiled back
But I knew I had failed.
And I wanted to take the brown paper bag that he had
tested me with from his mind
And hyperventilate in it as the room closed in around
me.

And I watched as he invited the girl whose skin
reminded me of carefully churned butter
To dance.
And as her hair swung hypnotically above her waist
line,
I know he fantasized about how pretty their children
would be.
How pretty and curly their children's hair would be.
Their "good" hair
With skin like sweet caramel.
They proceeded,

Careful not to pass down anymore melanin than was
absolutely unavoidable
As a matter of selective evolution.

But even so,
He looked back at me and smiled.
And I almost smiled back
But I couldn't get over the question:
With admirers like you, who needs oppressors?
Caught up in music video fantasies
Where ethnicity + mystery = commodity and anything
but me.
And I knew that if I could have looked a little more
Dominican
A little more Indian
A little more Puerto Rican or
Anything else but like a little dark skinned girl,

I would have held his attention.
And he wasn't so bad. Wasn't so arrogant, for a light
skinned boy.
And did I mention I almost smiled?
Because I did
But my bliss was broken by the tint of my skin.
And I couldn't figure out if I was too much of a
bitch
Or not enough hoe
To be simply greeted as a woman,
A beautiful woman just for a woman's sake.
Not to be trapped in the "dark skinned box."
Couldn't help wondering if I was just a jigaboo with
a nicely chosen lipgloss.

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Because it was those words that made me run from
 the sun
 It was those words that made me choose the white
 doll every single time.
 And it almost made me feel good to know that I was
 at least on the top of the bottom of the beauty
 ladder.
 Because that night I was cute, even if only for a dark
 skinned girl and I
 Wondered if it was like being pretty innocent
 For a convicted felon
 Sentenced to years of ridicule induced by melanin.

So I carefully picked out foundation two shades
 lighter than own my skin so that for that night I too
 might be considered beautiful too and
 Apparently, I had succeeded
 Because that night for a dark skinned girl, ha, that
 night, I was all that!
 And you know what?
 I almost smiled.
 But I couldn't stop wondering why the best compliment
 I ever had,
 still made me
 feel
 so
 Bad.

Beauty Shadows

By *Tiffany Bowden*

My roommate's mother is a Black Becky.
 She loves like a porcelain doll,
 And powders her nose and trims
 her imperfections away.
 She holds her reflection in her hand
 And cracks her whip of tresses, perfectly combed,
 Every now and then just to remind you she is
 "Princess."

Her skin is the color of coffee my sister makes.
 A cup of milk and sugar with a dab
 of coffee for coloring and flavor.
 The milk spilled before I got my dibs
 But it's better this way
 Not to have to worry about sunburns,
 tanning, blushing, aging or "Bourgeoisie" clubs.

My mothers stare is in her eyes.
 I was never groomed to be a Kente cloth wearing
 Nappy-headed dream chaser, but we are God's
 punch line.
 So I tighten up my sarongs as she buttons her Armanis

proud not to be like other black folk,
 and of the girl I must be hiding inside of me

The one she trained to look like my roommate.
 So upon introduction to my roommates mother, I fast
 forwarded
 my history and greeted her with my best "good evening
 mam"—
 it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," and wasn't
 the least
 bit offended when the faint "Oh" passed through her
 tightened lips,
 and her nose raised and twisted like a dog's sniffing
 a dead rat trying
 to figure out what the hell it is.

Shift

And I keep shifting
 Me with my "shiftless" Negro who happens to be
 my hero.
 I shift to obliterate your racist myth.
 I shift into my template "White" voice
 that you have come to recognize as your Negro of
 choice
 I shift into the blackface entertainment to make you
 laugh and
 Stand out to fit in
 And shift back into eloquent articulations of
 Shakespeare, Thai culture, and
 Venezuela to become one of those cultured Negroes
 Hiding my success so that my man doesn't feel less
 than a king for what
 he cannot bring to the table.
 I press my hair to make sure my kinks don't offend
 you and
 I shift my kinks back into their coils and back into
 myself to lead
 televised revolutions
 I shift my answers to reflect the universal Black
 woman
 in my White faced classroom.
 I shift to make myself appear "more black" to gain
 acceptance from my Black peers
 Shift back not to appear too "ghetto."
 I shift from man to man trying to create a custom
 made man that fits the description of what I
 deserve.
 Call me what you want but you can't call me shiftless
 You think you understand me
 But I just changed shifts
 How I wish I were shiftless
 And showed my face the same way every day
 But until then,

I've gotta work these shifts like a full time job
Gotta work these shifts till the wheels fall off and roll
Right into the next shift.

