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# Reclamancipation

*A Story of Brilliance, Resilience, and Transilience*

Nia Alexander Campbell

Nia Alexander Campbell

Reclamation: A Story of Brilliance,  
Resilience, and Transience

The artist's work is a story of resilience and transience, exploring the power of community and the impact of social and environmental issues. Her work is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the ability to overcome adversity. Her work is a story of hope and the power of community.

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# Reclamancipation

*A Story of Brilliance, Resilience, and Transilience*



## BRILLIANCE

*Excellence or distinction; conspicuous talent, mental ability, etc.;  
splendor, elegance, or magnificence<sup>211</sup>*

## RESILIENCE

*The process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma,  
tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress<sup>212</sup>*

## TRANSILIENCE

*The experience of entering the fiction world by way of the imagination<sup>213,214</sup>*



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# ABSTRACT

The experiences of African American women are composed of more than the maltreatment that often exclusively defines them. Oppression and celebration intermingle to define the identities of African American women, and this thesis proposes a method to understand this reality through an exchange of stories in the form of a customizable board game. The game educates those inside and outside the African American women's community by encouraging the emancipation of self, decolonization of society, and formation of empathy. This thesis embraces intersectional feminism, womanism, and linguistic descriptivism. The research is informed by personal narratives of African American women ages 23-71 and a "call and response" interview methodology.



*“come celebrate with me that every day  
something has tried to kill me and has failed.”<sup>215</sup>*





# INTRODUCTION

## **The life experience of African American women is nuanced.**

*Complex.*

It is informed by oppression and triumph despite the oppression. It is informed by thousands of years of joy alongside hardship. It is informed by adaptation and celebration. It is informed by subverting the rules American society has sought to govern them by.

But let's break it down like this.

### **ON THE DOWNSIDE**

As Johnson puts it,

“African American women, perhaps unlike any other group within America, have been subjected to a unique and intense form of oppression. The two main identities that largely shape their very being — gender and ethnicity — carry a double oppression, double shame, double burden, and double stigma. Not only must they face a racist society that has deemed their entire cultural group inferior, but a sexist one as well that views women as second-class citizens to their male counterparts.”<sup>1</sup>

### **BUT ON THE PLUS SIDE**

African American women have persevered despite this double oppression and that perseverance defines their identities and life experiences just as much as, if not more than, the oppression itself.

Here is a very tangible example:

The 1786 “tignon law” of New Orleans required all women of color to cover their hair. The law was enacted in hopes that it would prevent Black (for the purpose of this thesis, referring to African American) women, especially mixed-race Black women, from competing with white women. It was an attempt to categorize all Black women as slaves, regardless of whether they were enslaved or not.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

*It was an attempt by the oppressors to maintain their social order.*

However, Black women responded to this law by covering their hair with brightly colored fabrics, bedecked with jewels and feathers and ribbons, expressing their identities as Black women without breaking the law. They turned their symbol of oppression into a protest through the playfulness found in fashion. Furthermore, the act of Black women covering their hair existed in many places outside of 18th century New Orleans. Throughout the 246 years of legalized U.S. slavery, enslaved Black women would often wrap their hair to protect it from the dirt and sweat their labor produced. The act of Black women covering their hair also has roots in West African traditions that existed long before enslavement. Indeed, African American women donning elaborate church crowns have roots in this tradition,<sup>5,6</sup> as do the contemporary ways in which Black women knot their head ties.

*Think about that for another minute.*

One item – just a piece of cloth – represents oppression, protest, beauty, individuality, and tradition for African American women. It is all these things that can inform their collective identity. It is all these things that can define their collective experiences.

The act of Black women “hiding” their hair is wrapped up in both oppression and celebration.

*The African American woman’s experience is nuanced.*

*Complex.*

*Layered like the wrapped cloth.*

## **CONVEYING THIS DUALITY**

Black women’s dress, speech, movements, and all other forms of behavior and self-expression are informed by this mix of persecution and pride. Understanding this duality of Black women’s existence in American society – understanding their identities holistically – is integral to remedying the problems they nonetheless still face. While Black women’s ability to find power within oppressive systems is worthy of celebration, the dream is to exist in a society without that oppression because it still takes a toll on Black women’s well-being.

The oppression creates interconnected obstacles that affect every aspect of Black women's lives, from social acceptance, to internalized oppression,

to finances,

to safety

to education,

to career,

to family,

to self-esteem,

to interests,

to housing,

to healthcare,

to depression,

to anxiety,

to lost sense of self,

to fewer...

It can feel overwhelming.

*And yet*

There's still so much more to it than this.

*Reclamancipation: A Story of Brilliance, Resilience, and Transilience* explores the experiences of African American women and highlights how oppression and celebration often intermingle to define these experiences. This thesis proposes a method to understand the multiple identities of African American women through the creation of artifacts and a deliberate use of authentic and poetic language. In this context, the term “authentic” language refers to the voices of African American women without the heavy-handed barriers of American English language standards. This ties in with linguistic descriptivism, which can be defined as a non-judgmental approach to language, focusing on the understanding of what is being described, not whether the means of describing it are correct.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of this thesis, linguistic descriptivism decolonizes structure to enable an authentic form of storytelling. The use of poetic language, personal narrative, and visual cues to represent Black women’s voices, stories, and experiences also underscore the importance of personal expression. In doing so, the focus shifts away from adherence to a pre-established set of rules, to the content of the idea. This all contributes to the argument that Black women’s voices and experiences should be respected and celebrated for what they are without needing to adhere to the various filters created by oppression.

*Black women’s voices have the right to not be policed.*

*Black women’s voices have the right to not be erased.*

Building on the importance of authentic and poetic language, the thesis introduces a customizable board game, *Reclamancipation*, to support the exchange of stories. The game encourages emancipation of self, decolonization of society, and formation of empathy through conversation, exchange, and reflection. The 76-tile board features painted imagery of Black women existing in a variety of spaces, experiencing a range of emotions, and pursuing a variety of activities. These experiences are organized into Neighborhoods, each one protected by a Guardian. The goal for each player is to travel through each Neighborhood, collecting Gifts along the way and exchanging stories to make it to The Future.

This unthreatening interactive space embraces the sharing of Black women’s experiences and facilitates the exchange of stories. It welcomes other communities to learn and experience empathy through gameplay as well. Educating everyone – those inside and outside the African American women’s community – is important because it will contribute to an improved social environment for all involved. Any community that celebrates their identities honestly and unapologetically has the potential to contribute to the erasure of oppression in all its varying forms.

Communal joy has the power to provide a kind of glue that unifies a group. The use of play, an act of joy, to tell stories of both triumph and pain is in itself a means of resisting the victimhood narrative American society often broadcasts about Black women and to Black women.



*Black women are more than their skin.*

*Black women are more than their hair.*

*Black women are more than their figure.*

*Black women are more than their trauma.*

This thesis is informed by intersectional feminism and womanism, though it is not dissected through those lenses. Instead, a creative art, design, and writing approach is used to explore and express the subject. The content is also informed by casual dialogues between me and other Black American women, ages 23-71, that primarily took place over social media. This method is an extension of “call and response,” comparable to the Black performance tradition where everyone involved is both the speaker and the listener. Through this method, the research highlights both the individual and the community when working to understand Black women’s experiences and identities.



*“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”<sup>8</sup>*





BACKGROUND

# *LITERATURE REVIEW*

## BLACK WOMEN AND OPPRESSION

**Misogynoir:** *The specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed toward Black women*<sup>9</sup>

Much of the race and gender oppression affecting Black American women is rooted in enslavement. Some of the first enslaved Black women to arrive in the United States were brought to provide company for the Black male slaves already present in the country.<sup>10</sup> As time passed, enslaved men were often put to work as skilled laborers, such as blacksmiths, which led to an increase in the purchasing of enslaved women as fieldhands.<sup>11</sup> Enslaved women were also cheaper to purchase compared to Black men and these two factors led to enslaved women often outnumbering their male counterparts as agricultural laborers.<sup>12</sup>

Another fact of life that distinguished enslaved women from men is the more rampant sexual abuse inflicted upon them. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, possibly in anticipation of the 1808 ban on importing enslaved peoples from Africa,<sup>13</sup> slave owners increased the breeding of their own slaves through whatever means they deemed appropriate. According to historian Hallam, during this period the average enslaved woman had her first child at nineteen years old, bearing one more child every two and a half years in a cycle encouraged by the slave owner.<sup>14</sup>

Underscoring this was the belief that Black women were hypersexual,<sup>15,16,17,18,19</sup> inherently lustful beings ranked lower on the evolutionary scale.<sup>20</sup> As Hallam writes, “the perception of the

African woman as hypersexual made her both the object of white man’s abhorrence and his fantasy,”<sup>21</sup> and it is this belief, among others, that contributed to white slave owners’ rape of enslaved women.<sup>22,23,24</sup> Within this powerless position, some enslaved women willingly allowed the abuse in hope that their children would later be liberated by the slave owner.<sup>25,26</sup> This is tied to the law of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*,<sup>27</sup> a doctrine stating that any child born to an enslaved woman would also be enslaved unless a slave owner, whether they be the father or not, liberated the child. However, in the many cases where the mixed-race children of Black women were not freed, the abused mothers stood the chance of living long enough to see their enslaved daughters suffer sexual violence for the same reasons they themselves experienced it.<sup>28</sup>

To further the precarious complexity of the situation, pregnant slave women were often given more food and fewer working hours, offerings that could be seen as “perks” to the sexual maltreatment. Their proven fertility also labeled them as valuable, meaning that they were less likely to be sold by the slave owner and separated from their family. Yet, simultaneously, enslaved mothers were still expected to put the needs of the slave owner’s family ahead of their own, forcing them to either leave their children to be raised by others in the community or balance mothering alongside their other labors, as was often the case on smaller farms.<sup>29</sup>

The stereotype of Black women’s hypersexuality is not isolated and can be seen outside the context of U.S. slavery.

*Sara Baartman was raped and put on display for 192 years.*<sup>30</sup>

*Black women's bodies are used as props in music videos.*<sup>31,32,33</sup>

*Black girls risk being adultified starting at age five.*<sup>34,35,36,37</sup>

*Rocy Taylor was raped by six white men yet none were indicted, despite four of them confessing.*<sup>38</sup>

There are seemingly countless examples of this kind of this dehumanizing mistreatment, and the desire to eliminate the perception of Black women as hypersexual contributed to the development of respectability politics.<sup>39,40,41,42</sup> Respectability politics is an ideology born during the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era<sup>43</sup> and can be defined as “what happens when minority and/or marginalized groups are told (or teach themselves) that in order to receive better treatment from the group in power, they must behave better.”<sup>44</sup> While the implementation of respectability politics is understandable given the difficult situation recently emancipated Blacks were placed in, it is an ideology that ultimately puts the responsibility of combating discrimination on the oppressed, not the oppressors.

This unsurprisingly comes with a list of what is deemed appropriate behavior for Black women and girls, ideals that many Black women subconsciously<sup>45</sup> absorb at an early age as part of our enculturation process.<sup>46,47</sup>

*Some things on this list include,*

Don't go to that party.<sup>48</sup>

Don't wear short shorts.<sup>49,50</sup>

In fact, don't wear anything “provocative.”<sup>51,52</sup>

Don't talk about sex.<sup>53,54</sup>

Don't have sex.<sup>55,56</sup>

Don't let people *think* you're having sex, even if you're not.<sup>57</sup>

Don't talk to boys.<sup>58</sup>

Don't talk to white boys, especially.<sup>59</sup>

Don't get a bad reputation.<sup>60,61</sup>

Don't wear red nail polish.<sup>62</sup>

Don't wear red lipstick.<sup>63,64,65</sup>

Don't wear lace underwear.<sup>66</sup>

Don't wear any color undergarment other than white.<sup>67</sup>

Don't smile.<sup>68</sup>

Don't be “fast.”<sup>69</sup>

Don't act grown.<sup>70,71</sup>

Don't wear too much makeup.<sup>72</sup>

Don't kiss boys.<sup>73</sup>

Don't kiss girls, just for safe measure.<sup>74</sup>

Don't have your hair a mess.<sup>75</sup>

Don't wear poorly tailored clothes, even if that's all you own.<sup>76</sup>

**Just be decent,<sup>77</sup> for God's sake.**

loud<sup>78,79,80,81</sup>

intimidating<sup>82,83,84</sup>

emasculating<sup>85,86</sup>

unattractive<sup>87</sup>

asexual<sup>88</sup>

argumentative<sup>89,90</sup>

difficult<sup>91,92</sup>

token<sup>93</sup>

talkative<sup>94,95,96</sup>

illiterate<sup>97,98</sup>

uneducated<sup>99,100</sup>

unimportant<sup>101</sup>

unworthy<sup>102</sup>

unfriendly<sup>103</sup>

emotional<sup>104,105,106</sup>

stoic<sup>107</sup>

outspoken<sup>108</sup>

unserious<sup>109</sup>

sassy<sup>110</sup>

curt<sup>111,112</sup>

bossy<sup>113</sup>

assertive<sup>114,115</sup>

passive<sup>116,117,118</sup>

selfish<sup>119</sup>

boastful<sup>120</sup>

penniless<sup>121,122</sup>

pretentious<sup>123</sup>

ghetto<sup>124,125,126,127</sup>

disorganized<sup>128,129</sup>

bitchy<sup>130</sup>

Reflecting upon her childhood, educator Mauro writes that “women admonish[ed] me with half-smiles, finger-wags, and reminders that ‘little girls don’t do that’ or to ‘act like a little lady’ in relation to anything improper I may have done. But more vivid are those memories of women in my life making direct eye contact with me and saying, usually in hushed, serious tones, ‘we don’t do that.’”<sup>78</sup>

Coupled with this is the reality that Black women are not encouraged to question aspects of respectability politics because, as one of Mauro’s interviewees so clearly puts it, “it’s a command. You do it ‘because I said so,’” her mother explaining, “‘I am not your white friends’ Mama. You don’t ask me ‘why?’ You do it because I said so. Period.”<sup>79</sup>

*Respectability politics seek to combat a long list of stereotypes against Black women in the hopes of minimizing their risk of being perceived as:*

incompetent<sup>80,81,82,83,84,85,86</sup>

unmotivated<sup>87,88,89,90,91</sup>

untrustworthy<sup>92,93,94,95,96</sup>

aggressive<sup>97,98,99,100,101,102</sup>

independent<sup>103,104,105</sup>

dependent<sup>106</sup>

angry<sup>107,108,109,110,111</sup>

This means Black women must contend with the possibility of being considered a pretentiously ghetto boastfully bossy broke bitch.

An intimidatingly incompetent independent aggressor.

A selfishly sassy hypersexual emasculator.

An angry asexual token unable to maintain a functional family.<sup>216</sup>





*“For young Black American girls there is no presumption of innocence by people outside of our communities, and too many inside our communities have bought into the victim-blaming ideology that respectability will save us, not acknowledging that we are so often targeted regardless of how we behave.”<sup>217</sup>*



Black women contend with racist stereotypes against Blacks and sexist stereotypes against women, often creating direct contradictions and internal conflict<sup>218</sup> regarding appropriate behavior, as Terhune explained.<sup>219</sup> This becomes especially evident when considering the effect conforming versus not conforming to stereotypes has on Black women. A Black

woman who conforms to stereotypes risks discrimination, but conformity to these biased social norms also allows her to be viewed as acceptable. Meanwhile, a Black woman who does not conform to stereotypes – instead opting to present herself as layered and complex – risks “confusing mainstream society”<sup>220</sup> and prompting investigations into her personhood.

**Situation A:**

*Black women are lustful.*

*Let me go find a Black woman to sleep with.*

*The Black woman accepted my offer of sex.*

*Unsurprising. Black women are lustful.*

**Situation B:**

*Black women are lustful.*

*Let me go find a Black woman to sleep with.*

*The Black woman rejected my offer of sex.*

*What’s wrong with her? Why doesn’t she want to sleep with me?*

Black women also risk being perceived as too white,<sup>221,222,223</sup> too Black,<sup>224</sup> too feminine,<sup>225</sup> and too masculine,<sup>226</sup> creating a bizarre collection of oppressive intersections that Black women attempt to navigate both in and outside the Black community.<sup>227,228</sup>

*Miss Barbara: "Hey, Whygurh!"*

*The 6-year-old: "Hi!"*

*Grandmother: "Tell her, 'I'm not white!'"*

*The 6-year-old: "I'm not white!"*

Society reminds the 6-year-old that despite her echoed protests, she is indeed, "too white."<sup>178,179,180</sup>

She is not "Black enough."<sup>132</sup>

This child is a sellout.<sup>133</sup>

And yet, the child was not hurt by this. The child continued into her grandmother's house, went to her room, took off her shoes, and played with her Black Barbie dolls.

*This child found joy.*

Perhaps it was not an intentional act, having that the child was but six years old and likely did not comprehend the depth of the situation. But does the subconscious finding of joy make it any less important in combating oppression?

*“Black people need to unapologetically immerse themselves in whatever brings them joy. Our community continues to experience collective trauma and generational PTSD rooted in white supremacy. We are expected to explain why we need self-care because this country thinks it is still our job to take care and build for them. We do not need to earn the right to take care of ourselves or experience Joy.”<sup>185</sup>*





## BLACK WOMEN AND JOY

“Joy is a revolutionary force. We need it as much as we need anger because it is joy that will help keep us in these bodies long enough to enact justice. How are you finding and harboring joy right now? How are you encouraging those you are in community with to seek joy and hold onto it fiercely, even in the very darkest hour? We are owed our anger. And at some point, we are owed our joy.”<sup>134</sup>

Journalist, author, and Editor-in-Chief of *Bitch Media* Evette Dionne explains that Black women have the right to feel joy in addition to their justifiable anger. She echoes the ideologies of other writers like Payton,<sup>135</sup> Danato,<sup>136</sup> brown,<sup>137</sup> Lee,<sup>138</sup> and Baker.<sup>139</sup> The statements these writers make pertaining to Black women and joy can be broken down into two parts:

- 1) The oppressed are allowed to experience joy despite their suffering.
- 2) The oppressed are not required to suffer more in their fight to topple systemic oppression.<sup>140</sup>

*Let's talk about number one.*

Payton writes, “don't get it twisted, I'm upset. I'm angry. I'm hurt. I'm grieving. I'm anxious. One thing I am not is disappointed because we have been here before, and despite my best wishes for the opposite, I'm sure we'll be here again.

**And I cannot allow that anger and pain to consume me.”<sup>141</sup>**

In Baker's dialogues with nine Black women about making time for joy and why it's important, one of the interviewees states that, “We often feel selfish when we take the time to prioritize self-care because we are conditioned to put everything and everyone before ourselves. However, during a time when we are constantly absorbing and digesting such heavy information, it's imperative to take some time to do the things that make us feel recharged and full.”<sup>142</sup>

Both these women explain that they cannot allow the swarm of justifiable negative emotions to overtake them. They acknowledge that in order to adequately engage with the heartbreak they need to juxtapose it with actions that cultivate joy.

Another one of Baker's interviewees said that, “somehow, amidst everything, the Black community never has to look far for joy. Miraculously, we always find a reason to celebrate. I think it's because joy is in our DNA; it just has to be activated. It's necessary for our survival.”<sup>143</sup>

We, as Black women, are allowed to acknowledge the trauma that has wracked our communities while also finding moments of laughter, pride, passion, and *joy*.

*This all leads to number two.*

The act of joy as a form of activism can help activists, especially those from marginalized communities, maintain engagement in their advocacy, minimizing the risk of burnout.<sup>144,145</sup>

The intertwining of joy and activism can be referred to as “pleasure activism,”<sup>146</sup> elaborated upon in brown’s book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*.<sup>147</sup>

In discussing the book, brown said, “I wrote the book primarily for those who, through ancestral and current oppression, have lost touch with their natural right to it. We need to stay in visceral touch with what brings us aliveness, contentment, joy — so that we do not settle for suffering or fighting for crumbs.”<sup>148</sup>

The power that comes from using joy as a form of resistance is not a new phenomenon.<sup>149</sup> The banning of dancing<sup>150,151</sup> and drumming,<sup>152,153</sup> for example, was a direct attempt by the oppressors to suppress the joy of enslaved Black Americans, aware of the power it had when used as a tool of resistance.<sup>154,155</sup>

This in mind, think about the ways enslaved Blacks replaced drums with the juba dance.<sup>156</sup> Think about all those people doing the *Electric Slide*<sup>157</sup> and the *Cupid Shuffle*<sup>158</sup> during Black Lives Matter Protests in 2020. Think about the conversion of the Robert E. Lee monument into a community space complete with music, food vendors, and a basketball hoop, and a sign that reads “Welcome to Beautiful Marcus-David Peters Circle, Liberated by the People MMXX’.”<sup>159</sup> Think about how this statue in its emancipated, graffitied glory was named one of the most influential pieces of protest art since World War II.<sup>160</sup>

Think of the way we all can bond over things like food, art, music, and dance when they are removed from oppressive confines and allowed to just exist as they are. Ingrid Fetell Lee references Audre Lorde, writing “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.’ Joy, and celebrations in particular, focus our attention on our commonalities, not our differences.”<sup>161</sup>





*Everyone eats.*

*Everyone dances.*

*Everyone laughs.*

**“Communal joy provides a kind of glue that unifies a group.”<sup>162</sup>**

Experiencing joy is still within the power of the oppressed, no matter how hard oppressors attempt to limit that freedom. Joy can never truly be taken away from someone. Black women do not need to defend their experiences of joy to others, nor do they need to ignore their trauma to experience joy. Lee writes, “joy is fundamentally different than turning a blind eye”<sup>163</sup> and research<sup>164</sup> shows that even small bursts of positive emotions help manage one’s response to stress, allowing them to continue working and healing from a place of wellness.

