

# 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.