Black Birds

Black birds,
Why don't you fly?
Why, why, don't you fly
When the white van rolls by?
you were supposed to be in the sky
but you die under its wheel.
Black birds, black herds
Black herds, black birds.
Black men,
Why don't you fly?
Why, why, why don't you fly
When a White man rolls by?
You were supposed to be in the sky
But you die under his heel.
Kiss the clouds. Pierce the sun.
Catch the wind. Your battles won.
Fully equipped to dodge all that life brings
Use your wings and spring
from the perils you meet.

All that sky but you die in the street.
All that sky don't you die in the street.

Boss Lady (A.K.A. I Quit)

My manager—
Never,
My BOSS.
I will build my own dreams today.
Everybody wants to succeed
But the need mixed with greed
Makes you not want to heed
The internal warnings
Inside of you
Mixed feelings swarming,
But would never lie to you.
And the stress you're giving me
Is taking a toll on my body
And if I called in
to tell you that I was sick
What I meant to say was
I am sick of you holding my dreams
On a string
Dangling
Them over me
Tangling my decisions
While steadily
Fucking me with my own ambitions.
Don't do me any favors,

I knew I wasn't going to get what I deserved from you
When you evaluated my worth
On one sheet of paper.

I am as unique,
yet as ordinary as a fingerprint
pressed to make an imprint on your corporation.
What do you mean I haven't met your expectations?
Well,
This New Plantation
Has not exactly fit in to my emancipation
Equation either . . .
According to my calculations.
So shall I take the job or the dollar
I guess I must say neither
If it comes with an invisible collar
To trap me in a game of following some
Nameless,
Shameless
Leader.
—Working hard, working, working, Working hard—
on some dead man's plans
that were somehow
carried out
even though he's buried now
next to some other rich man's father—
and my dreams,
slaughtered.
The cost of my hoped for future
Sends me to anger,
But why bother
To try to Manage
My manager—

Never,
My BOSS—
I will build my own dreams today.

Every minute and second of stolen time
Wrecks my mind
I remember the choice was . . . mine.
But it seems like Procter and Gamble just may be a
Gamble that I can't handle
If it means putting myself on the back burner.
And I am still not making even half of what I'm
earning.
On top of all this
I have to shift through all of your sex scandals
And I simply can't handle any more of your sexploits
And even if I worked for Deloitte
& Touche,
I am not used to being on the bottom on anybody's
totem pole.
My position they stole,
A reversal role,

But you can not mold
 Or persuade me into your sexual persuasion
 On some late night working occasion.
 So don't try.
 And of I raise the hair on the back of your neck,
 Or lift you to some far off star,
 You can look at me from afar and get off,
 But you best keep your money laundering,
 Genitalia stitched hands off—
 With all due respect.
 Any thing for my—
 Ay, ay, ay boss?
 Think I could get some time off?
 Maybe a raise,
 Or perhaps a sick day?
 You're my manager,
 Maybe, now . . .
 But never my boss.
 I will build my own dreams today.

Don't ask why I look at you so blankly,
 Quite frankly it's because you forgot to thank me.
 This job don't fit my skills,
 This check don't fit my bills,
 This check don't fit my skills,
 This job don't fit my bills.
 And no matter how long I kiss up
 against my will you will imprison me still.