Baker explains that “showing up for yourself is just as important as being there for others. You’ll see amazing results in anything you do when you fight for yourself first. Being dedicated to your own joy and strength fuels you to be capable of standing strong on any frontline, whether it’s for racial equality, a better position at work, or simply loving yourself in entirety when you wake up in the morning.”<sup>165</sup>

In other words, allow your cup to refill.<sup>166</sup>

*“...struggles for justice are often also struggles for the acknowledgement of an oppressed group’s full humanity. Joy is a sign of vibrant life, of thriving. It is one [of] the things that makes us truly human. So depriving a group of people of joy, whether through an outright ban, or the denigration or shaming of their sources of pleasure, or through economic means, is a method of dehumanization. Reclaiming those sources of joy is a way to refuse to be dehumanized, to reassert our vitality.”<sup>186</sup>*



*"Without practicing joy, we cannot truly be free. Just like our demands for justice, our joy must be nonnegotiable. I move away from the tropes of strength and perfection that have been pushed onto us and step into the understanding that perfect is holding the hand of the little girl inside me and letting her know that I love her and I will never stop looking to bring her joy. Being a Black woman in and of itself brings me joy."<sup>220</sup>*



*PRECEDENT STUDY*

# BLACK BY DESIGN MATCHING GAME

## PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

Produced by Olmec Toys, *Black by Design* is a matching game devoted to inventions made by African Americans. A set of 21 matched pairs, some of the objects depicted on the cards include the baby carriage, push mower, ice cream scoop, automatic elevator doors, golf tee, and riding saddle. Included in the game set is a booklet detailing the rules of the game, instructions for alternative modes of play, and the biographies of the inventors whose creations are featured.

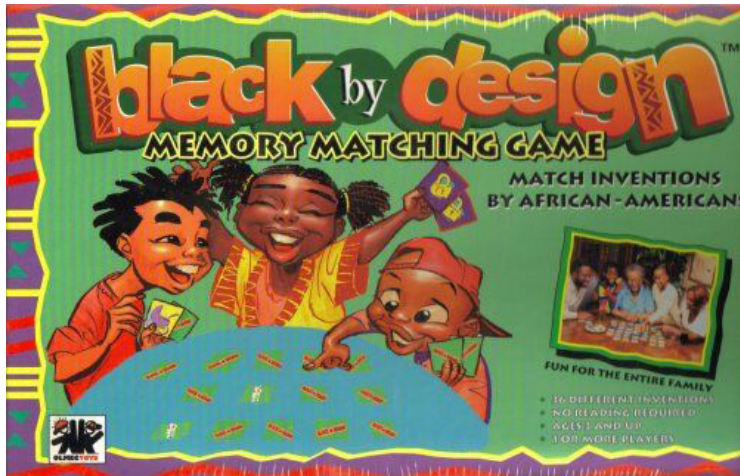


FIG. 1 Black by Design Memory Matching Game by Olmec Toys



FIG. 2 Black by Design game pieces, full set

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Before I dive into how this object relates to my thesis, I would like to highlight a few things: Figure 1 is not evenly cropped, Figure 2 was photographed by my then 70-year-old grandmother on her cream satin couch from 1999, and Figure 3 was also photographed by said grandmother on a freshly washed white towel.

These photographs are not “bad” per say, but the fact that these were the only images of the game available to me speaks to the larger situation regarding mainstream America’s awareness of Black peoples’ contributions, businesses, and general presence in society. I had assumed the game, issued in 1995, would have left its mark on the World Wide Web, but Figure 1 was the only image I could find despite the vastness of the internet. So why were images of this game so hard to find? It’s true that Olmec Toys went out of business the same year this game hit shelves, so perhaps that explains it all. But why did Olmec Toys go out of business? Declining sales? Increased costs?

Could it be because their “ethnically correct”<sup>168</sup> merchandise wasn’t of interest to people outside the Black, Latinx, and Asian communities? Could it be because this toy company – the largest minority-owned toy company in the United States at the time<sup>169</sup> – couldn’t compete with its predominantly white-owned mainstream counterparts? Could it be because this business, founded in 1985 by Yla Eason – a Black woman – faced business-altering discrimination behind the scenes?

*Maybe. Maybe not.*

All this said, it began to feel as though the only place this game existed was in my memory of playing it on the carpet floor of my grandmother’s master bedroom. This situation led to my grandmother offering to dive into her basement at 4am and document the game I trusted she still had.

Before receiving these photos from my grandmother, the only inventions I could remember from this game were the traffic light and the ice cream scoop. At first, I thought, *dang, Nia, you gotta do better than that* – a thought that is overly critical and possibly reflects the pressure Black women face to avoid discrimination by aiming for perfectionism. After all, how many people can say they remember anything from a matching game they played when they were six years old? And yet, I as a Black woman still – for a moment – felt as though I was a poor representation of the Black community because how, oh, how could my Kindergarten brain forget something so important?

*But I digress?*

Though at first I thought it was unfortunate I could only remember two of the inventions in the matching game, I later accepted that the fact I remembered them at all was incredible. The game had impacted me enough to stay preserved in my brain as other memories dissolved around it over the course of two decades.

I then realized that one big reason I was able to retain the information the game offered was because of the experience. I remembered playing the game with my friend, I remembered the weight of the cardboard squares, I remembered the bright colors of the cards, I remembered the expressive faces of the kids on the box, and I remembered my feelings of surprise upon learning that someone in my community invented something I, at six years old, could recognize.

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

Perhaps the stories *Reclamancipation* inspires, along with the realities they represent, will remain in players' minds for decades too, attached to memories of gliding fingers across glossy wood surfaces or setting up the board to stretch across the entire living room floor.

Both *Black by Design* and *Reclamancipation* function as learning tools for Black history and explore this through the act of engagement, play, and matching. In *Black by Design* players match images to learn culturally significant fun facts and in *Reclamancipation* players match words to spark stories. Through both these methods of gameplay, knowledge is learned, shared, reflected upon, and preserved.



Fig. 3 Black by Design game cards

*“As a Black woman in this country, I have to walk around every day knowing that, had I been born at a different time in this country’s history, it would’ve been a policy, like part of the law, that I could be raised for the pleasure of whoever owned me in that time. I’m trying to come all the way back from that to living in my own dignity and like, the self-actualization of my own pleasure, my own body — not for someone else to use, not for someone else to have ownership of.”<sup>184</sup>*





## ANNIE LEE

### PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

Annie Lee was an African American woman artist and philanthropist known for her expressive paintings of Black women in everyday life. Her choice in subject matter was informed by her own experiences and observations of her community. She is perhaps most famous for the painting *Blue Monday*, a print of which has hung in the hallway of my great aunt's second floor since before I was born.



Fig. 4 *Blue Monday* by Annie Lee

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I didn't even know the name of *Blue Monday* until I stumbled upon a screenshot in an Instagram Story the autumn of 2020. I reflected upon why I had never known the name of a painting that was so familiar to me and why I had generally never paid this artist any mind.

One reason for this is rather innocent. I grew up with the art of Annie Lee existing in the homes of every Black auntie, the pages of every mail order Black art binder, probably bore witness to her art on television shows like *A Different World* and *The Cosby Show*, and probably heard her voice speak through the speakers of my grandmother's radio during on the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*.<sup>229</sup> I never thought twice about the paintings or its creator because they were a norm I had grown up around. As art seller Yusuf Ali El said, "What she painted was what we all knew, but it was not art until she pointed it out."<sup>230</sup>

However, another very evident reason that I was mostly unfamiliar with Lee's art practice is because she was a Black woman. Her artwork, like most Black artists and women of color, never made it into any of the art history books I read, never became part of casual conversation amongst artists, and never was deemed relevant enough to be placed on the pedestal that other white and/or male artists are placed upon.

Annie Lee's life, filled with incredible accomplishments and immense sorrows, is innately tied to her artistic career and the paintings she created. The relationship between Lee's life and art practice is a beautiful example of how the two become inseparable within the context of Black women depicting their community through art and design.

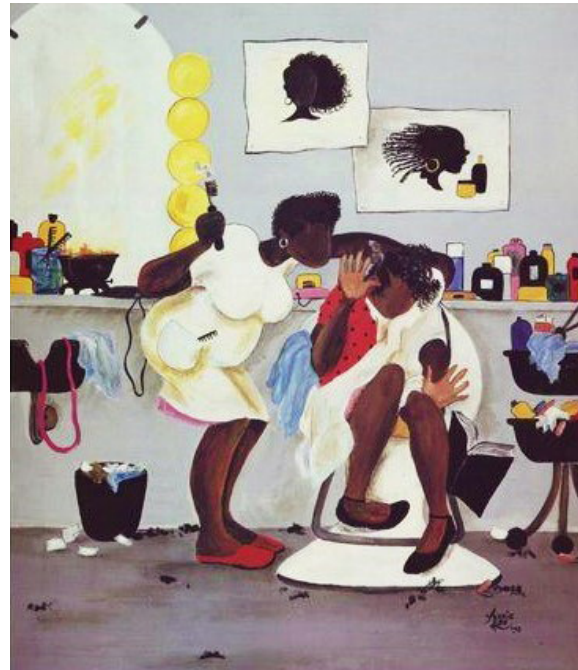


Fig. 5 Burn You Baby  
by Annie Lee



Fig. 6 Six No Uptown  
by Annie Lee

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

The content of Lee's paintings – images Black women in moments of hardship and celebration, isolation and community – also act as a precedent, as they are comparable to the imagery depicted in the game tiles of *Reclamancipation*. Further, Lee intentionally emphasized dynamic body language over facial expressions<sup>231</sup> when depicting her figures, a stylistic decision that influenced the design of the Guardians and the figures in the game tiles.

Perhaps most significantly, though, I am referencing Annie Lee to honor a woman and an artist that deserves the recognition not historically given to people like her.

*Artists like her. Artists like us.*

This act of representation underscores this thesis' goal of highlighting the voices and experiences of African American women as both individuals and as a community.

As Lee expressed in an interview held coincidentally the same year I was born,

*"I think my paintings connect me to women. I know that how I feel is the way a lot of women feel."*<sup>232</sup>



Fig.7 5th Grade Substitute by Annie Lee

## #GROWINGUPBLACK

### PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

#GrowingUpBlack<sup>170</sup> is a Twitter hashtag that peaked in 2015 as a reaction to the Rachel Dolezal controversy.<sup>171,172</sup> During this period, which coincided with multiple high-profile incidents of police brutality toward Black Americans,<sup>173</sup> conversations about what it means to be African American arose. The Twitterverse responded in a variety of ways, one of which being the creation and posting of memes describing the Black American experience.

"Lemme know when it starts  
burning" #GrowingUpBlack



Fig. 8 "Lemme know when it starts  
burning" by Frenchest\_fries\_2013

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

I first encountered these memes in passing; they were simply a part of my various social media timelines, images for me to briefly laugh at and double tap for a Like. As I began my thesis process, however, I began to seek them out during moments where engaging with the material left me feeling sad and unmotivated. These memes became a means of escape, escape that was still surprisingly parallel to the subject of my thesis.

I began to realize the depth and complexity of what these memes were really communicating. They are a way for us – the Black community – to channel our feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, and exhaustion into something that we could all laugh about together. In these memes are stories of hair discrimination, hair pride, creative expression, relationships, finances, anxiety, problem-solving, strength, spirituality, dress, language, cuisine, and childhood. They are a way for us to collectively respond, process, and cope with contemporary and past issues affecting our community, a way to laugh at a situation so as to not let feelings of sadness or anger overtake us.

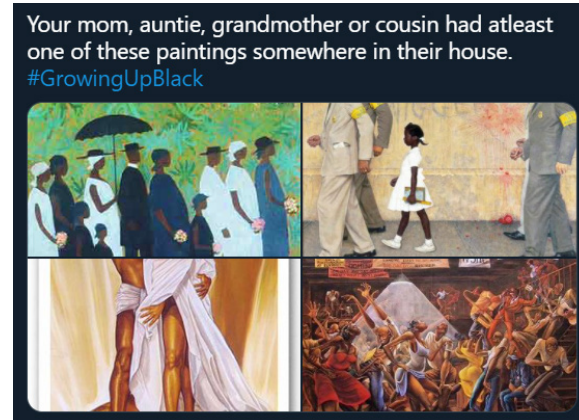


Fig.9 "Your mom, auntie, grandmother or cousin had atleast one of these paintings somewhere in their house." by kayla

## The one room in the house you wasn't supposed to be in #GrowingUpBlack



Fig.10 "The one room in the house you wasn't supposed to be in" by L. Joy Williams

#GrowingUpBlack I swear I have permanent dents in my head from these



Fig.11 "I swear I have permanent dents in my head from these" by Unknown

Ladies which one held up your beads? #GrowingUpBlack



Fig.13 "Ladies which one held up your beads?" by Jai Sophrosyne

Having to get your hair washed in the sink 🤔😂  
#GrowingUpBlack

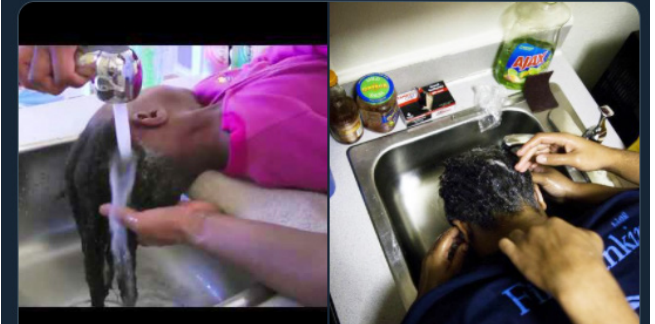


Fig.12 "Having to get your hair washed in the sink" by sB

They're cheating! Getting your ear damn near burnt off by a hot comb is a little black girl rights of passage 🤔😭

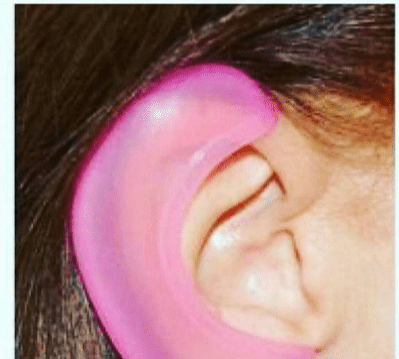


Fig.14 "They're cheating! Getting your ear damn near burnt off by a hot comb is a little black girl rights of passage" by Unknown

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

The memes and these realizations influenced my research methodology both functionally and stylistically. The methodology relied on social media as a means of sharing images, quotes, and questions, allowing the Black women's community to connect and share their stories in a communal space. It later informed my choices of what types of objects to post as prompts for narratives, as well as the decision to post pictures of objects on solid or minimal backgrounds.

#GrowingUpBlack also shaped the game itself by providing a template for how joy and pain could coexist in one object that is able to tell communal stories.

These memes pair statements of permanent dents in your skull with crying laugh emojis.

Claim that nearly being burned in the name of attractiveness is a right of passage.

Present a child smiling happily as she waits to tell you the chemicals have started to burn her scalp.

These memes showcase the complexity, uniformity, and uniqueness of the African American experience through their content and shareability.



GrowingUpBlack

Fig.15 "The 'we got McDonalds at home' starter pack" by SPARTA



#GrowingUpBlack the candies ya grannie would give you at church

RETWEETS  
**1,147**

FAVORITES  
**778**

2:33 PM - 14 Jul 2015



Fig.16 "the candies ya grannie would give you at church" by Unknown

Having to wear ruffle socks & lil church heels to Sunday service. #GrowingUpBlack



Fig.18 "Having to wear ruffle socks & lil church heels to Sunday service." by Unknown

"Baby hold your ear"

#GrowingUpBlack 🧒❤️



Fig.17 "Baby hold your ear" by Ty

Hair be sizzling like bacon 🤔🤔🤔  
#GrowingUpBlack

RETWEETS  
**1,663**

FAVORITES  
**1,002**

3:48 PM - 14 Jul 2015



Fig.19 "Hair be sizzling like bacon" by Huly

*“Black Joy seems to be a radical term because since this country was built, Black people have been used for labor solely. We’ve been conditioned to labor under inhumane circumstances and expected not to complain.”<sup>183</sup>*



## FREEDOM QUILTS

### PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

“According to legend, a safe house along the Underground Railroad was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area’s immediate dangers or even where to head next.”<sup>174</sup>

These quilts, known as Freedom Quilts, are one of those things that has passively seeped into African Americans’ collective consciousness. However, like much of African American history, it has been documented outside the scope of mainstream American and women’s histories.

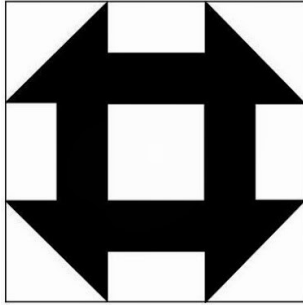
Carroll, for example, explains that quilting did not become part of “the American woman’s needlework experience”<sup>175</sup> until primarily the 18th and 19th centuries. She claims this is simply because fabric became significantly less expensive around this time. However, an explanation such as this ignores the relationship contemporary enslaved Black women had with quilting.

*“Long-ignored and conspicuously absent from many early accounts of American quilt history, African American quilting has become a growing area of study.”<sup>176</sup>*

*“African American quilting is almost as old as the history of America.”<sup>177</sup>*

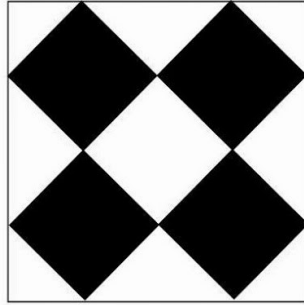
Black American quilting techniques of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – the peak of enslavement – are a mix of traditional African techniques and contemporary American ones. As Breneman points out, “some intriguing theories have been proposed that link African American women’s quilting to their African roots. Strip construction, large-scale designs, strong contrasting colors and variations from symmetrical patterns all appear to reflect textile patterns found in parts of Africa.”<sup>178</sup> In addition to this, there is also a likelihood that Black women’s knowledge of quilt making is tied directly to their status as slaves, learning quilting techniques from not only their communities, but also their women slave owners.<sup>179</sup> Economic status also defined what kinds of quilts both Black and white women made, which is why there are similarities between quilts made by enslaved Blacks and poor whites.

However, despite the shared features between Black American women’s quilting traditions and general American ones, the idea of the Freedom Quilt – whether fact or fiction – is directly linked to slavery in the United States.



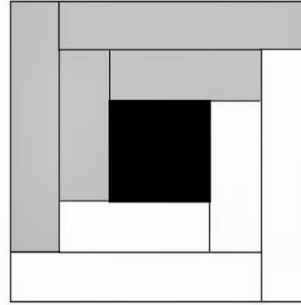
**Monkey Wrench**

Get ready! Gather the tools you'll need to build shelters, navigate the journey, or defend yourself along the way.



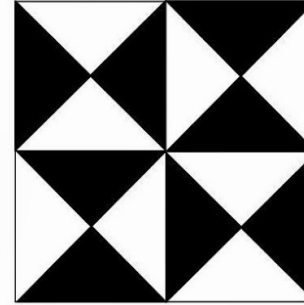
**Crossroads**

Keep going and travel to the crossroads in Cleveland, Ohio. Nicknamed "Hope", this vibrant Underground Railroad station, was the last stop where slaves would board a boat to Canada.



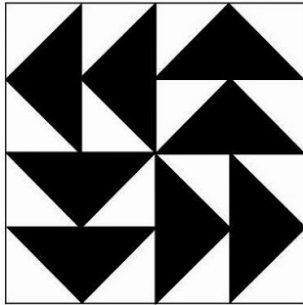
**Log Cabin**

You've reached a safe house. Congratulations you have found new friends who are friends of slaves.



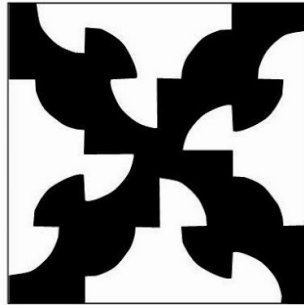
**Bow Ties**

You're looking pretty tattered. To disguise yourself as a freed slave, you'll need a change of clothes. The Bow Ties quilt block is a code to tell you someone will bring you nicer clothing.



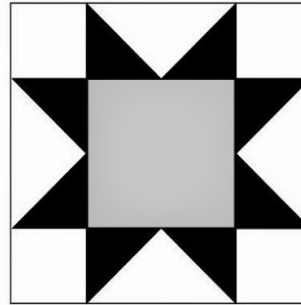
**Flying Geese**

Follow the migrating geese north to Canada (and freedom).



