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Climbing Back into Our Skin: A Poetic Narrative of Two Black Women Navigating Academic and Professional Spaces

Veronica Fields & Briana Martin

Black students face challenges in navigating predominantly White institutions. Some of these challenges include social isolation, racial discrimination, culture shock, lack of interpersonal relationships with White peers and faculty, and the absence of Black role models (Grier-Reed, Madyun, & Buckley, 2008). West (2015) discusses the tragedy that occurs when Black women doubt the validity of their perspectives, contributions, and worldview. Our narrative further explores this tragedy at the student level, in addition to the ways Black women experience being underrepresented student affairs professionals. Through the process of creating professional identities and developing a sense of authenticity, the well-being of Black women continues to be affected by issues of isolation and marginalization (West, 2015). Two Black women use poetry to affirm their identities, reclaim space for authenticity, and celebrate diversity.

How do Black people find space within a system that was not created for them? Throughout history, poetry has been used as a vehicle for empowerment, creative expression, and liberation. Black poets such as Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks used this art form to bridge the gap between academic writing and self-reflection, giving voice to the intersectionality of identities, and shedding light on macrosystems impacting the Black community. In reclaiming space in mass media and academia, hooks (2015) describes the importance of Black women offering radically different images of themselves. We intentionally use this collection of poems to not only embrace our whole selves, but also to affirm creative expression.

Veronica Fields is a first year student in the University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration program. She received her B.A. in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Connecticut in 2016. She is passionate about supporting first-generation students and students of color as they transition into and through college. In her free time, she writes poetry and reads books about Black history or dismantling systems of oppression.

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Lighting Our Torch

It's been so long since I've seen myself in the mirror.
Every time I turn on the TV or open a magazine, there's a sea of white.
Do people in media look like me? Where are they?

Do they also have to drown out the images that make us question our truth?
Do they have to learn how to love themselves?

I've spent my childhood searching for the beauty within.
Within my curls, within my skin.
I could not find myself in the world.

No one affirms little Black girls
who grow into angry Black women,
and are then condemned for their anger.

*No one has affirmed us, but us.
No one has understood us, but us.*

Our sisters and mothers have been here,
and know the scars that we carry.

We transform darkness into love and light.

Why do you think we use art?
Art has taught us to put our anger
into something productive.

*Art shows our magic.
Art gives us voice.
Art allows us to continue to love and shine.*

Think about mainstream women
like Solange and Beyonce,
to old-school women like
Lauryn Hill and Nina Simone,
and so many more.
Black sisters utilizing the power of music to heal us.

Women like Alicia Keys,
who have had the courage to rid
themselves of foundation.
Powerful Black women taking lead,
not afraid to be themselves.

*We, too, are Black sisters.
We, too, are Black leaders.*

It is our turn to inspire.
There is power in our truth.
We will affirm our Black feminine youth.

*Together we will become our authentic selves
and appreciate our womanly Blackness.*

Five Senses of the Ism's: Racism, Sexism, Activism

Is my voice valued?
When I speak of ideas you love,
will you celebrate me or
exploit me without credit?

Neither the palms of your hands nor
the tips of your fingers can embrace me.
My tresses are sacred.
Understand that the inner ideas of my head
are not comparable to the outer magic you see.
My hair is untouchable.

Through what cultural lens do you view the world?
Do you think it is identical to mine?
Sometimes I wish there were shades to disguise the shaded.
You have the privilege to be color blind,
but color is binding.
I envision a future where people
accept,
respect,
and see me for all that I am.

Do your scents alarm you,
when you sense something off?
I can tell you tried to cover something up.
I do not want your reactions,
you should have been proactive.
Replace your odor with an equitable aroma.

Do you savor colorful crayons;
understand the way they stand unified in a box?
Some students' experiences are too strong for your palate.
Where is your appetite?
Utilize your power and privilege to wash away that
bitter,
stale,
awful tang.

Fuel your hunger with more knowledge.
Educate yourself into action.

I'mVisible

Climbing back into my skin.
It has been far too long of a journey
where I departed to follow my soul.
Gathering the scattered pieces strewn across this earth.
My spirit has died again
and again,
bursting through the flames,
shedding the red target of my skin.

I am climbing back in.
Now can you see me?
You all walk through me,
Black bodies lost in a sea of white on this campus.
You see through me.
I am invisible.

I am climbing back in.
No you cannot wear me.
You cannot touch me.
I am real.
I am here.
Strength,
in the flesh.

I am climbing back into my skin.
Embracing my identities,
pieces falling beautifully B(l)ack together.
I am climbing back into the power of my wholeness.

Echoes of my VOICE

When I'm stressed out or have a lot to do,
why do I put an imaginary hand gun to my head
and say, "shoot me"?

Real guns are killing my people.

When I make a mistake or cause someone to
feel some type of way, why do I say, "sorry"?
My people are stereotyped as sorry.
I am not sorry. We are not sorry.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am using language to uplift me.
I am no longer being violent to myself.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am not using my identities to limit me.
I am no longer allowing others to define my capabilities.

I am climbing back into my skin.
I am going to be true to myself.
I am no longer assimilating to dominant culture.

It hurts me that I am not accepted for who I am.
It hurts me that I am a woman.
It hurts me that I am Black.
It hurts me that I feel I cannot be a Black woman.

Let me climb back into my skin.
No, I do not have to ask for anyone's permission.
I do not need anyone to make space for me.
I will claim my space.

I AM CLIMBING BACK INTO MY SKIN.

Vines to your Vida

Yo they say resilience like
 we don't bear the subtle acts
 As scars on our backs
 Those whip...lashes
 Still piercing our skin.
 Listen,
 Don't tell me to relax,
 Relax my tresses,
 Relax my goals,
 So I won't notice that I make my dreams grow...

We water our words,
 a sounding board for our visions...
 Tightening the knots in our sisterhood,
 I see the Queens in my circle.

We're so connected to our roots,
 to the earth.
 We say what's up to Mother Nature.
 Feminism is power.
 Our melanin strikes strength.

Creators,
 Writing our wrongs,
 Righting our wrongs,
 And riding through our wrongs into lessons learned.
 Wisdom worn into creases that meet lips
 that have learned to speak our truth.

Language is critical;
 How we get coined as angry?

We coined intersectionality.
We intersect your reality.

A light bulb went off in your head.
 Quick now back to darkness.
 The black sky consuming you,
 taking over your mind,
 Traumatized.
 Let me remind you...
 I'm haunting you.

Carrying the deeply rooted sorrows of our Mothers,
 plucking weeds and burying seeds
 We give birth to beauty.
 Moons shine bright
 amidst the belly of the night.

Reeling the Real to you

No censorship,
I stopped consulting with my oppressors beatings ago.
I will not love my abuser.
My walking away is a statement
Of how much I have learned to love myself.
So yeah, *forget* you.

It is so ironic
You thought I was trying to meet your standards.
Your white privilege ain't iconic.
Meet the real me,
masks off.
Are you ready for war?

I need to do this for me.
Like my ancestors,
I will extend my compassion to you from afar.

I've seen your reflection of me,
& most times I am not even alive.
You do not draw whole images of me,
scraps and rough drafts
lifeless to your control,
I am not seen.

You cannot love me even you tried.
Your guilt consumes you.
Glancing at the bruises you left across generations.
What is it that you're hiding from?
What is it that you need healing from?

Your inhumanity
because you were inhumane to me?
Man, what are you even saying to me?
I quit listening to your insanity.
You're locked up now.
Strait jacket,
Lobotomy.
Sing lullaby to me.
Do you sense what's controlling you?

Slavery baby.

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