How long will I listen to the fax machine *screeching*
 in my ear?
 Can't *believe* I'm here another year!
 I am indebted to myself, I can't even pay off the
 interest,
 I didn't go to college for my health,
 To be somebody's "yes mam" or misses
 I have all this knowledge,
 But it don't do me a damn bit of good if I am in a trance.
 You call that advanced? Still the statistics say that we
 don't lead we just feed off the brother in a lower
 place, position and pay
 And dare I say food chain.
 Somebody must have scalped me in my sleep and
 switched my DNA
 Because I constantly feel like I'm going insane
 Like my hair when it was
 Re-laxed,
 I used to fight myself every 4–6 trying weeks not to
 be more like me and hide what's mine.
 Somewhere along the line we must have Re-lapsed
 Or stayed in the same stage in time we might find if we
 Re-capped
 But until we are unfulfilled with the idea of standing
 still there's no way that I can

Re-lax.
 What's this thing that has my people and Me-trapped.

Mental sabotaging up and down my family tree,
 Infiltrating my string of genealogy.
 Programming my generation
 Who's visions have been programmed
 By Tel-Lie-Vision programs.
 Racing against a clock,
 I don't wan't think outside of the box,
 I don't want to get in it, I know I can't fit though I try.

But I no longer admire those in Armani attire and
 professional dress,
 Because this pain in my chest won't let me rest and
 I almost regret being given the biggest paycheck
 and simultaneously the biggest pain in the neck of
 my entire life.
 But the way I keep walking through those Fortune
 500 doors you'd think I'd want to feel it 500 times
 more and enjoy misfortune and strife.
 I'm tired of the dissing and dismissing it's pissing me
 off
 So I beg your pardon,
 But please take my misplaced face and erase it from
 your memory
 And stick it on the back of a milk carton
 Because I am missing.
 I am out sick.
 Sick of this shit.
 And I'm building my own dreams today.

In other words,
 I QUIT.

Coloring Book

When I was just a child,
 Colors
 Were a part of my art lessons.
 Things teachers hung on the walls as inspiration and
 gateways for self-expression.
 Like God gift wrapped the rainbow just for our
 amusement.
 There were never mistakes.
 Never any rules about when and where to use them.
 I colored in the pictures, skipped right over the lines
 and never once
 looked over my shoulder while doing so.
 I would color the corners, my desk, the walls—the
 world was my palate and I could transcend all
 boundaries.
 No one could contain or own such beautiful colors
 And one would be a fool to try.

But soon,
 I was introduced to a new coloring system.
 "Stay in the lines" they said.
 Only brown and green could be used for trees.
 "No, no, no. .there's no such thing as a purple elephant,
 Here let me get you a grey crayon."

Soon even I could see the separation.
 Blues from greens,
 Reds from yellows,
 But none so much so as White from Black.
 They were the mysterious unused crayons that refused
 to mingle
 Or the black would smudge the perfection of the
 white tip,
 Or the white would dilute the power statement of
 pitch black.

The world became like my crayon box.
 Not the ways of blending but the separation.
 Only the black and white.
 Fixated on the black and white.
 Why is everything so damn black and white?

And even when other colors emerged, they held similar
 boundaries.
 Soon I knew without question where to sit in the
 lunchroom and on the bus . . .
 Which church to go to . . .
 Which school was good . . .
 Which jobs were bad . . .
 What colors not to wear in certain neighborhoods . . .
 Which colors I needed to wear when I got to college
 if I wanted to be popular . . .
 Which restaurants to go to . . .
 Everything.
 I learned it from my coloring book.

The place where I was taught to color by numbers.
 Never stray from the guide.
 Never mix the colors.

But you know . . .
 Sometimes I wish I could still see those blue trees
 And purple elephants.
 Color in any section that I wanted without even
 thinking twice.
 I wish I could see my box of colors as I did before
 there were only two.
 When my friends weren't white or black
 They were Kim, Kalena, Stasia, Rico and Ryan
 Before the "isms" crept in.

Yes, sometimes I wish I could see those colors,
 Or even wish I could be "colorblind" like you.
 But the fact of the matter is,
 When so many people are crying over colors,
 Dying over colors,
 Lying over colors,
 A color isn't just a color anymore—
 And it forces you to take notice.

But if I knew that so much pain would one day come
 from the same colors that once brought me joy,
 I might have just skipped art class,
 And left those crayons with all of their beautiful and
 painful colors,

In the box.

Bio

Tiffany Bowden is a PhD student at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the Institute of Communications Research. Her work is primarily concerned with African American representation, identity, and media influence.