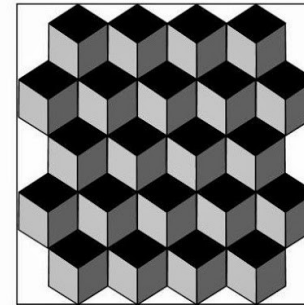
**Drunkard's Path**

Go back one space! This quilt block is a sign that slave hunters are near. Double back to elude them immediately!



**North Star**

Look to the skies to help you navigate the way. Follow the North Star to Canada.



**Tumbling Blocks**

The time has come to box up your belongings. Your escape will be happening soon!

Fig. 20 "Freedom quilt patterns and meanings" by Spring Hill Historic Home

*“Many stories and legends have been circulated about the role, if any, quilts may have had in the Underground Railroad. Unfortunately, researchers have found little actual evidence of codes in the quilt blocks or messages in quilts hanging on clotheslines.”<sup>180</sup>*

*“I can see the promise of such a system. Nimble fingers working in secret, armed with needle and thread, engaging with a visual language, doing their part for freedom. I want to believe it happened.”<sup>181</sup>*

Some sources assert that the prevailing myth of the Freedom Quilt is harmful to the true history of the runaway slave experience, expressing that “the hardships, the hunger, the fear, the incredible courage and determination”<sup>182</sup> is diminished by the idea of secret codes in quilts.

They argue that teaching this “implausible and simplistic legend is a disservice to Underground Railroad history and the remarkable people who lived it.”<sup>183</sup>

In referencing contemporary quiltmaker Sharon Tindall, however, Bryant writes that “quilts allow Tindall to sustain a conversation about these men and women who were valiant, who fought slavery by taking the ultimate chance — running, and maybe even trusting the message on a blanket when everything was at stake — and encouraging others to do the same.”<sup>184</sup>

Tindall’s quilts make use of the same motifs said to have been used in Freedom Quilts. In interviewing Tindall about her work, Bryant states that “at its center, a quilt is an assemblage of historical and creative cues in the form of fabrics, shapes, symbols, textures and colors. Quilts were often made to commemorate important family events such as marriage, a birth, or moving to a new place. Often made from scraps of old dresses, burlap sacks, and dish cloths, it gives physical, even functional, form to a family or individual’s past and present.”<sup>185</sup>



Fig.21 Log cabin crib quilt, circa 1880

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Did the story of these quilts come about as a way for my ancestors to add a sense of wonder and likely a happy ending to the brutal stories of enslavement they would share with their descendants? Did the narratives of secret codes and stealthy escapes develop as means to cope with the trauma of slavery that still lingers in the Black community? Though these questions may be unanswerable, *Reclamancipation* embraces this idea of processing harsh realities through storytelling in a way that is fun and engaging.

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

Freedom Quilts have influenced the design of *Reclamancipation* in various ways. Visually, the game makes use of graphic shapes, textures, and colors to immortalize important moments in Black women's lives. It also inspired the recurring motif of the North Star throughout the game's imagery, representing the idea of freedom and the location players need to get to win the game. Further, the game makes use of the traditional square quilting format and is created using various types of collage, comparable to using scraps of fabric to construct a scene in a fabric quilt.

Regarding giving "physical, even functional, form to a family or individual's past and present,"<sup>186</sup> *Reclamancipation* does this by focusing on both the Black women's community and the individual experience. The game focuses on moments of the "now," alongside moments of the distant and recent past, honoring the experiences of Black women by highlighting their untold stories. The history of the Freedom Quilt, both factual and speculative, also relates to the way players engage with the content of the game.



Fig.22 Colorful  
Underground  
Railroad Sampler  
by Sharon Tindall,  
cotton, 88x70 in,  
2008



## THE WIZ

### PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

Created in 1978 with the Black community at the forefront, *The Wiz* is a reimagining of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The film featured an all-Black cast and upon its original release, it was considered both a critical and commercial failure. Despite this, though, the film became a cult classic within the African American community, so much of a classic that I was terribly confused when I saw the 1939 version<sup>187</sup> as a child, confused in the same way I was when I was gifted with a white Barbie for the first time.



Fig. 23 *The Wiz* main cast, 1978

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

The film is a wonderful example of themes like hardship and celebration paired with a colorful, detail-oriented aesthetic. Like the original work by Baum, the story features the characters of Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion. Each character has a goal: Dorothy wants to go home, Scarecrow wants a brain, Tin Man wants a heart, and Cowardly Lion wants courage. They travel together through various locales to reach The Emerald City, home of The Wiz, an all-powerful being who will hopefully be able to grant them their wishes.

*The Wiz* is a precedent not only for its aesthetic and story progression, but also for the way it celebrates Black womanhood through the unique portrayals of Dorothy, Evillene, and Glinda. These characters, through their sheer existence, represent a spectrum of what roles Black women can play beyond society's stereotypes. Through their actions and design, these characters show that Black women can be calm, vibrant, elegant, sad, joyous, angry, caring, bold, shy, dangerous, and above all, powerful, each in their own way.

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

The journey of *The Wiz* influenced many elements of *Reclamancipation* such as the inclusion of Neighborhoods and Guardians, as well as the collaborative gameplay and the short story included in the booklet. The aesthetic of the film also influenced the game, with its bright colors and detailed costumes that in many ways resemble sculptural collages. The film combines elements of the fantastic with the familiar when constructing its themes, characters, settings, and aesthetic (both visual and audial), subverting a narrative traditionally portrayed through whiteness and replacing it with a narrative told through an African American lens.

*The film is an interdisciplinary exercise of the Black imagination.*



Fig.24 The Wiz main cast on set, 1978



Fig.25 Diana Ross as Dorothy Gale, 1978



Fig.27 Lena Horne as Glinda the Good Witch of the South, 1978



Fig.26 Mabel King as Evillene the Wicked Witch of the West, 1978

## INDIGENOUS ARCHITECTURE THROUGH INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

*“in my defense my style of writing is not laziness or lack of knowledge of proper usage of the english language it is a form of grammatical resistance as a deconstructionist in the manner of many writers especially american poet ee cummings he graduated with a master degree in english from harvard university and they called him experimental and innovative not words likely to be used to describe an indigenous writer who breaks all the rules of writing (the behavioural ethics board at the university of british columbia suggested that i hire an editor as it appeared that i did not know the english language) times though they are changing”<sup>188</sup>*

## PRECEDENT IN CONTEXT

Patrick Stewart, a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, wrote his 52,438-word architecture dissertation with almost no punctuation. Though each chapter includes a short abstract written in “standard academic English,”<sup>189</sup> and though there are a few question marks scattered about, there are no periods, commas, semicolons, uppercase letters, or typical paragraph structures. His thesis, about the architecture of the local indigenous population, was originally written in the Nisga’a language, however, his supervisors rejected it, insisting that it be written in English. His response was the dissertation excerpted above.

Stewart said he “wanted to make a point’ about aboriginal culture, colonialism, and ‘the blind acceptance of English language conventions in academia.” His use of lowercase letters and minimal punctuation, for example, is a means of removing “the hierarchy of punctuation in the text and sort of democratize the writing by having none.”<sup>190</sup> Stewart also says, “we just accept white English norms as the norm for written language in America, the lands that have been colonized. That’s why there are no rules about it, because the academic world was built for white men by white men, their tongue becomes the norm and we as minorities must adhere to it. But why? They just assumed their way of speaking was right, that’s why there’s no rule because it’s like a *duh*, *you must write like me to succeed*, *duh* without taking anyone else into consideration because the system was not built for others.”

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

Despite Stewart hailing from a different cultural and linguistic background than I, his statements on the relationship between colonization and academic language aligned with my experiences as a Black American woman. Throughout the entirety of my education, even in schools that were predominantly Black, use of the Black vernacular was not considered acceptable in an academic environment. We, first as children and adolescents, then later as university students, have been consciously and unconsciously encouraged to code switch without question.

## APPLICATION TO RESEARCH

Stewart’s dissertation functions as a template for the textual elements of *Reclamancipation*, challenging the need to code switch and reclaiming an academic space that has historically excluded the voices of marginalized communities. Stewart’s original dissertation, written in the Nisga’a language, is also a precedent for the text as it underscores the idea that the most honest way to tell the stories of a particular community is to do it in that community’s language.

*“The linguistic practices of African American women arise out of their lived experiences, experiences which have been largely ignored in the literature on both women’s and African Americans’ language behavior, which has focused on the dominant groups, white women and African-American men.”<sup>191</sup>*



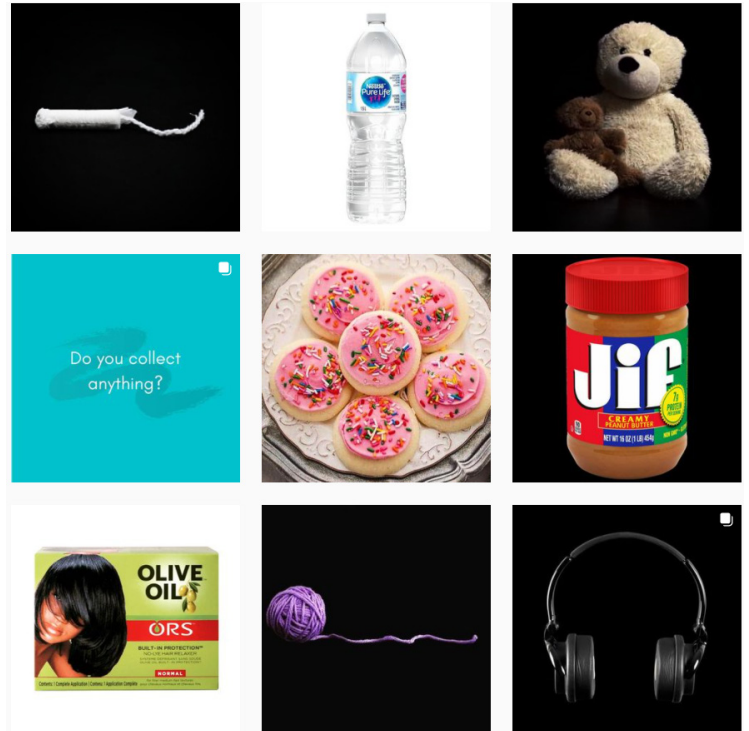
# *RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES*



# CALL & RESPONSE

## METHODOLOGY IN CONTEXT

In the context of music, notably African American spirituals, call and response can be defined as “a musical conversation between multiple participants. The caller or leader acts as a guide for the musicians, starting the song and facilitating its development. The caller sets the tone throughout the performance, pushing and pulling on the energy of the participants. The responders follow the leader with set lyrics. This form allows for maximum participation, emphasizing inclusivity and community.”<sup>194</sup>

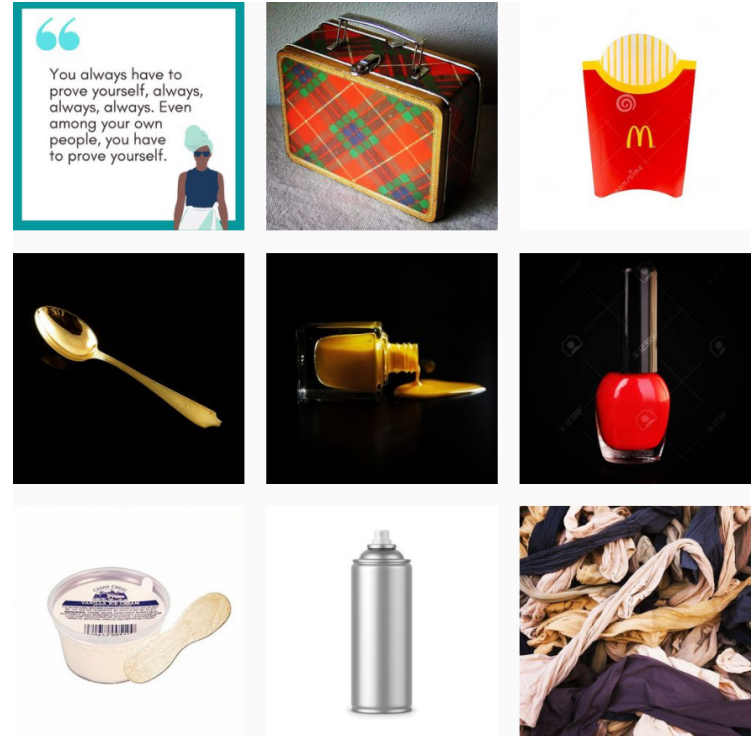


Coded Communication Instagram feed, March 13-17, 2021

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

To maximize engagement through the call and response methodology, my research used social media as a primary interview tool. I posted 189 images of objects, 25 quotes, and 13 sets of interview questions on an Instagram account (@codedcommunication) created exclusively for story collection and my public art page on Facebook.

Posted were images of food, toys, hair products, fashion accessories, work tools, and household items. Some objects, like the hot comb or tools typically associated with women's work, were posted due the relationship they had to the Black women's community. Other objects, like crumpled paper, headphones, or a loaf of bread were posted as "neutral" objects, objects that had an equal amount of potential to spark stories but weren't necessarily linked to the history of the community. The images were posted multiple times a week in sets of 3-5. Sometimes the mages would have no relation to each other, other times they would be different versions of the same object (such as dolls or corn), and sometimes they would be visually related (like a collection of wood objects or objects of the same color palette). Some objects were suggested by Black women who were engaging with the research.



Coded Communication Instagram feed, January 17-22, 2021

“

Are you really hearing me or am I a symbol of the oppression I represent? People seem to expect that I can or should provide insight as representative of women, people of color, Black people, or Black women... I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual.



Graphic for Quote #2

“

Even if there ain't no precedent, switchin' up the messaging, I'm about to add a little estrogen.



Graphic for Quote #25



How would you  
define internalized  
oppression?

Graphic for Interview Question #8a



How do you  
celebrate?

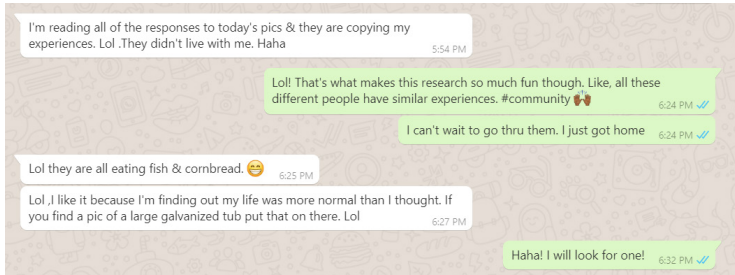
Graphic for Interview Question #4

I chose the posting of objects as a primary research method to explore the relationship between object and story. Educators Patrick Dillon and Tony Howe, in describing the use of design objects as conduits for narrative express that, “like narratives, objects have power in social settings: they offer an interpretation of the story of their existence; they give back echoes of their past. To regard design objects as forms of text allows ‘readers’ to interpret them within their own frames of reference. The understanding that arises from this form of interpretation allows for creative involvement with objects and permits more realistic engagement with design work. It promotes a form of thinking that is personal, relevant and open to negotiated meaning in an otherwise increasingly prescriptive educational world.”<sup>195</sup>

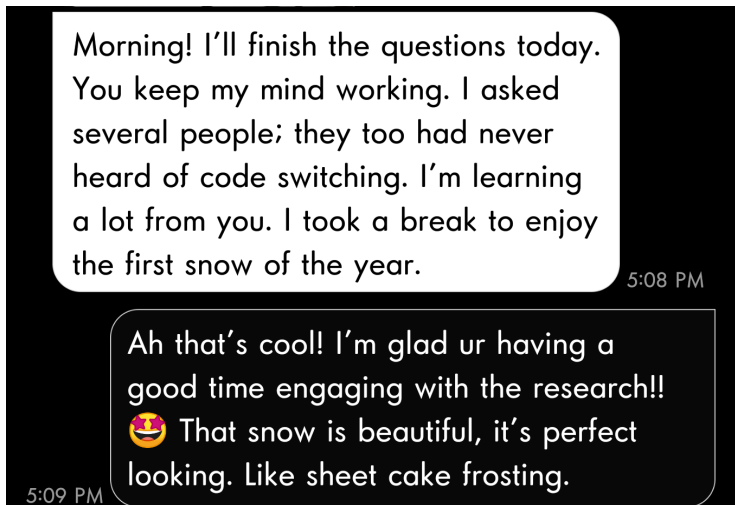
Of the quotes that were posted, 23 were by Black women, one was from the African American National Anthem, and 1 was said by a Black man interviewee in a research text referenced in the Literature Review. The quotes by Black women were sourced from research texts, songs, poems, and speeches, though this information was not given to the interviewees. The quotes were occasionally shortened or had punctuation changed for clarity in its social media format. Often, these quotes were paired with the most recent interview question to be posted publicly.

The interview questions were first given to individuals who were interested in learning more about the research. These interviews, which typically went into great detail in responding to questions, were one-on-one and took place over email and direct messaging. Each interview question was sent out on Thursday and interviewees would have a week to respond in whatever format they saw fit, usually expressing themselves through text, voice notes, and images (both photographed and hand drawn). After discussing the questions with the interviewees, the questions would be posted publicly for anyone to respond to.

The posting of these materials took place between December 3, 2020 and March 30, 2021. Black women between the ages of 23 and 71 would comment on a post and the conversation would go back & forth between them, myself, and any other Black American woman who had something to share. Participants expressed learning new terminology from the questions, sometimes comparing the material to a brain exercise that got them to think and reflect. Other participants described the process as enjoyable and cathartic, one participant going so far as to playfully say that the opportunity to share her voice through engaging with the research was “keeping [her] out of jail.”



Interview exchange example 1



Interview exchange example 2



Interview exchange example 3

*“There is a considerable amount of risk and not a little arrogance in any white writer’s attempt to describe Black life and culture.”<sup>193</sup>*



## S'ALL GOOD: EMPATHETIC RESEARCH

### METHODOLOGY IN CONTEXT

This methodology was designed to be accessible, promoting an environment where participants engaged with the material in their own time and acknowledging various global realities we all faced. Keeping these factors in mind accommodated for the eight-hour time difference between myself and participants, as well as the fact not everyone had equal access to WiFi, video call platforms, or the ability to make international calls. The methodology was also designed to consider foreseen and unforeseen personal, communal, and global disruptions, such as holidays, busyness, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keeping this in mind, the research material was structured to be flexible and, when able, align with some of these disruptions. For example, interview questions were organized where lighthearted questions coincided with the U.S. holiday season. The heavier questions pertaining to oppression would follow, and then would end in International Women's Month with questions that were generally positive and hopeful.

### APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

The empathetic approach to research allowed participants to more deeply engage with the research material because they could partake in it during times that were ideal for them. This became especially useful during holiday seasons and extreme weather conditions that caused power outages. Participants were able to prioritize their own necessities without risk of disrupting the research they were participating in.

This methodology also kept in mind the physical, mental and emotional circumstances of the participants. It was particularly beneficial during COVID-19 pandemic, for example, especially as it pertained to screen time and social media consumption. Further, the research methodology acknowledged the reality that African American women are often – in one word – busy. While they are of course not the only community that could be described as “busy,” I recognized that Black women are often subjected to a unique kind of busyness due to their status as Black women. I passionately did not want my research to be a burden upon my participants, and as a researcher, I did not want the research to be reliant upon a strict atmosphere that may not have been applicable to everyone's lives and schedules.



# REDEFINING TRADITIONAL ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

## METHODOLOGY IN CONTEXT

In the context of this thesis, a traditional one-on-one interview method is defined as one person asking questions to get immediate answers from another. The interviewer documents these exchanges either by transcribing or recording through video or audio.

*It can be summarized as, I ask, you tell, I keep.*

While traditional one-on-one interview structures are not inherently bad, they still make use of a hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee. There is a power dynamic in its approach to gathering information and engaging with subjects, further emphasized when those subjects are from marginalized communities. When people from these communities engage with interview questions, they are often existing as representatives of their entire community due to the discriminatory power structure of U.S society. Regarding Black women, the traditional interview structure forces them to code switch their speech, posture, dress, makeup, and hair. Further, they are expected to minimize strong emotions and reactions to fit within this interview structure, regardless of how loaded a question about their experience may be.

*The traditional interview structure becomes an extension of oppression.*

This process would have undermined the authentic voices and experiences of both me and the participants. It also would have added a detrimental time-sensitive pressure to the answering of questions about race, history, gender, identity, and oppression, topics that are inherently complex and would benefit from time to reflect and craft a response they felt comfortable with.

This informed my decision to give interviewees a full week to respond to question sets, each one composed of 2-5 questions. The desire to eliminate the hierarchy is also the reason why I chose to post interview questions publicly, allowing African American women who were not partaking in one-on-one interviews the ability to respond to these questions if they wanted.

In summary, the main goal of redesigning the one-on-one research methodology was to give power to the participants by giving them the space to say what they wanted, when they wanted to say it, through whatever method they felt expressed them the best, without any feelings of interrogation.

## APPLICATION TO THE RESEARCH

Social media allowed participants to engage with the material without needing to navigate the performative nature of traditional interviews. They could write words like “conebread” and trust that no one would question their intelligence, knowing that the community would recognize the beauty and humor of that language within a group discussion about Fish Fridays.

Similarly, phrases like “GET THAT KITCHEN,” typed in all caps, were not interpreted as hostile or irrelevant, as we – the community of Black women – all understood the intense yet humorous situation about Black hair being described. Further, participants chose to express themselves through direct messages, Reactions,<sup>196</sup> emojis, GIFs, photographs, voice notes, Word Documents, and emails, allowing for nuanced communication that would have been lost had I opted for the traditional interview style.

I'm giving you my experience & you can use it how you like. (1) In 70's I worked at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. The Black & White signs for the bathrooms had been painted over & the paint started to fade during a meeting. Everyone saw it. 🌟🌟 (2) My mother would use the hot iron to press my hair for church on Sunday mornings. (3). Peppermint candy was always in our pockets.(4). When I worked for the telephone company, the supervisor always tried to make you sound white over the phone. 😊

Interview exchange example 4

Slide 3 reminds me of the very first black & white tv we had with only 3 channels. 6-8-12 😊. Later we moved up by the time I graduated high school & we got a big floor model tv that you had to put quarters in to play a hour at a time. This is how we paid for it 😊😊. And slide (2) my grandma used this when she made the best chocolate cake frosting. 🌟. (1) We got kool-aid cherry or grape in evening with our supper 😊. We were so happy with each other back in the day, we didn't know we were [poor](#). 😊🙏❤️

Interview exchange example 5

We had a clothes line on poles outside and another ran across the enclosed back porch. We didn't have a use the washboard but small thin items go soaked rinsed and wringed in the tub when the washer didn't work. Before that we went to the laundromat (laundry mat). The crisp fresh smell of tide and the air dry was so wonderful and relaxing. The clothes pins were pretty tough to hold things down. Just wood wedges and a spring. Good memories helping my gma and my mom except the ironing part. 🥰



Art gives me life  
23h · 🌐  
Wash Day by Carlton Murrell  
<https://www.facebook.com/ArtGivesMeLife>

Nia Alexander Campbell 2 Comments

Love Comment Share

Nia Alexander Campbell  
"except the ironing part" that's funny 🥰 I love ironing. Although I have definitely never used a washing tub or a clothes line. Thanks so much for sharing!!  
Like Reply 6m

Nia Alexander Campbell  
Also, this image really reminded me of something I want to do with my thesis imagery, something I had totally forgotten about. Thanks for sparking my memory!  
Like Reply 1m

Interview exchange example 6

My favorite and daily activities were playing cowboys with my brother and all of his friends. Playing with Jack rocks, roller skating all over the neighborhood, bike riding and playing all childhood games. Life was good, exciting, friendly and fun.

3m Love Reply Message 1 ❤️

Interview exchange example 7

Also, unrelated, I saw your Story earlier with the barbie bed sheet. I had the exact same one!



That bed sheet is a Black girl staple. My mom covered my room with that print when she finally found Black Barbie representation.

Same!! I had the bed set, the curtains, and the border that goes on the top of the wall ❤️



Even now at 25 that Black Barbie brings me so much joy.



Interview exchange example 8

She was to young. I'm 3 years older than her. Didn't have time to babysit her. BTW, I was mean. I threw down the stairs & beat this guy everyday in K because he pulled my hair. He didn't have sense enough to stop. His mother was a friend of grandma & she came to the house & asked mama to tell me to stop beating him & I stopped. She said she was tired of walking him to school. Lol

4:01 PM

I earned RESPECT at a young age of 5 years old

4:02 PM

Interview exchange example 9

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

With the security that everyone involved in the discussions would comprehend each other's stories in all their multidimensionality, participants – myself included – expressed enjoying the process. Engaging with the material through these research methodologies promoted an atmosphere of transparency, honesty, reflection, comfort, innovation, and joy. Together, we built a safe space to discuss the joys and pains of what it means to be an African American woman.



Fig.28 African American Barbie ballerina twin sized bedsheets by Mattel, cotton and polyester, 1995

*“...’in order to talk about Black cultural experience’ she needs the language created out of that experience as opposed to the ‘power code’.”<sup>192</sup>*





# ARTIFACT EXPLORATIONS

## THE FOUNDATION OF EXPLORATION

After exploring the complexities of Black women's experiences and the various ways these experiences could be represented, it was time to apply that knowledge to the development of an artifact. For the purpose of my work, an artifact is defined as visual, aural, or textural media that embodies the research.

*And therein lay the challenge.*

One of the biggest takeaways I received from the research is that African American women's life experiences cannot be compartmentalized. Our experiences overlap and intertwine in ways that I realized could easily be lost through the process of artifactization, a process that relies on summarizing ideas in a way that is comprehensible to an audience.

This circumstance led to the exploration of dozens of multidisciplinary methods for representing the research. Videos with the sound of a kitchen in the background, seemingly empty vessels that played poems and speeches, installations of hot combs and perm boxes, colorful timelines of abstracted color and text, interviews transcribed onto paper hand toys, and many more.

Through these explorations I narrowed down the elements that would be integral to the final product. Those elements are:

**Oversized scale:** *Reclaiming the space Black women have historically been denied.*

**Shared stories:** *Exchanging the stories that establish or similarities and our differences.*

**Vibrancy & color:** *Representing Black women as more than just their Blackness.*

**Faces & figures:** *Acknowledging Black women both as mirrors reflecting ourselves and as wholly unique beings.*

**Black womanhood:** *Highlighting this intersection that informs Black women's experiences.*



## THE ACCEPTABILITY OF BLACK WOMEN'S HAIR

*Oversized scale  
Faces & figures  
Black womanhood*

### **This is a die.**

"A small cube marked on each side with from one to six dots, usually used in pairs in gambling and in various other games."<sup>197</sup>

Each side of the die shows the same Black woman with different hairstyles. Each side of the die shows the same Black woman existing incorrectly.

Though it asks the question, who perceives her existence as incorrect? It asked the question, "Too \_\_\_\_\_ for who?"

Too ghetto for the mall security guard?

Too ethnic for her high school principal?

Too masculine for her grandmother?

Too showy for her minister?

Too fake for the man she's dating?

Too rebellious to her interviewer?

Or are these thoughts her own as she looks in the mirror?

And no matter what side of the die you roll, you learn your existence is incorrect.

No matter what side of the die you roll, you always lose.



Game die in hand



Too Rebellious



Too Ghetto



Too Showy



Too Masculine



Too Ethnic



Too Fake

Illustrations on each face of the game die

## DEFINING BLACK WOMEN

*Shared stories  
Black womanhood*

Throw the dice and tell the story you see.

know-it-all, knowledgeable, loud.

Strong, leader, uptight.

Mature, blood, mother.

Relaxed, light, easy.

How do these words describe the Black woman?

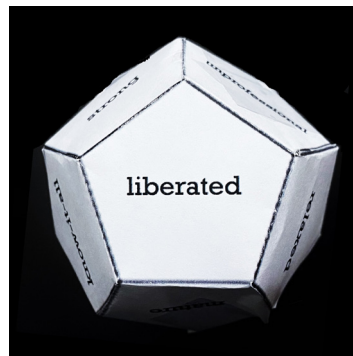
Who does she become when these words are combined?

What do you mean by “easy”?

What do you mean by “relaxed”?

Who defines her in this way? Who tells her story?

Why were these the words that came to mind?



Faces of the dice

**3 dice. 12 sides each. 36 words.**

strong	body	strong	ho
liberated	light	liberated	fake
know-it-all	leader	know-it-all	girl
unprofessional	voice	unprofessional	uptight
relaxed	blood	relaxed	unique
mature	natural	mature	demure
emotional	knowledgeable	emotional	professional
prude	uppity	prude	dark
ghetto	aggressive	ghetto	easy
nappy	quiet	nappy	loud
confident	woman	confident	bossy
responsible	sexual	responsible	mother

## STITCHED STORY DICE

*Oversized scale  
Vibrancy & color  
Faces & figures  
Black womanhood*



Stitched felt and cotton dice

## Celebrate the hot comb.

We burned our curls to blend in, but the scar  
on the ridge of all our ears makes us laugh.

Celebrate the headwrap.

We turned a symbol of inferiority into  
a symbol of beauty.

Celebrate chitlins.

We turned scraps into hearty dishes.<sup>198</sup>

Celebrate greens with ham knuckles.

We turned boiled leaves into a nourishing meal.<sup>199</sup>

Celebrate sweet potato pie.<sup>200,201</sup>

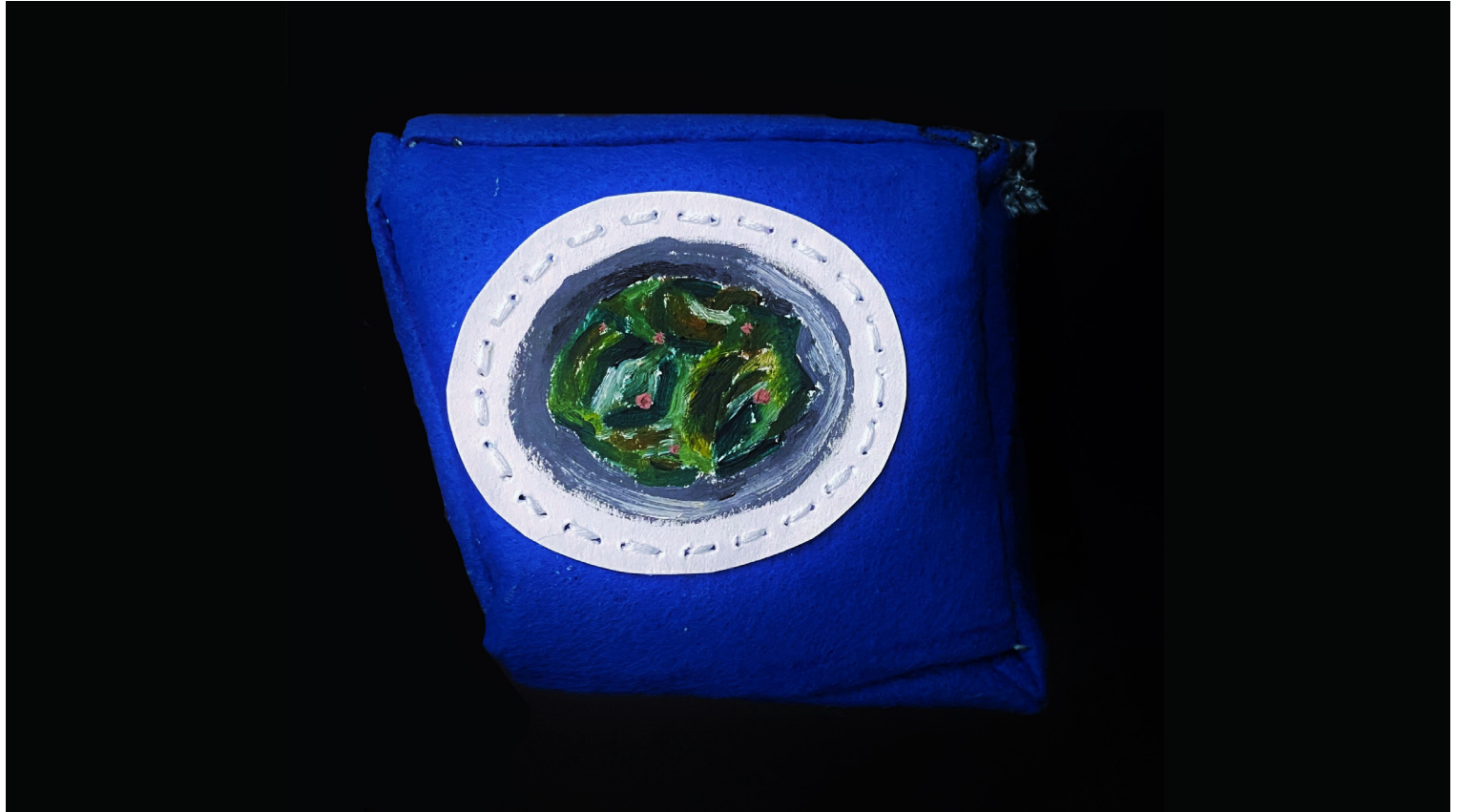
We lost the roots of our motherland, we found  
an alternate root, we mashed to shape our  
oppressor's taste, and we built a new tradition.



Stitched painting of a hot comb on game die



Stitched painting of chitterlings on game die



Stitched painting of collard greens and ham on game die



Painting of a slice of sweet potato pie on game die



Stitched in purple, trimmed in gold, filled with luck. Celebrate our versatility, our ingenuity, and our ability to choose how we wish to present ourselves to the world. Celebrate defining ourselves for what we are, not what we are not. Celebrate the women's work of our mothers and grandmothers and aunts of now and then. Honor the erosion of their joints used to stitch the things that would protect and comfort us.

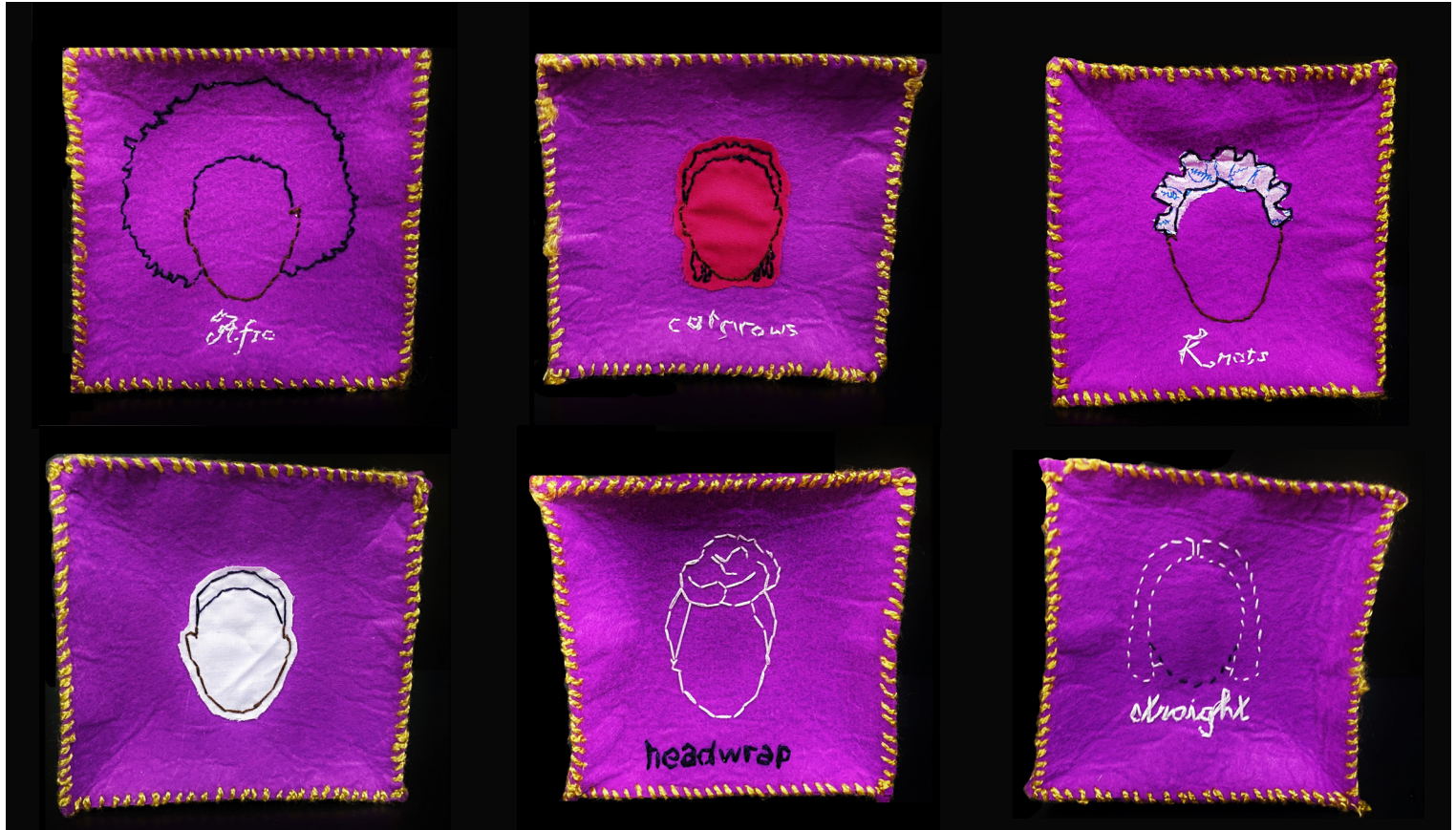
*Pain and pleasure. Crisis and victory.  
Bitter and sweet.*

*"If I can't face my grief, I can't face my joy.  
Grief and joy are sacred twins."<sup>202</sup>*

Rest your head atop them, stuffed with cotton and wool. Toss them back and forth with your sisters and let the dried black-eyed peas fill the room with the sound of the shekere. Collapse them down and watch them re-inflate, never ever truly crushed.



Painting of cornbread on game die



Embroidered silhouettes of Black women's hairstyles on felt dice

## COLLAGED SCRAP FABRIC QUILT GAME BOARD

*Shared stories  
Vibrancy & color*

Step 1: Find a tailor shop in a predominantly male part of town.

Step 2: Ask them for their scrap fabric.

Step 3: Get your male friend to repeat the question for you.

Step 4: Bring the fabric home and separate by color, akin to laundry

Step 5: Bleach some, darken others

Step 6: Photograph them

Step 7: Arrange them in the quilt patterns your ancestors may have used to find freedom

*Flying Goose*

*Bow Tie*

*Log Cabin*

*Monkey Wrench*

*Drunkards Path*

*Crossroads*

*Tumbling Blocks*

*North Star*

Scraps collaged together in hand and on screen.

Colors added and removed.

Small enough to rest atop a coffee table, this paper board has no rules.

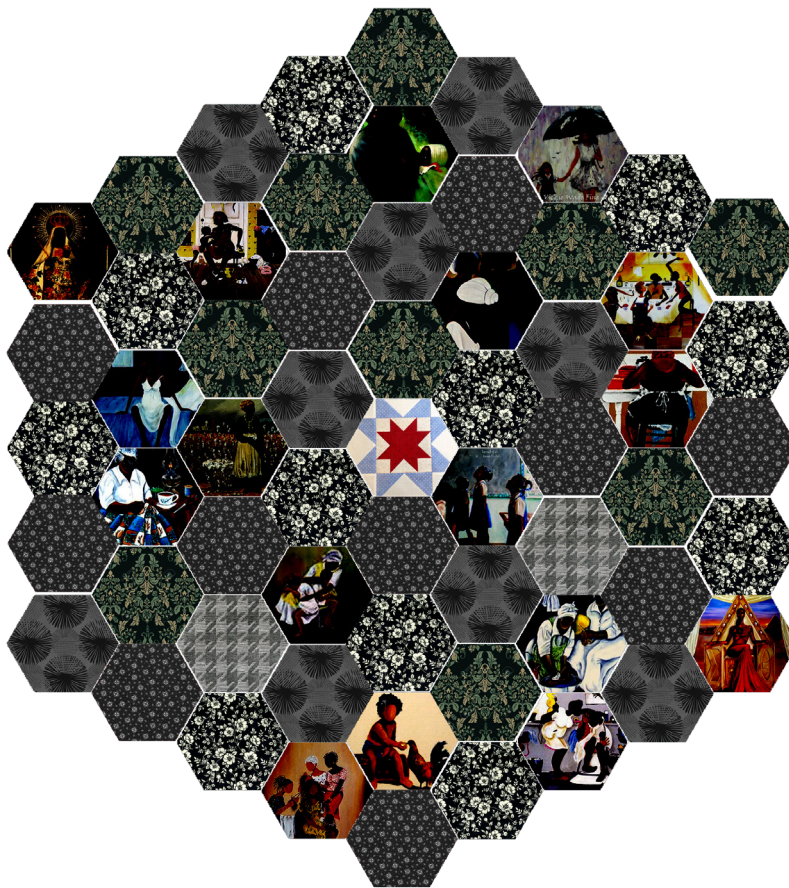
Move the die around it, flipping from face to face. Traverse the quilt until a story, integral to your freedom, is revealed.



Collaged paper game board

# HEXAGONAL STORY QUILT BOARD

*Oversized scale  
Shared stories  
Faces & figures  
Black womanhood*



Digital render of painted fabric game board



Sample of painted fabric game board with game pieces

8 feet tall, 8 feet wide

61 hexagons

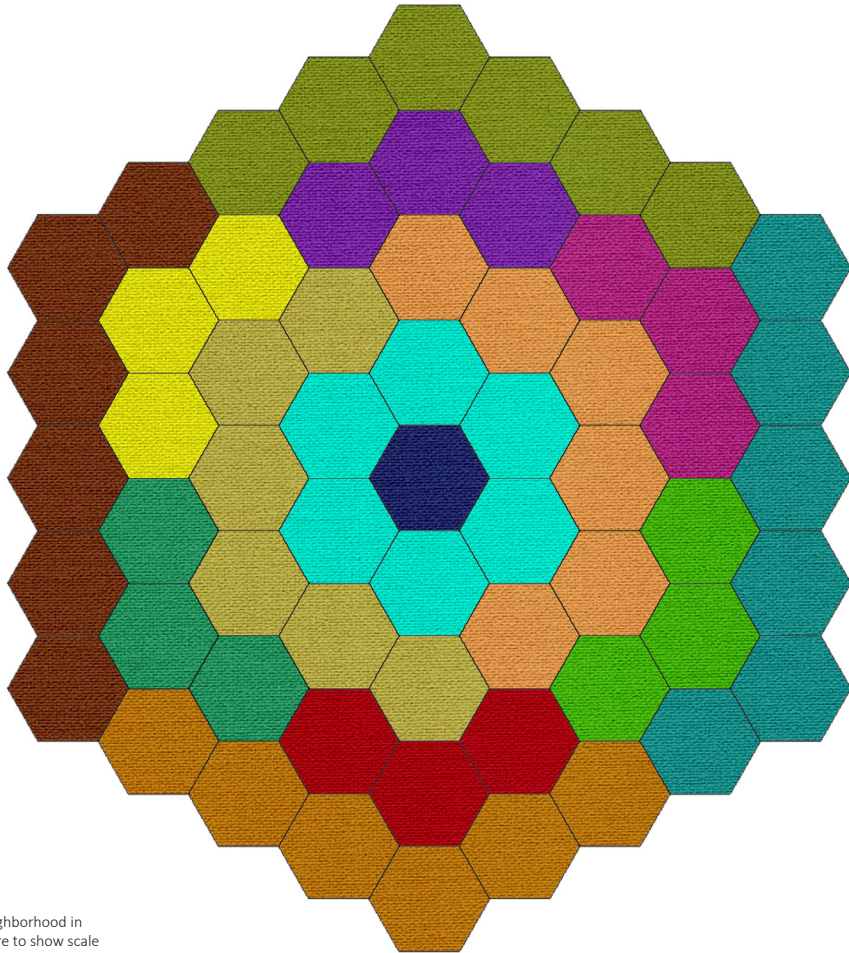
Stiff, blackened cotton

Beginning at the perimeter, players traverse a spiral to reach the center.

Beginning at the perimeter, players traverse each Neighborhood to reach The Future.



Key indicating each Neighborhood in the game board



Color coded map of each Neighborhood in the game board beside a figure to show scale



Stories of Blackness stitched together in black.

Stories of Blackness stitched together in gold.

Jump the broom.

Comfort the infant.

A memory preserved in each image and texture.

Stories to be folded and stored, passed on from daughter to daughter.

Sacred.

A soft power.

But Blackness is much more than the color of one's skin. Blackness is informed by melanin, but not defined by it.

Blackness is colorful. Blackness is vibrant. Blackness is dynamic.

Blackness is your voice, your tongue, your dress, your eyes, your nose, your lips.

Blackness is your hair and your food.

Blackness is your gap toothed smile.

Blackness is you and whatever you embody.



Sample of painted fabric game board (detail)

# QUOTED STORY CARDS

*Oversized scale  
Shared stories  
Vibrancy & color  
Black womanhood*



*The soaking of collard greens.*

*The use of heat protection.*

*The feeling of a headache.*

*The taste of dryness.*

Individual moments that can combine to tell a full story.

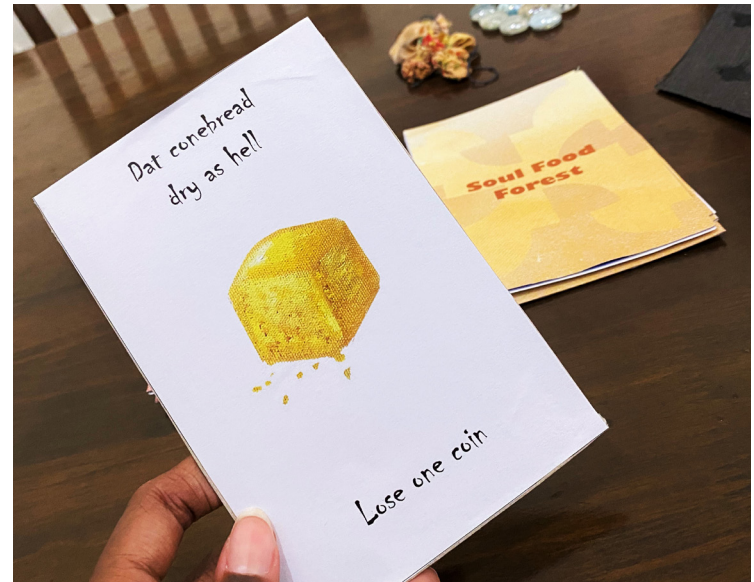
Parts of a whole experience.

Good experiences. Bad experiences.

Your experiences. My experiences.

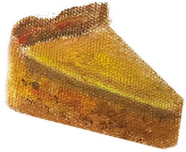
Represented through one object.

These cards, each the size of a photograph, highlight some of the shared experiences of African American women.



Game card from Soul Food Forest

Whipped cream gets  
on your nose



Gain the gift of  
laughter

Da sto' gotta  
sale on bundles



Gain the gift of  
hair

The chitlins' give you  
a headache



Lose one coin

The hot comb  
singes your ear



Discuss

You soak the greens  
a full day ahead



Gain the gift of  
time

Your hot comb breaks



Discuss

You remember to use  
heat protection



Gain one coin

You fry your ends



Lose one coin

Mama chooses to do  
your sister's hair first



Gain the gift of  
time

But their function in the game became too action-oriented.

*Too competitive.*

*Too capitalist.*

*Too individualistic.*

These cards dictated the story by telling players what they earned instead of listening to what they've experienced.

## GLASS GIFTS

*Vibrancy & color  
Black womanhood*



Hand-painted glass beads

**The Black households of my childhood  
had glass gems hiding in plain sight.**

*Cooling the wax of candles*

*Catching sun in the window.*

*Hiding inside the mancala board.*

*Speckling the front of the fridge.*

*Shining between the Christmas leaves.*

*Sitting inside of necklaces*

*Ornamenting the garden*

*I loved the way these beads looked to my young eyes.*

*Transparent, but colorful.*

*Liquid, but frozen in time.*

**I loved the way these beads felt in my hands.**

*Small and cool.*

*Smooth.*

*The sensation of my hand immersed  
in a netted bag of them was magical.*

**I loved the way these beads sounded to my ears.**

*Gentle clinks when they'd bump against each other.*

*Dull thuds when they'd drop on the carpet.*

*Echoed taps as they fell into the wood basins of the mancala board.*

These gems represent the time I spent playing mancala on the basement floor of my new grandparents' house. They represent the history that was transported alongside the enslaved.<sup>203</sup>

They represent the unique relationship I have with my senses.

They are catalysts for stories I can share about my experiences.

*The experiences of a Black woman.*

*These beads are parts of a whole.*

Representations of Blackness, representations of womanhood, representations of life. Made glass, paint, paper, thread, sand, glitter, and hair, these gems highlight the seemingly mundane as sacred.



**These gems are the hidden gatekeepers  
of stories, representing many things:**

*Dreams*

*Hair*

*Blood*

*Corn*

*Earth*

*Education*

*Fire*

*Luck*

*Paint*

*Wings*

*Skin*

*Tears*

*Time*

*These gems and the stories they  
guard are Gifts, and once you  
collect enough of them, you can  
piece together a full story.*

## BEAN GIFT BOX

*Oversized scale  
Black womanhood*



Foldable paper gift box with two compartments for beans

**It's 11:59pm on December 31st.**

Black-eyed peas and stewed tomato simmer on the stove top.

You ring in the New Year with a serving of good luck

In the African American tradition, black-eyed peas are said to symbolize prosperity because of the way they swell when cooked, or simply because they look like coins.

The beans are usually seasoned with pork, traditionally whatever cut was available, because pigs rooting forward symbolize forward mobility (and adds flavor). Side dishes are usually greens and/or corn bread, the former representing money and the latter representing gold. Some people even put coins in the pot or under each bowl to further cement wealth in the New Year.

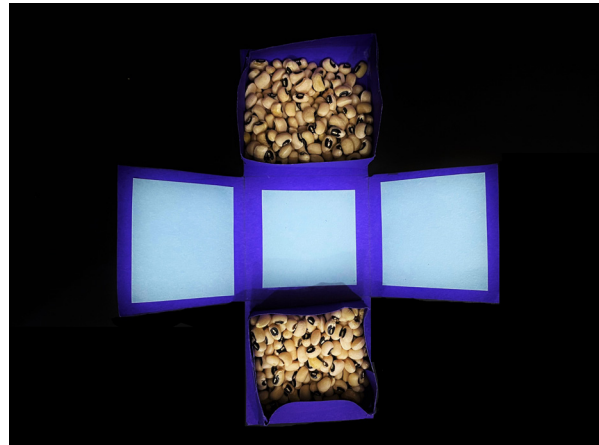
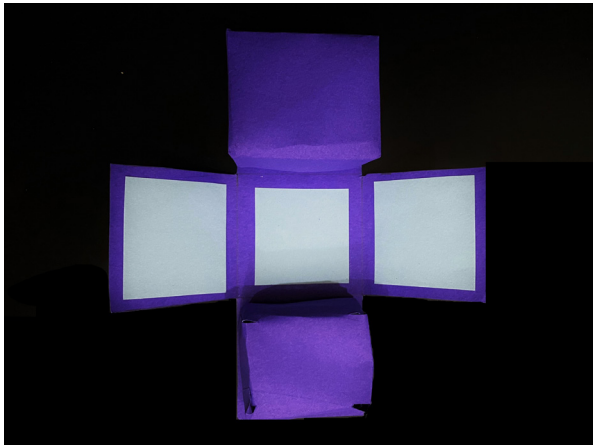
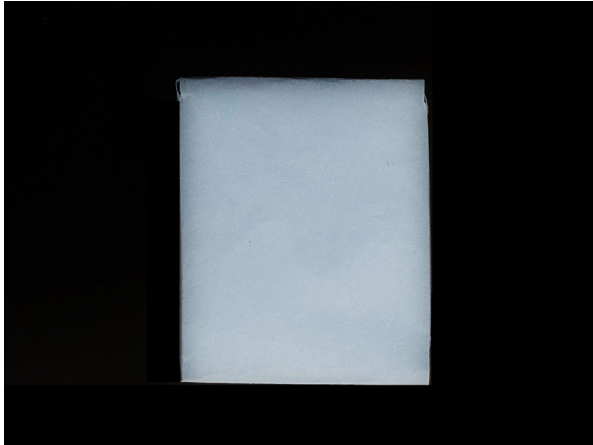
*Now it's 7pm on a Wednesday.*

*Leftover red beans sit in the fridge.*

*You boil some rice and within the hour you're enjoying dinner.*

Red beans and rice is another traditional dish in the African American community, hailing specifically from Louisiana. It doesn't necessarily represent good fortune, but it is considered a complete protein, a food source that provides all nine of the essential amino acids the human body cannot produce on its own.<sup>204</sup>

Upon learning this, I was reminded of a conversation I had with my sister in the basement of my aunt's house while we ate subpar ramen. She expressed, much more eloquently than I can write, that the offering of food is in itself a form of aid. In essence, *I may not have any money to offer, but I can damn sure feed ya.*



Step by step process to open the gift box

In the context of the African American experience, these bean dishes represent many concepts and histories.

They represent monetary wealth, or the lack thereof.

*They represent hope.*

*They represent full stomachs.*

*They represent energy.*

*They represent the blending of traditions in America's "melting pot."*

*They represent ancestral traditions.*

*They represent luck.*

*They represent love.*

*They represent comfort.*

*They represent care.*

These dishes, along with other bean dishes in Black Americans' collective soul food lexicon, represent what we as a community have historically wanted or needed. So imagine being given one small box that opens to reveal two mounds of one hundred beans. Imagine that each one of these beans has the power to grant you what you need or want.

**Each bean has the power to nourish you.**

And once you are nourished, imagine reboxing the package, storing it until needed next, knowing it will last indefinitely.<sup>205</sup>



Bean gift box (detail)

## THE ANCESTOR GUARDIAN

*Vibrancy & color  
Faces & figures  
Black womanhood*

She spent the first half of her life enslaved and the second half emancipated.

She is successful, for a woman in her position, though the wrinkles of her face and the wringing of her wrists reveal the hardships she endured to get to where she is as you stand before her.

She is a figure to be respected, a figure whose existence cannot be challenged. She does not have room for advocates of the devil.

She is a symbol of the transition into freedom.

She is more than a sepia photo of Black bodies at work

Backed by a heavy mist of gold, grounded somewhere between the earthly and the ethereal, her experiences are sacred.

She protects the experiences of her children and grandchild and great-grandchildren as you traverse her domain. She does not share her story freely; that honor must be earned. She watches you with tired, curious eyes as you offer her a Gift. She listens to your story and considers if she should share her own. Her decision determines your ability to move freely across the board.



Illustration of The Ancestor Guardian (detail)



The Ancestor Guardian with painted fabric game board



*"cry until you laugh. laugh until you cry. when we allow grief  
and joy to dance together in our lives, we become more free."<sup>233</sup>*





OUTCOMES

## OVERVIEW

The outcome of the research is the board game *Reclamancipation*. The goal of the game is to collect a Gift from all seventeen Neighborhoods in order to access the final Neighborhood: The Future. To receive a Gift, players must share stories by matching one of their Story Cards with the Story Card of another player.

### Nia Alexander Campbell

#### Reclamancipation is a Story of Beliefs, Resilience, and Transience

Reclamancipation is a board game that explores the concept of resilience and the power of community. The game is set in a world where the environment is constantly changing and players must work together to survive. The game is designed to be played by a group of people and is a great way to learn about the importance of community and the power of resilience.

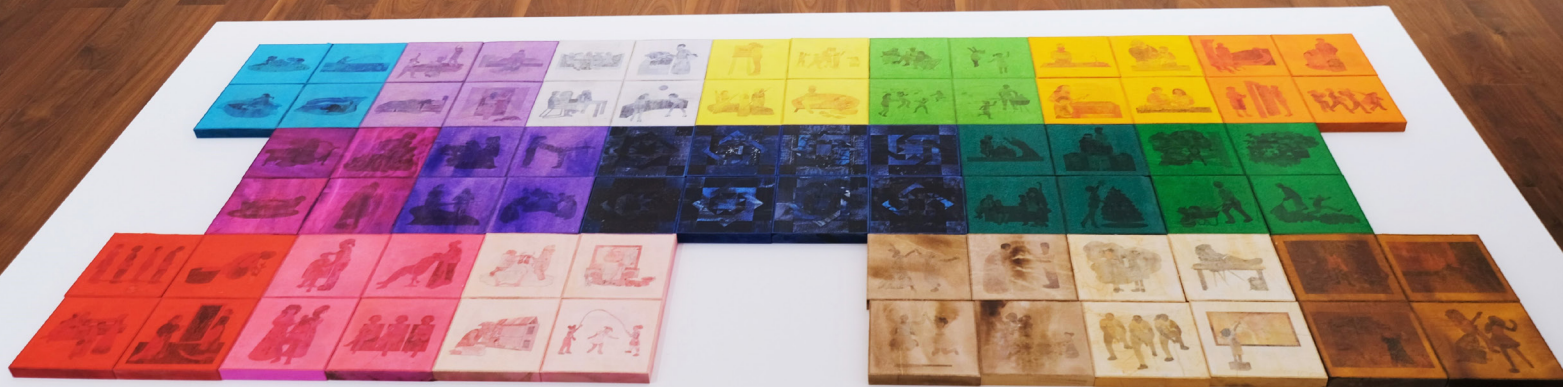
Reclamancipation is a board game that explores the concept of resilience and the power of community. The game is set in a world where the environment is constantly changing and players must work together to survive. The game is designed to be played by a group of people and is a great way to learn about the importance of community and the power of resilience.



## GAME BOARD TILES

Each tile is 6x6 inches long & wide and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch thick, making them large enough to cover a wide area when combined, but light enough to be handled with ease. This facilitates players' abilities to set up the board in any way of their choosing. Each tile is comparable to the scraps of fabric used to piece together quilts,

especially in the variety of compositions the tiles can be arranged. When laid out in its entirety, the board can easily exceed nine feet in width, symbolizing the right of Black women's voices and experiences to take up space in U.S. society.



This is further underscored by the use of wood, a material that is solid, weighty, and semi-permanent. In contrast to a fabric quilt, which risks disintegrating over the course of a few decades, the wood tiles could last for thousands of years,<sup>206</sup> preserving the experiences of Black women. In total, there are 76 wood tiles that can be divided into eighteen Neighborhoods.

**The neighborhoods are:**

<i>The Queendom</i>	<i>Downtown</i>
<i>Girlhood</i>	<i>The Stage</i>
<i>The Backyard</i>	<i>The Graveyard</i>
<i>The Sanctuary</i>	<i>The Coast</i>
<i>The Kitchen</i>	<i>Sunday Mourning</i>
<i>Holiday</i>	<i>Soul</i>
<i>The Salon</i>	<i>The Schoolhouse</i>
<i>The Garden</i>	<i>The Doorway</i>
<i>Union</i>	<i>The Future</i>

Each Neighborhood, aside from the Future, is composed of four collaged maple wood squares. The imagery on these squares depict Black women engaging in an activity pertaining to the Neighborhood’s theme, each one color coded to indicate what Neighborhood the image belongs to.

The colors of each Neighborhood were chosen by considering objects associated with said Neighborhood. For example, the shade of pink used in The Salon was sampled from flexirods and sponge rollers, objects pertaining to Black hair care that interviewees were asked about. Other colors were informed by visual or historical relevance to the Neighborhood, like the use of a dry grass green to define The Backyard, or the use of a rich violet – a color historically associated with royalty – to describe The Queendom.

Pink Carnation #eea5a7	Light Lavender #b7a8c9	Florida Orange #ffaa00	Fern Green #4f7942	Almond Latte #d6c0a4	Spring Grass #c5c053
Dark Emerald #003818	Beasty Brown #663300	Fervent Brass #bd8f40	Harbour City #cdd6df	Strawberry #fc5a8d	Pacific Blue #1ca9c9
Dark Pink-red #a50013	Persimmon #ec5800	Cyber Grape #58427c	*Divine Purple #5a005a <small>*goes by many names</small>	*Bad Moon Yellow #fff700 <small>*identical to Lemon Yellow</small>	Ensign Blue #161c29

Reclamancipation color palette

This color palette served as a guide when creating the textures that would be used in the final imagery. These handmade texture collages were informed by both their designated color palette and the themes of the Neighborhood they correspond to. For example, wood papers and linear brush strokes were used in creating textures for The Stage, comparable to the woodfloors of theater stages, paint brush handles, and pencils. The textures of The Schoolhouse includes childlike markings, streaks like an erased chalkboard, and cursive alphabets written on notebook paper, all intertwined with the color of brass school bells. And the textures of The Graveyard were made using techniques to make the paint bleed, sharp aggressive angles, and materials like cotton and metal.

The figurative imagery and the graphic pattern used on the eight tiles of The Future were then created digitally. Notably, the graphic of The Future tiles is based on the eight-point North Star quilt pattern of Freedom Quilts. These images were then transferred onto the wood and layered with additional paint, stains, and paper, all representing the uniqueness of Black women's voices and the retelling of stories. The use of practical and digital collage throughout the process underscores the idea that Black women are composed of many layered and nuanced experiences.







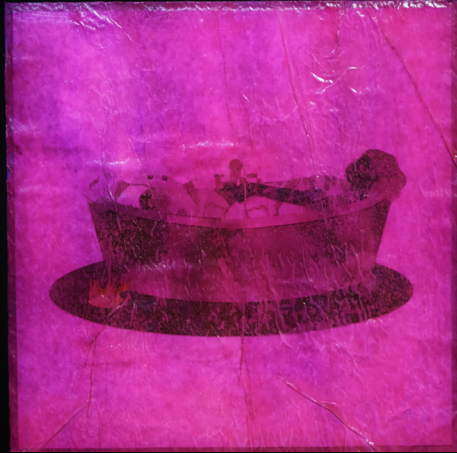
Texture painting for  
The Graveyard



Texture painting  
for The Stage

# THE QUEENDOM

*Black women are allowed to be confident.  
Black women are allowed to take breaks.  
Black women are deserving of respect.*



# GIRLSHOOD

*Black women were once girls.  
Childhood is sacred.  
There is still a child in all of us.*



THE BACKYARD

*Chill.  
Kick back.  
Relax.*



# THE SANCTUARY

*Recharge.  
Play.  
A safe space.*



# THE KITCHEN

*Memories of smell.  
Memories of mischief.  
Memories of love.*



HOLIDAY

*Joy!*  
*Reunion.*  
*Comfort.*





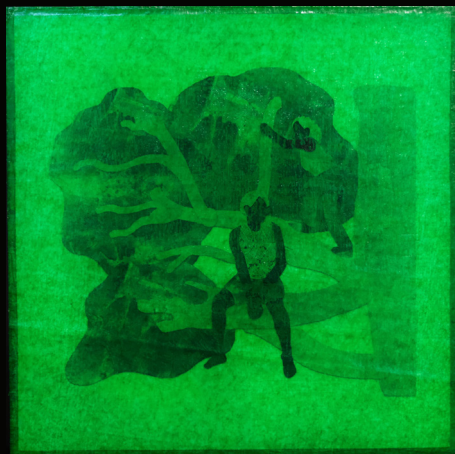
## THE SALON

*Have you heard?  
You look so pretty.  
The scent sticks.*



# THE GARDEN

*The sun on my skin.  
Ladybugs and bees.  
Watch us grow.*



# UNION

*My mom is my best friend.  
My sisters need not be blood kin.  
My daughter is my joy.*



DOWNTOWN

*Winning.  
Working.  
Getting together.*



# THE STAGE

*Express yourself.  
Speak your truth.  
Enjoy the show.*



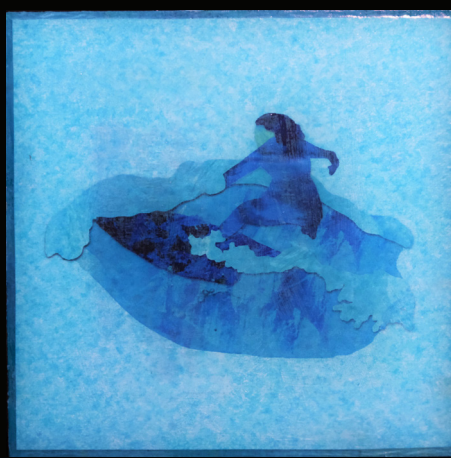
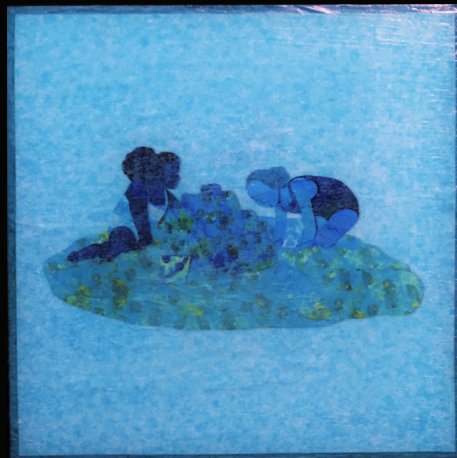
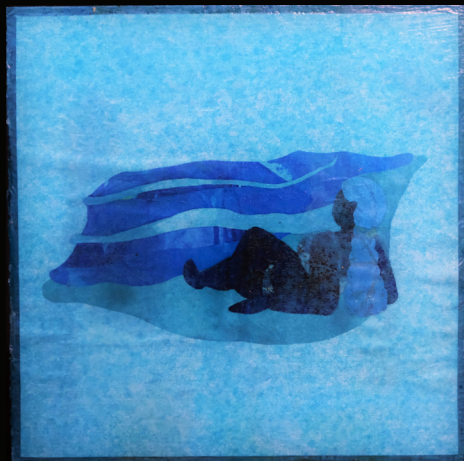
THE GRAVEYARD

*Panic.*  
*Cruelty.*  
*No.*



# THE COAST

*Collect the shells.  
Feel the breeze.  
Exhale.*



# SUNDAY MOURNING

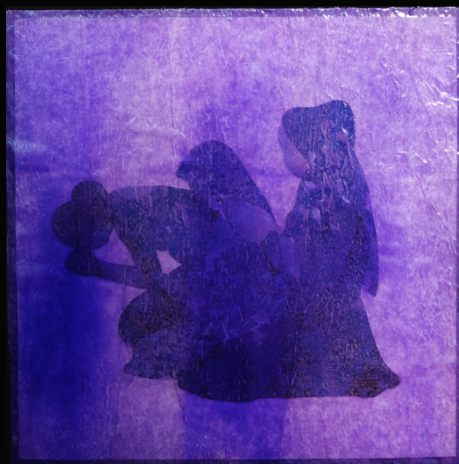
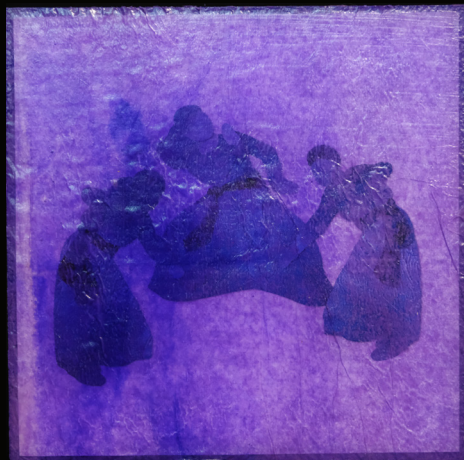
*Cry to release.  
Allow peace.  
There is no pain without love.*





SOUL

*Feel the energy.  
Feel your thoughts.  
Move your body.*



# THE SCHOOLHOUSE

*My best friend.  
My mentor.  
My life is changed forever.*

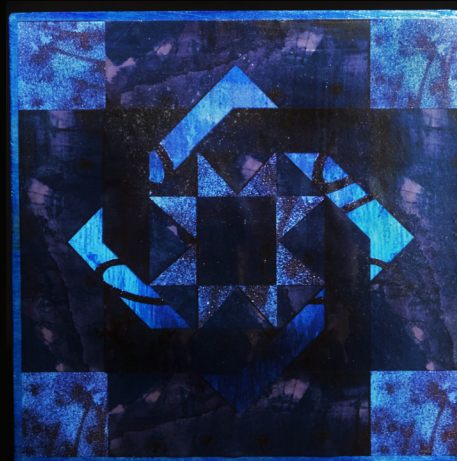
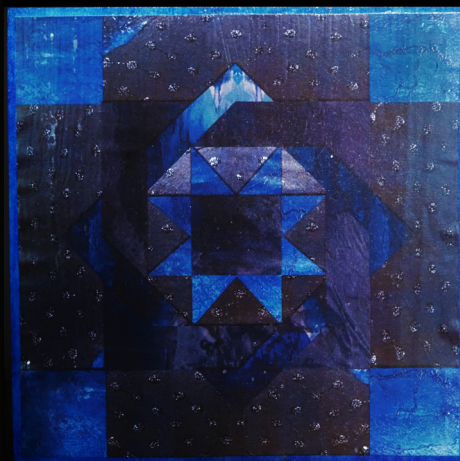
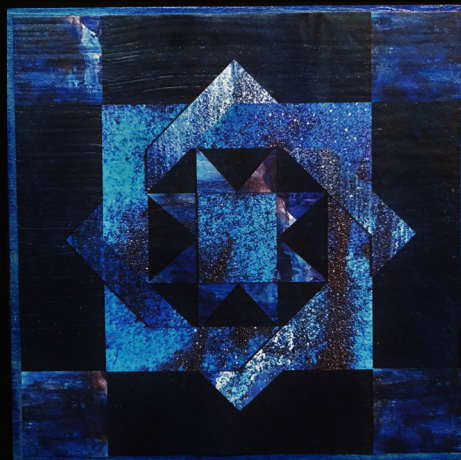


# THE DOORWAY

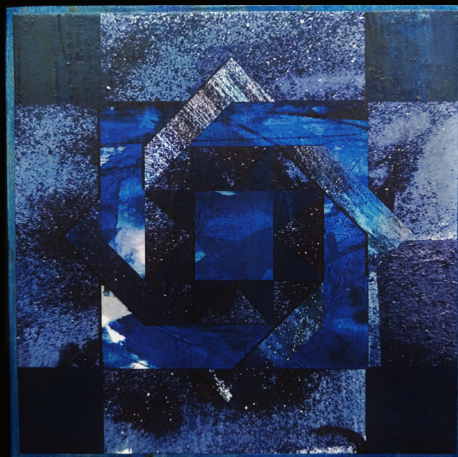
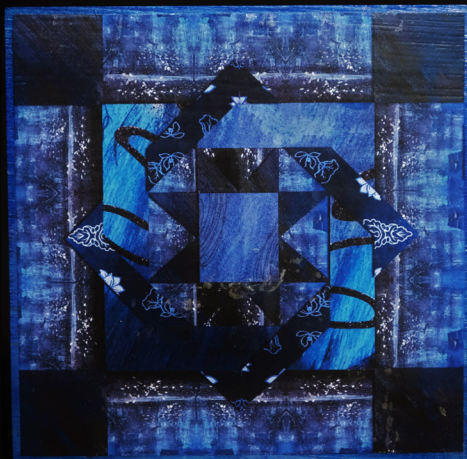
*We will make a better tomorrow.  
We will fight.  
Every generation will be better off than the last.*



THE FUTURE



*Your future.  
My future.  
Our future.*



## PLAYER TOKENS

At the beginning of the game, each player chooses a token to represent them as they move across the board. These tokens, carved from maple wood, vary slightly in size and feature point, 6-point, 8-point, and 9-point stars.

The star shape, inspired by the North Star motif used in Freedom Quilts, represents the idea of freedom as both individuals and a group. Each piece is dyed with two colors featured in the game board, a tribute to the way every Black woman's identity is defined by intertwining experiences.





## STORY CARDS

Each Neighborhood, not including The Future, includes a deck of twenty Story Cards. The backs of the cards feature variations of the North Star pattern mixed with the textures and colors of the Neighborhood they belong to. The front of the cards feature single nouns, verbs, and adjectives associated with their Neighborhood, though not restricted by it; many words have relevance in other Neighborhoods, allowing for a fluid and diverse sparking of stories.

### Examples of these words are:

dance	read	tear	foil	book	apple
bag	line	wave	relax	salt	pick
band	pants	blood	listen	record	cape

The words on the cards are all written in lowercase to underscore the idea of equality; no one letter has more power than another through capitalization. Many of these words have double meanings, varying parts of speech, or are heteronyms. For example, the words *tear* and *read* can be pronounced in the different ways that change the meaning while still being spelled the same. Words like *foil*, *record*, and *bag* function as both nouns and verbs. The word *wave* could refer to ocean waves, sound waves, finger waves, or the waving of a hand. Similarly, *band* could refer to rubber bands, hair bands, music bands, striped bands, or wedding bands.

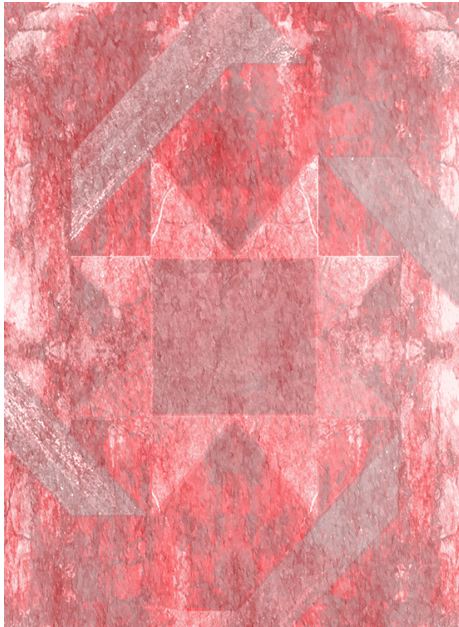
Any interpretation of these words on the part of the player is correct as long as it sparks a story when matched to another card. There is at minimum a possibility for 115,600 stories to be triggered by the Story Cards.







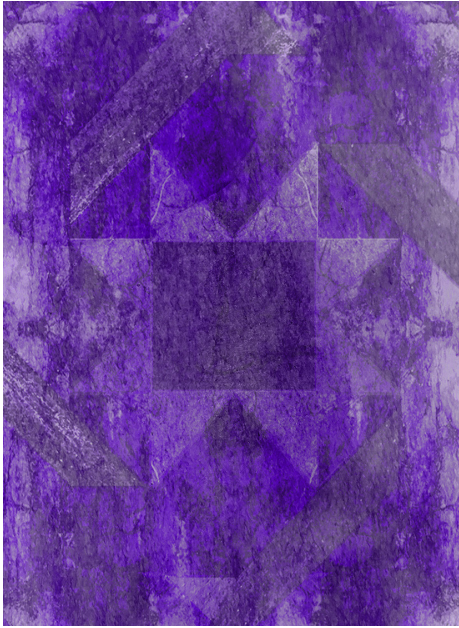
Pattern for The Queendom



Pattern for Girlshood



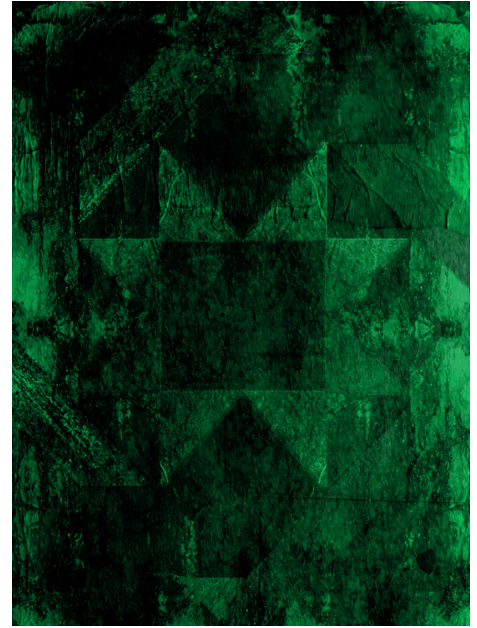
Pattern for The Backyard



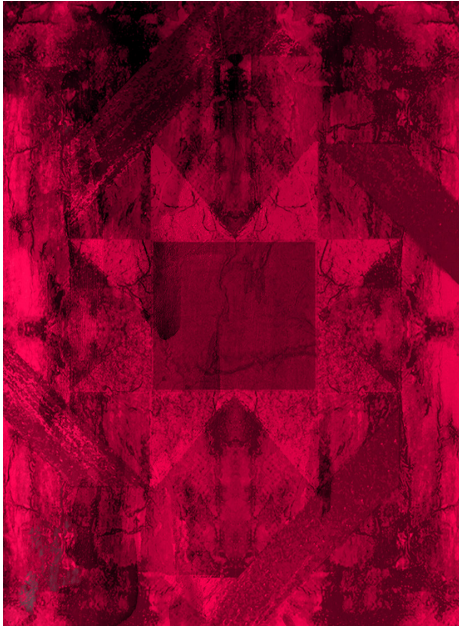
Pattern for The Sanctuary



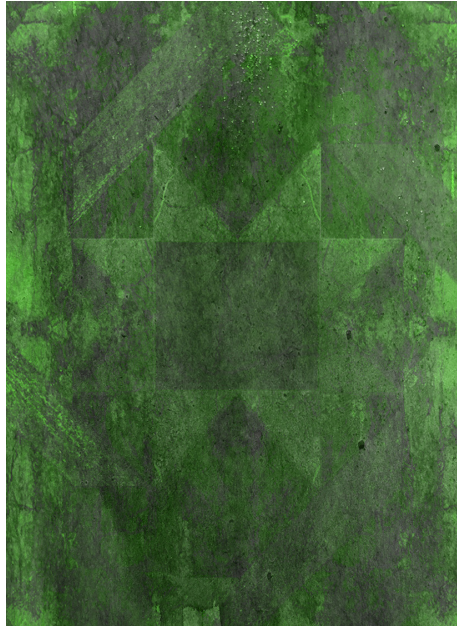
Pattern for The Kitchen



Pattern for Holiday



Pattern for The Salon



Pattern for The Garden



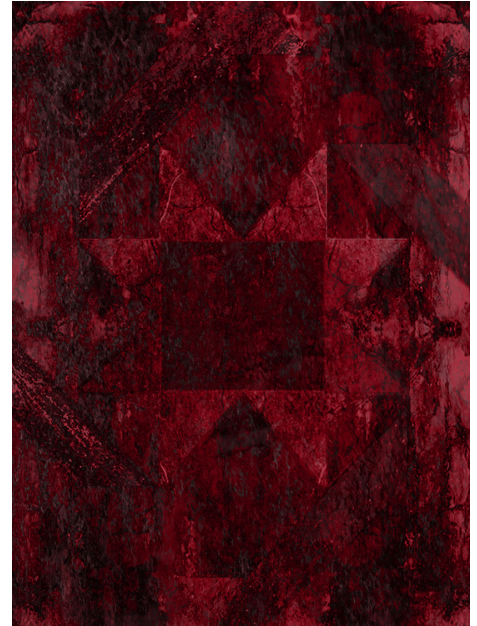
Pattern for Union



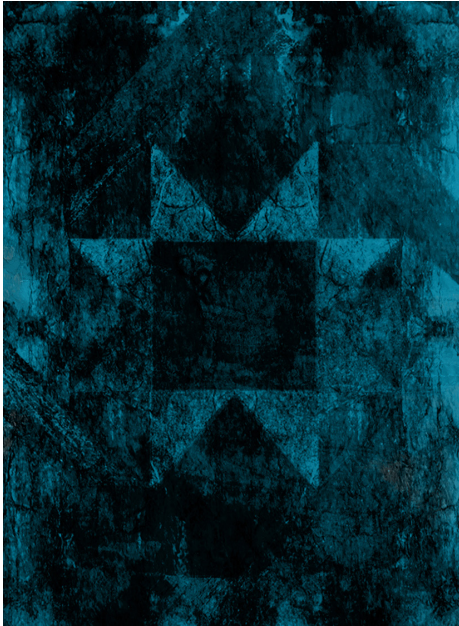
Pattern for Downtown



Pattern for The Stage



Pattern for The Graveyard



Pattern for The Coast



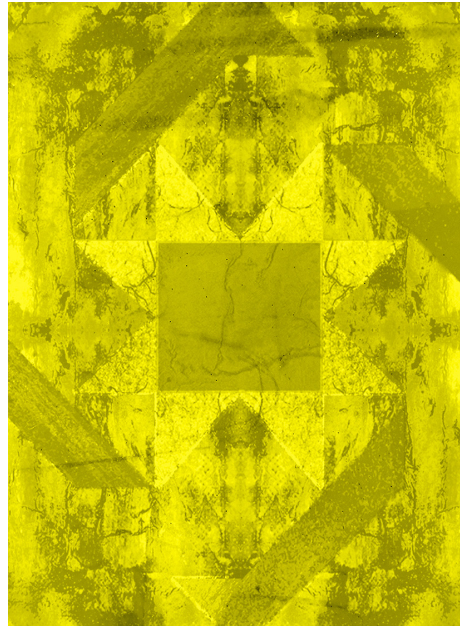
Pattern for Sunday Mourning



Pattern for Soul



Pattern for The Schoolhouse



Pattern for The Doorway

## GIFTS

The Gifts are made from a mix of black-eyed peas, red kidney beans, lima beans, and butter beans dyed to match the colors of the Neighborhood they represent. They are stored in miniature burlap sacks with drawstrings that indicate what Neighborhood they belong to. The choice to use this material is linked Black women's historical relationship with labor and adaptability.

African American women were often responsible for agricultural labor during enslavement, their harvestables sometimes stored in large burlap sacks. Further, burlap and rough cottons were either given to slaves to make clothing out of or were the only affordable fabrics for low-income Black families during Reconstruction and into the Great Depression.<sup>207,208,209</sup>



At the end of the game, the players who reach The Future place their Gifts into a final bag with a black string. The act of using beans to represent the exchange of stories and pursuit of The Future signifies beans' ability to nourish someone both figuratively and literally. This nourishment, in its varying interpretations, can be viewed as a gift, especially in the context of radical joy. These sacks, once a representation of labor and hardship, now store vibrant objects devoted to the telling of Black women's stories.



Fig. 29 Woman pouring winning Gifts into final bag by Paulo Fugen











































## GUARDIANS

Each Neighborhood has a Guardian to serve as the protector of that Neighborhood and the entity who gives each player their Gifts. The Guardians were drawn by hand then finished digitally using the same color palette and texture collages as the imagery

featured in their respective Neighborhoods. Each figure is backed by a variation of the final Guardian, The Portal, which features the North Star motif also present in the Story Cards.





*The 1-Day-Queen*  
Guardian of  
The Queendom



*Babygirl*  
Guardian of Girlhood



*The Explorer*  
Guardian of  
The Backyard



*Amani*  
Guardian of  
The Sanctuary



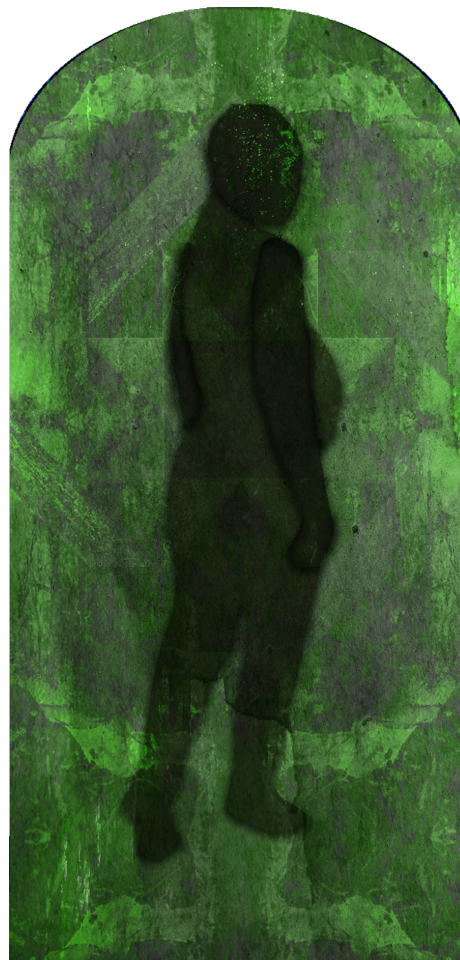
*Elderberry*  
Guardian of The Kitchen



*Gleam*  
Guardian of Holiday



*The Weaver*  
Guardian of The Salon



*Sprout*  
Guardian of The Garden



*Unity*  
Guardian of Union



*Bee*  
Guardian of Downtown





*Presence*  
Guardian of The Stage



*Echo*  
Guardian of  
The Graveyard



*Anemone*  
Guardian of The Coast



*The Broken Heart*  
Guardian of  
Sunday Mourning



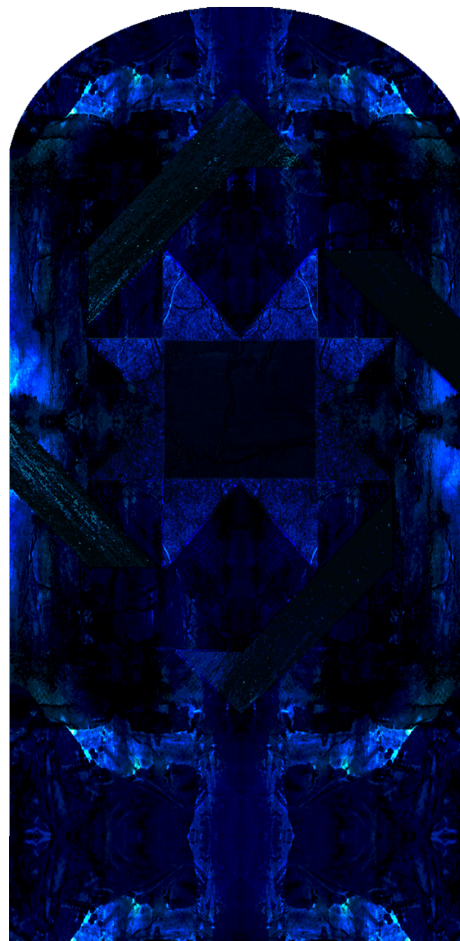
*Maya*  
Guardian of Soul



*Ray*  
Guardian of  
The Schoolhouse



*The Warrior*  
Guardian of  
The Doorway



*The Portal*  
Guardian of The Future



## TAKEAWAYS

Stickers and cards featuring imagery of the Guardians, Neighborhood illustrations, and the patterned North Star motif were designed as mementos for the public. Also offered was a booklet with instructions on how to play *Reclamancipation* and a short story inspired by it.

The story follows the journey of You and Your Friend who suddenly find themselves in a strange land after a peaceful protest becomes violent. The people of this land explain that to get back home, the two of you must head north, but getting there proves to be full of unexpected occurrences. You and Your Friend ultimately visit each Neighborhood, meeting their respective Guardians and learning about yourselves as you traverse the unfamiliar environment. The end of your adventure is a surprise to you both, however, and readers are invited to write what happens as the two protagonists enter The Future.

The narrative acknowledges themes of joy, anxiety, superwoman syndrome, self-compassion, police brutality, agency, femininity, personal growth, enslavement, memory, relationships, and other experiences drawn from the research and the stories *Reclamancipation* has the potential to spark. In one way or another, the audience is encouraged to continue the story of *Reclamancipation*, whether that be through finishing the narrative in the booklet, writing a note on a card, or sharing a sticker with someone. The takeaways give power to the public, allowing them to safely and playfully engage with the work both inside and outside the gallery space.

*“When we share our stories and seek to unshroud the lives of [Black] women who have come before us, the telling empowers us all.”<sup>269</sup>*





*"I wholeheartedly believe that Black joy is an act of resistance because we live in a world that thrives off of Black pain or exploitation. It's something that as Black folks, we need to find a way to reclaim. It's not something that will ever be given freely to us."<sup>268</sup>*





# CONCLUSIONS

*HOW DOES A BOARD GAME SOLVE THE PROBLEM?*

***Reclamancipation functions as a learning tool.***

*A tool to teach about the experience of African American women.*

*A tool to help remove internalized oppression.*

*A tool to remind us that we need not relive our trauma to educate an oppressor.*

*A tool to decolonize our minds and our actions.*

The game relies on communication in a safe, playful space as means of acknowledging both the hardships in life and the things worth celebrating. It offers a window into the experiences of those outside one's community and inside, creating bridges of knowledge and understanding that allow us all to learn about each others' multidimensionality.

Remember, the goal of every player is to get to The Future through telling stories. The path to The Future, the path to freedom, is reliant upon understanding people in a multidimensional way.

*Your success does not harm me.*

*Your freedom does not harm me.*

*Indeed, your freedom helps me.*

*Your freedom teaches me.*

*Your freedom has the potential to bring us both to tears.*

*Your freedom has the potential to bring us both joy.*

*Our freedom has incredible power.*

*Through the sharing of stories, everybody wins.*

cinnamon





*Reading all these texts really got me to reflect on myself and that's effing awesome.*

*All hair is wash-n-go hair.*

*It's okay to be 'girly'*

*We are still trying to heal from old wounds in the community while dealing with new ones everyday.<sup>234</sup> We are also still dealing with the seeds of oppression planted within us decades and centuries before we were a twinkle in anyone's eye.*

*There's a little bit of red in The Garden, just like The Graveyard. Did the ancestors do that? Labor by force vs. labor by choice. Work vs. hobby. Pain vs. pleasure.*

*Hilarious, my cravings for sweet potato pie led me down a thesis path.*

*I can't believe that random doodle I drew on expensive paper sparked my entire method for crafting imagery.*

*Damn, all my reference photos are of white women.*

*Woman baking, sleeping, playing. Confident woman. Girls sleepover.*

*They're all white. They're all thin.*

## **REFLECTIONS: THE EMOTIONAL HIGHS AND LOWS OF UNCOVERING THIS STORY**

*I type 'woman on her knees' and all I get is sex & submission.*

*What about prayer?*

*Misogynistic bull—*

*Bloody algorithm.<sup>235</sup>*

*Image search 'warrior women' and it's all big breasts and chainmail bikinis.*

*Literally the topic of my thesis is impeding me from making my thesis.*

*I can't even research imagery to get inspired without being painfully reminded that (western) society sees me as an object. My Blackness is a kink. My womanhood is owned. My very existence has been colonized and it is reflected through invisibility or objectification.*

*"if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunch into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."<sup>236</sup>*

*I have every right to challenge an answer that doesn't satisfy me.*

*The decolonization of self.*

## BLINDSIDED

When I think back on this project, I realize it had multiple starting points. Starting points for the imagery, starting points for the concept, starting points for the techniques, starting points for everything. One of these starting points was an exchange I had over Instagram with complete strangers during the summer of 2020.

You see, there was a Black-owned organization I followed on Instagram that reposted a statement said by another Black American man. It read, “right or wrong, I stand with my kind.” I tried to ignore it, but the post didn’t sit right with me, so I decided to check the comments. I saw that I wasn’t alone, as there were many women in the comment section expressing their disagreement with the statement. They sighted issues of abuse toward Black women and girls within the Black community, referencing high profile cases and statistics about this violence.

*The organization didn’t respond to any of these comments.*

But then I thought to myself, *Nah, maybe we are reading the sentence two different ways.* Perhaps by posting the statement, the organization was trying to say, ‘whether I am perceived as right or wrong, I will stand with my community’ instead of ‘whether my community is right or wrong, I will stand with them.’

The first interpretation leans a bit more towards the activism side of things than the second interpretation, which reads as irredeemably problematic and, frankly, is the language of the oppressor.

I held onto this hope and decided to message the organization, just to clarify for my own peace of mind. I was courteous in my message, clear and curious, and within a day I received a response. In short, their response was a combination of irrelevant commentary, a vague assertion that they believed the latter interpretation of that post, and an expression of hope that I would continue to follow them.

*I blocked them.*

It hurt me to see Black men dismiss the real issues of Black women within our community. It hurt to feel as though they hadn’t actually heard what I was asking of them. It hurt to see them ignore the comments of their other Black women followers. It hurt that they expected me to continue supporting them after having just implied that I – Black women – don’t matter, even if the harm is coming from within the community.

**I felt blindsided.**

*And I was surprised to have felt so surprised.*

It was at this moment that I began to change the direction of my thesis topic. Whereas before it was about the experiences of Black Americans, it was now about the experiences of Black American women.

*“Black women by sexual predators like Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, and Russell Simmons. Weighing a Black woman’s trauma against her abuser’s triumphs as a successful Black man, friends, family, and the community at large might question why a Black woman had to take down an otherwise ‘good Black man.’ The expectation is that, no matter what happens to a Black woman, she’ll support a Black man, even if he causes her suffering. Wilson calls this the ‘ride or die model.’ She explains, ‘There are some real gendered problems with the ride-or-die model that always relied on Black women repressing, absorbing, and being the vestibules of suffering without getting the support that we need.’”<sup>210</sup>*





## BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS

A quote came across my path via a text from my grandmother. I don't know where the quote originally comes from; I tried to find its original origin with little success. But its point still stands, no?

Do we really need an academic citation to certify this statement is truthful? Do we need to know the name of its creator to validate its message?

This statement reminded me of an experience I had while cutting samples of my game board tiles. The sensation of guiding the wood through the saw blades was profoundly similar to using my sewing machine. Moving the wood slowly between the blade, following the line I drew.

Feeling the machine whir on and off in a rhythm, like putting pressure on a foot pedal. Listening for the smallest hiccups in sound to let me know something is amiss. I know the sound that happens when my needle is about to break, when the bobbin gets tangled. I felt my ear listening to the saw in the exact same way.

I found this moment unexpectedly poetic. There I was, making a board game inspired by African American women's quilting traditions, and the experience of it felt parallel to working with a sewing machine.

I wondered if the spirits of ancestors were bridging this connection for me. I wondered if they believed in what I was doing. These women would have had to do these kinds of physical labor without choice. They would have had to do it because they were owned or out of necessity, a means of survival. But I had the freedom to do this physical labor by choice and to use the fruits of my labor to promote the emancipation of society.

### **The emancipation of self.**

*The work of my foremothers allowed me the privilege I was experiencing in that moment.*

*“Our hopes, dreams and future aspirations have been sacrificed with the tears of our ancestors to pave a way for the future. Blood, sweat, and tears have paved the way.”*



## THEIR STORIES ARE MY STORIES

In developing this project, I realized rather early on how uncomfortable I was speaking exclusively in the third person. I felt weird referring to the African American women's community as "they," when in my mind I knew it was "we."

### **I am a part of that community.**

While the language of Western academia is traditional written in the third person, my use of that language felt dishonest when discussing the topic.

It felt unnatural.

It felt soulless.

It felt like I was distancing myself from my own community, implying they were some kind of "other."

It felt like I was objectifying them.

It felt like I was establishing a hierarchy.

It felt like I was establishing that I was in some way higher or better than the women in my own community just because I was making creative work about them.

Us.

But the thing is, how do you take the wetness out of water? How do you take the heat out of the sun?

This is how I felt about this process.

I am a part of it, it is a part of me.

This feeling was furthered as I began interviewing other Black women. I saw similarities that are in some ways hard to put into words.

So, I put them into pictures.

*They are in the Guardians, as am I.*

*They are in the board tiles, as am I.*

*Their words are in the Story Cards, as are mine.*

*Their evolution is in the narrative, as is mine.*

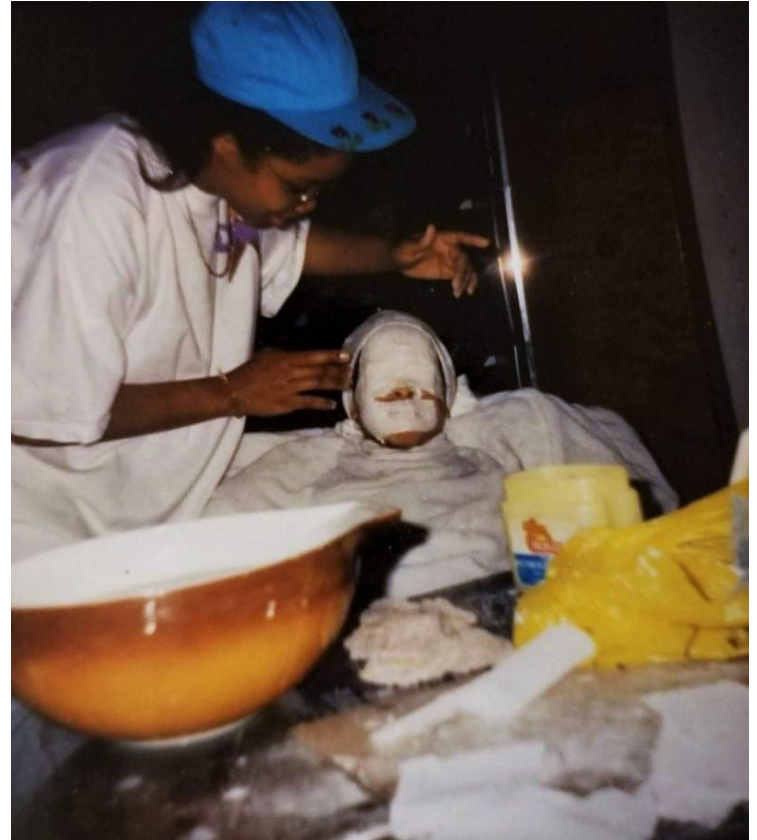
*One in the same.*

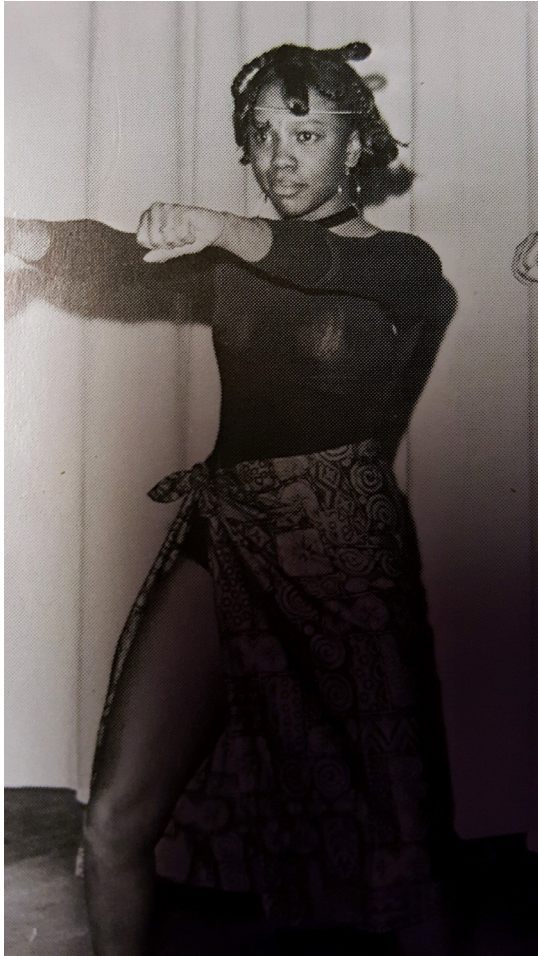
*In many ways, their memories are my memories.*

**Their stories are my stories.**





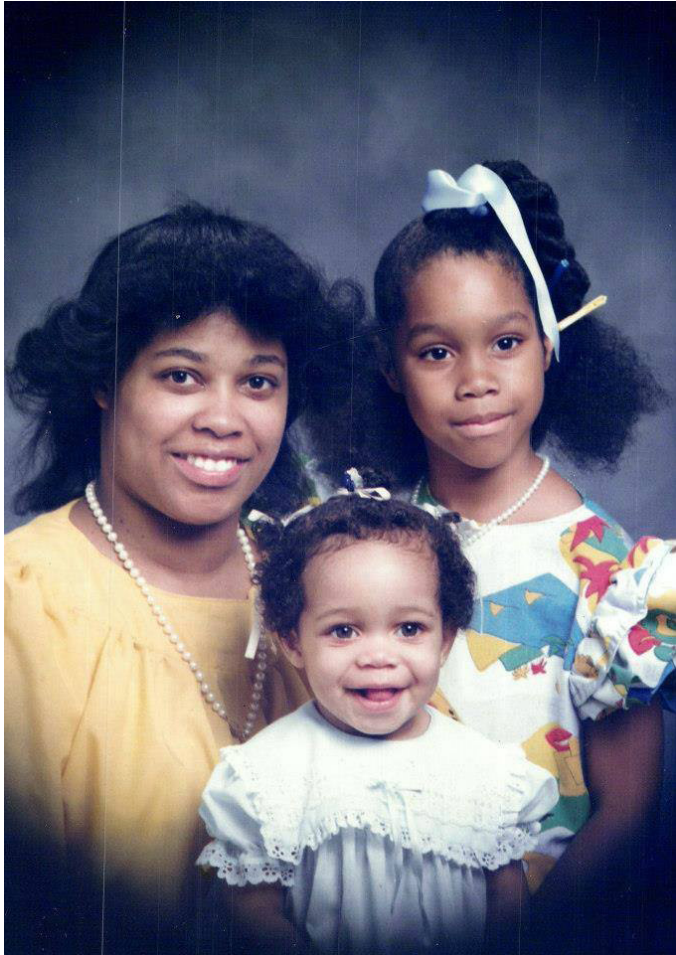




















## SISTER GAMES?

What if *Reclamancipation* was just one game in a larger collection? What if there was a partnering game about the experiences of African American men? What if there were partnering games that focused on other marginalized communities in the U.S. and abroad? In either of these scenarios, I would need a co-creator of those communities to help with “research.” I put research in quotation marks because it wouldn’t simply be them reading texts and delivering me information to then apply to a game in the same format. Instead, their role would be to engage with their communities and guide me through the creation process in a way that best reflects their community’s collective voice.

## A FILM?

As soon as *Reclamancipation* began to take shape, multiple people began comparing it to a film. I instantly loved this idea and would be thrilled to pursue it, be it live action, animation, or a mixture of the two. When I imagine *Reclamancipation* in filmed form, I see the energy, color, and Blackness of *The Wiz*. I see the color palettes and soft worldbuilding of *No Man’s Sky*. I see the structure of *A Christmas Carol* and some of the tenseness of *The Grudge*. I also see a film that is rated R.

There are aspects of *Reclamancipation’s* narrative that are terrifying, liberating, and joyful. All these experiences should be depicted in their intended manner, whether that include blood, nudity, or the kind of emotional roller coaster that adults are generally prepared to handle. There move or minimize the pains and joys of *Reclamancipation* would be to muffle the voices of the community this project is devoted to.





## THERAPY TOOL?

*Reclamancipation* is founded upon establishing a safe space for people who are both willing to speak and ready to listen. I wonder if it could be used as a tool in group therapy, especially for discussing issues pertaining to trauma in the Black community.

The game has the ability to cushion trauma in between moments of laughter and encourages the right for people to share only what stories they are comfortable sharing when they are comfortable sharing them. This could allow patients a sense of ease, minimizing the pressure of sharing – or not sharing – that comes with the complexities of processing trauma. Instead of a stoic dialogue between doctor and patient(s), the experience of therapy through use of the game could be more akin to chatting with a group of friends, sharing stories around a central point.

This is especially significant when acknowledging the oppressive relationship many Black Americans have with both mental health services and acknowledgement of mental health problems in general. This game could help remedy that problem by allowing the counselor to engage with the patient in a way that reduces the doctor-patient hierarchy and teaching counselors outside the Black women's community what it is like to experience life as an African American woman.

## A TOOL FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA?

My great-grandmother is full of stories. Sometimes she shares bits and pieces of them at random, and sometimes she is silent, keeping those memories tucked away in her mind somewhere.

I wonder if a game like *Reclamancipation* could be used as a healthy trigger for exercising the brain and socializing. I wonder if a game like this would allow people with dementia or Alzheimer's to feel good. I wonder if it would make them feel free.

My great-grandmother enjoys tracing patterns on fabric with her finger. I wonder if she would enjoy tracing over the textures of the board game tiles or the wood grain. I wonder if it would help with motor skills.

*I wonder if the simplified silhouette figures would accommodate for her diminished eyesight and allow her to still recognize what was happening in the scene.*

*I wonder if she would enjoy the Guardians and see them as little paper dolls.*

*I wonder if she would enjoy the varying weights and textures of the bean bags, the wood, the slick cards, the paper figures.*

*I wonder if she would like the little painted stars, if she would tuck them away for safekeeping, and I wonder if that would make her feel good.*

After all, words, colors, textures, sounds, and images all have the potential to trigger memories, and each of these elements are present in *Reclamancipation*. These elements could even be emphasized through taking advantage of the tactility of fabric or depicting the words in different typefaces or handwriting.

Could the game be a way for her to play with the youngest generations in the family, even if the game isn't played by the rules? Could it offer her caretakers a bit of a break to recharge, knowing that even the smallest pieces are nontoxic and safe to handle?

*Could it give enjoyment, laughter, smiles, or freedom to everyone involved?*







## I DENY YOU ME

When I was in high school, I drew a picture of my 5-year-old brother playing with rainbow bubbles. In response, my art teacher told me it was “too sweet” and encouraged me to do more of what I had been doing before.

The drawings of my anxiety attacks. My visual explorations into police brutality.

### **These images were better because they were “edgy.”**

At the time, I accepted this. At the time, this made sense. So, I stopped drawing pictures of little Black boys playing with bubbles. And when I graduated, and expressed my then lack of interest in art, I blamed it all on myself; I thought I had wasted time pursuing something I didn’t actually have a passion for. This belief stuck with me for years, even as I attempted to succeed in art school. Further still, whenever I made a painting about a fun princess adventure or some gentle religious scenes, people wouldn’t engage. However, images of social anxiety and abstracted Black bodies on display almost always received attention.

It wasn’t until recently that I realized how screwed up this situation was. It wasn’t until recently that I questioned why my Black pain was seemingly the only part of my art practice that was marketable.

### **“Edgy” for whom?**

### **“Edgy” or exploitative?**

I was overwhelmed with the feeling of being consumed by the masses. Devoured because the pain of my people was trending.

Many, many months ago, I changed the focus of my thesis from Black trauma to Black joy. And to express this change, I wrote the line “I deny you me” as the end of a poetic self reflection. I created a thesis that brought me joy. I created a thesis that brought joy to others in my community.

### **Edginess be damned.**

I shouldn't have to deny myself joy for you to understand the pain I am experiencing, the pain I have experienced, and the pain my ancestors experienced. Pain that is often inflicted by you, whether you are an active or passive participant.

**I deny you me.**

*Moving forward, this is what I want to keep doing.*

I want to keep using joy as activism. I want every Black woman to know that she does not owe anybody any part of herself.

**We have suffered enough.**

So, we will be joyful despite all attempts to keep us down, be they intentional or not. We will not carry a weight that does not belong to us. We will allow ourselves to feel our pain, and we will choose who to share it with and why. We will be joyful. We will create our own liberation.

**We will be free.**

Moving forward, in whatever form the future takes, will be in the name of reclaiming our emancipation.



*I deny you me.*

*We have suffered enough.*

*We will be free.*

# APPENDICES

***APPENDIX A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & GRAPHICS***



### **#1 Name questions:**

Do you like your name?

How does (or doesn't it) represent you?

What is the story behind your name?

### **#2 Black womxn questions:**

What do you value as a Black womxn?

Do you have a favorite(s) Black womxn (real or imagined)? If yes, who and why?

What makes a Black womxn a Black womxn?

### **#3 Memory questions**

What is your earliest memory?

Do you have a favorite memory? (this can be recent or long past)

What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?

What is your favorite thing to do as an adult?

### **#4 Celebration questions**

What do you celebrate?

What does celebration look like and feel like?

### **#5 Story questions:**

Do you have any favorite quotes?

Do you have a favorite object that you own?

What's your favorite story? (this can be a well known story, like *Cinderella*, or a personal story)

### **#6 Self expression questions**

What do you like to wear and why?

Do you have a favorite article of clothing? If yes, please describe.

How do you like to wear your hair and why?

### **#7 External oppression questions**

What does it mean to be oppressed?

What are negative impacts of oppression?

What are positive impacts of oppression?

Do you feel oppressed? If yes, how does it feel?

### **#8 Internalized oppression questions**

How would you define internalized oppression?

Do you think you have internalized oppression?

If yes, where do you think it came from?

If no, why do you think that is?

### **#9 Code switching questions**

How do you define code switching?

Do you code switch?

If yes, why and in what ways?

If no, why not?

Describe what it feels like to code switch.

### **#10 Do for fun questions:**

Do you have a favorite game? (board game, hand game, word game, anything)

Do you have a favorite holiday? If so, why is it your favorite?

What do you do to have fun?

### **#11 Feel good questions:**

What is your favorite color? Why?

What's your favorite food? Why?

What brings you joy?

### **#12 Extracurricular activities questions**

List and describe any hobbies you have. Why do you like them?

Do you collect anything?

If yes, what do you collect and why?

### **#13 Future questions**

What does the future look like?

What does the future look like for Black womxn?

What is the next thing you are going to do? (short term or long term)

Come help Nia with her MFA thesis!

I am excited to introduce the next part of my thesis research! I'd like to interview Black womxn, ask you all questions so I can hear some more of your stories. However, these interviews won't be the typical back & forth over a screen or the phone. Instead, I will send participants 3-5 questions once a week (from December-February). Some of the questions will be easy to answer, others may require a bit more reflection.

You would have all week to respond to the questions, but if you need more time just let me know! This is all very casual, like a chat, and the information will only be used as reference material for my thesis artifacts. Also, you can respond any way you want. You can type your answer, draw your answer, take a video, record an audio – anything! I've included a few examples here in this post. The only rule is to please not show anyone's face, not even yours.

I will also post a few of these interview questions publicly on my Nia Alexander Art page, so Black womxn will still be able to partially participate if they'd prefer not to have a one-on-one chat. It's also okay to jump in on this process at anytime! And remember, it doesn't matter how much drawing skill you have or how inarticulate you think you are, this is all about self-expression. Just be yourself and do what comes natural. This whole experience is supposed to be both reflective and fun!

I will still be posting images for you ladies to comment on, as well as some quotes over the next few weeks. I'm also ready to accept suggestions for any images you'd like me to post, things you'd like our community to comment on.

All the stories you have shared thus far have been awesome! It has really helped shape my thesis thus far. Thank you so much to everyone who has been engaging with my research these past weeks. Keep those stories coming, ladies!

Feel free to contact me through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, texting, email – whatever works for you!

Email: [campbellna4@vcu.edu](mailto:campbellna4@vcu.edu)

And if you want to read my thesis statement and see my progress thus far, check it out here:  
<https://www.niaalexanderart.com/codedcommunication>



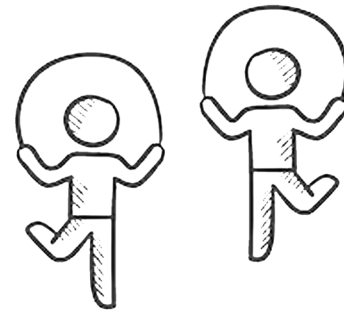
What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?

Rope  
Sneakers  
Rhyme

What was your favorite  
thing to do as a kid?

*Jumping rope with my sister*

What was your favorite  
thing to do as a kid?




What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?

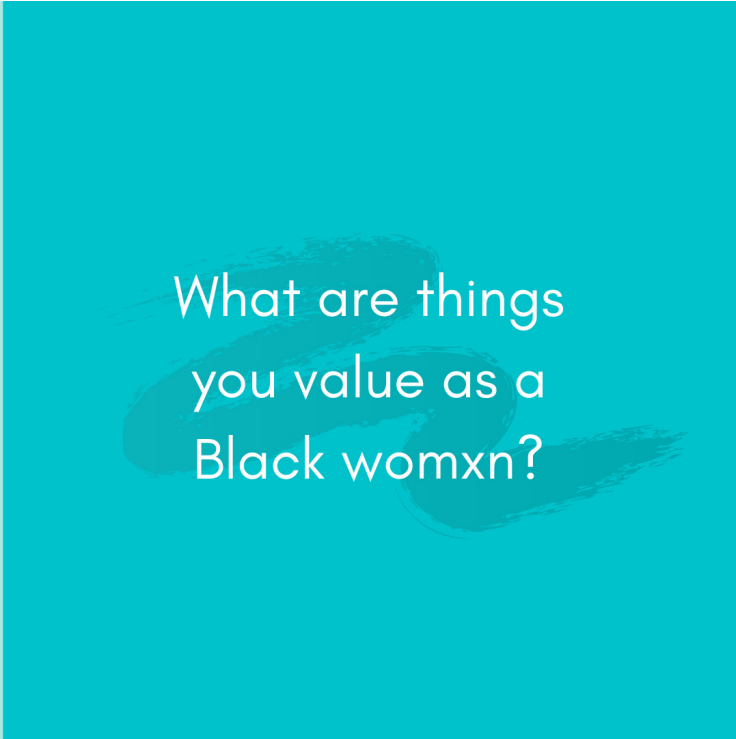


What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?





Do you like your  
name?



What are things  
you value as a  
Black womxn?

Do you have a  
favorite Black  
womxn?

What makes a  
Black womxn a  
Black womxn?




What is your  
earliest memory?


What was your  
favorite thing to do  
as a kid?

What is your  
favorite thing to do  
as an adult?


How do you  
celebrate?



Do you have any  
favorite quotes?



Do you have a  
favorite object that  
you own?



What do you like to  
wear?



How do you like to  
wear your hair?

What does it mean  
to be oppressed?

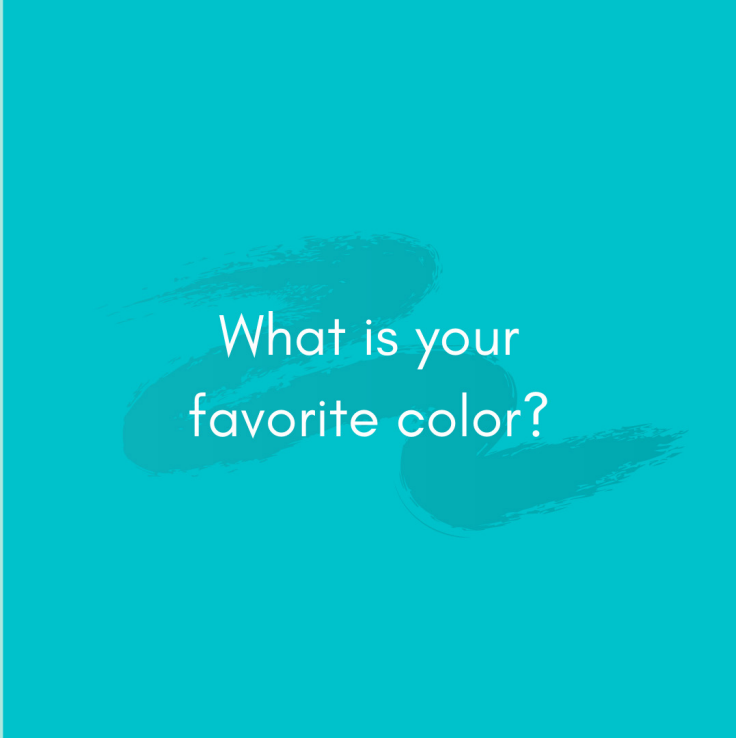
How would you  
define internalized  
oppression?

How do you define  
code switching?

Do you have a  
favorite game?

A teal square background with three white, horizontal brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, positioned behind the text.

What do you do to  
have fun?

A teal square background with three white, horizontal brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, positioned behind the text.

What is your  
favorite color?


A teal square with white text and three horizontal brushstrokes in a darker shade of teal. The text is centered and reads: "What's your favorite food?"

What's your  
favorite food?


A teal square with white text and three horizontal brushstrokes in a darker shade of teal. The text is centered and reads: "Do you have a favorite holiday?"

Do you have a  
favorite holiday?





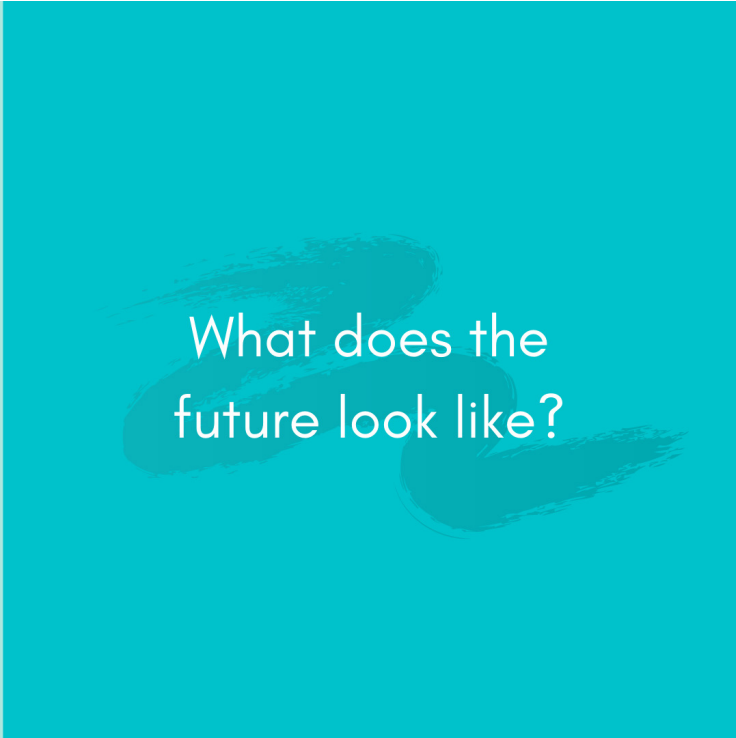
What brings you  
joy?



Do you have any  
hobbies?

A teal rectangular background with three horizontal white brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, positioned behind the text.

Do you collect  
anything?

A teal rectangular background with three horizontal white brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, positioned behind the text.

What does the  
future look like?

What is the next  
thing you are going  
to do?

**Hey, ladies! Here's a bonus  
research question for us: What  
defines a Black American  
Queen? What does she do?  
How does she act? Who does  
she spend time with?**

Hey, everyone! help me out with my thesis? Anyone can chime in.

I've been using the term "womxn" throughout my thesis research as a very significant placeholder. I'm still deciding if I want to use "womxn" or "women/an"

On one hand, it is an intentional act of inclusion. One word that deliberately highlights the experiences of POC & peeps in the LGBTQ+ community. One word that acknowledges the fluidity of gender and the limitations of white feminism.

On the other hand, the term can unintentionally reinforce the idea of "other". Like, THIS group is "women" and THAT group is "womxn". And that division is counterproductive. Because, POC & LGBTQ+ women are just as much women as any other woman.

When writing/reading something, all you have are the words. And words have power.

## What does "Womxn" mean?

"Womxn" is an alternate spelling given to the word "Woman/Women" solely aimed to include trans women, non-binary and feminine identifying genderqueer folks, not just cis women intending to make it more inclusive and intersectional. The word has not come to a consensus on the official pronunciation, some prefer to pronounce it simple as woma/en while others prefer to say it as wom-inx or wom-ux.

### Origin of "Womxn"

The word was identified by intersectional feminists during the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s.

Alongside the word, "Woman", "Womyn" was another alternative spelling both served to dissociate womanhood from male forms and norms. Later the word "womyn" was removed as it is linked with transphobia and white feminism.

### Continued...

The interpretation of the word "Woman" is constantly changing over time due to the shifting values of society. Even though the word was formed with inclusive intentions, today "Woman" can mean different things to different people as the social context for the word has changed since the 70s.

The word "woman" was promoted in the Women's March in 2017 held in Seattle. Further, in January 2019, "Indigenous Woman's March" was held in Portland dedicated to missing and murdered Indigenous girls, women, and transgender people.

### Arguments against Womxn

Many believe that the word is more divisive than inclusive. **+5** [Scroll to read the arguments put forward against womxn!](#)

### Nia Alexander

March 1 · 🌐

Hey there, everybody! So, I have been using the term "womxn" throughout my thesis research, though I am still determining if I should use it in the final product. I want to hear what you all think!

I've included the text of my original Instagram poll (where the results were split 50/50). I've also included some background information from @thistletopics on Instagram. This is the link to their original Instagram post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CLvBL9QJl70/?igshid=n3yu70oogfcm>

I've been using the term "womxn" throughout my thesis research as a very significant placeholder. I'm still deciding if I want to use "womxn" or "women/an"

On one hand, it is an intentional act of inclusion. One word that deliberately highlights the experiences of POC & peeps in the LGBTQ+ community. One word that acknowledges the fluidity of gender and the limitations of white feminism.

On the other hand, the term can unintentionally reinforce the idea of "other". Like, THIS group is "women" and THAT group is "womxn". And that division is counterproductive. Because, POC & LGBTQ+ women are just as much women as any other woman.

When writing/reading something, all you have are the words. And words have power.

Should I keep using the term "womxn" in my thesis?

YES

NO

***APPENDIX B: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY  
QUOTES FOR COMMENTARY & GRAPHICS***

1. *"When we share our stories and seek to un-shroud the lives of Black women, the telling empowers us all."*
2. *"Are you really hearing me or am I a symbol of the oppression I represent? People seem to expect that I can or should provide insight as representative of women, people of color, Black people, or Black women...I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual."*
3. *"Mother, loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden."*
4. *"What does it mean to be Black? Being Black means that you have to live by a different set of rules understanding that you can succeed. You have to work harder, you have to ignore people telling 'you can't' and you have to keep going..."*
5. *"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?"*
6. *"It took all the strength I had not to fall apart."*
7. *"Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes? Shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries?"*
8. *"You think I'd crumble? You think I'd lay down and die? Oh no, not I, I will survive."*
9. *"Now you understand just why my head's not bowed. I don't shout or jump about or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing, it ought to make you proud. I say, it's in the click of my heels, the bend of my hair, the palm of my hand, the need for my care, 'cause I'm a woman, phenomenally."*
10. *"We have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered."*
11. *"Southern trees bear a strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root."*
12. *"You always have to prove yourself, always, always, always. Even among your own people, you have to prove yourself."*
13. *"It seems we lose the game before we even start to play. Who made these rules? We're so confused. Easily led astray."*
14. *"Hold up. I know what you gonna say. Talkin' that Black English is okay at home and with your friends, but don't be speakin' that foolishness in school or at the j - o - b. And don't be tellin' no students they can speak that mess either. You want people to think they ignorant?"*

15. *"...by placing code switching in a larger cultural context, we can see that sometimes it happens as a result of the majority culture imposing its communication styles on others."*
16. *"...code-switching means we lose out on the opportunity to truly learn about one another in authentic ways."*
17. *"I may be a weed in the garden of women I have loved who are still trapped in their season, but even they shriek as they rip burning gold from their skins."*
18. *"Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise that I dance like I've got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?"*
19. *"All I'm askin' is for a little respect when you get home."*
20. *"...if you cannot hear others, then you cannot understand them, if you cannot understand others, then you cannot hear them."*
21. *"Oh, but my joy of today is that we can all be proud to say 'to be young, gifted and black is where it's at.'"*
22. *"Sugar, spice and I'm nice, show me what you're made of. Crazy, sexy, cool baby, with or without makeup. Got nothing to prove, but I'ma show you how I do."*
23. *"And now we are mourning our sisters lost to the false hush of sorrow, to hardness, and hatchets, and childbirth, and we are shouting."*
24. *"You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise."*
25. *"Even if there ain't no precedent, switchin' up the messaging, I'm about to add a little estrogen."*

“

When we share our stories and seek to un-shroud the lives of Black women, the telling empowers us all.



“

Are you really hearing me or am I a symbol of the oppression I represent? People seem to expect that I can or should provide insight as representative of women, people of color, Black people, or Black women... I sometimes feel more like a symbol or representative than an individual.





“

Mother, loosen my tongue or adorn me with a lighter burden.



“

What does it mean to be Black? Being Black means that you have to live by a different set of rules understanding that you can succeed. You have to work harder, you have to ignore people telling 'you can't' and you have to keep going...



“

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?



“

It took all the strength I had not to fall apart.



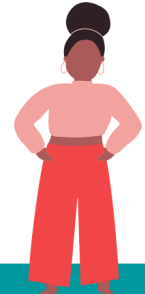
“

Did you want to see me  
broken? Bowed head  
and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down  
like teardrops,  
weakened by my  
soulful cries?



“

You think I'd crumble?  
You think I'd lay down  
and die? Oh no, not I,  
I will survive.



“

Now you understand just why my head's not bowed. I don't shout or jump about or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing, it ought to make you proud. I say, it's in the click of my heels, the bend of my hair, the palm of my hand, the need for my care, 'cause I'm a woman, phenomenally.



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“

Southern trees bear a strange fruit. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.



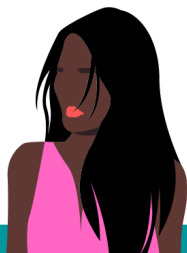
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You always have to prove yourself, always, always, always. Even among your own people, you have to prove yourself.



“

It seems we lose the game before we even start to play. Who made these rules? We're so confused. Easily led astray.



“

Hold up. I know what you gonna say. Talkin' that Black English is okay at home and with your friends, but don't be speakin' that foolishness in school or at the j - o - b. And don't be tellin' no students they can speak that mess either. You want people to think they ignorant?



“

...by placing code switching in a larger cultural context, we can see that sometimes it happens as a result of the majority culture imposing its communication styles on others. This can threaten the feelings of authenticity of those who must adapt to it in to gain access to opportunities.



“

...code-switching means we lose out on the opportunity to truly learn about one another in authentic ways.



“

I may be a weed in the garden of women I have loved who are still trapped in their season, but even they shriek as they rip burning gold from their skins.



“

Does my sexiness upset you? Does it come as a surprise that I dance like I've got diamonds at the meeting of my thighs?





“

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“

...if you cannot hear others, then you cannot understand them, if you cannot understand others, then you cannot hear them.



“

Oh, but my joy of today is that we can all be proud to say 'to be young, gifted and black is where it's at.



“

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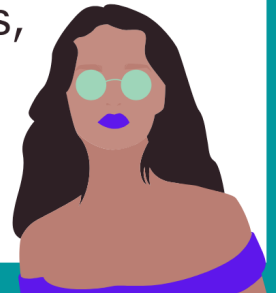
“

And now we are  
mourning our sisters lost  
to the false hush  
of sorrow, to hardness,  
and hatchets, and  
childbirth, and  
we are shouting.



“

You may shoot me with  
your words, you may  
cut me with your eyes,  
you may kill me with  
your hatefulness,  
but still, like air,  
I'll rise.



“

Even if there ain't no precedent, switchin' up the messaging, I'm about to add a little estrogen.



## ***APPENDIX C: CERTIFICATIONS AND RESEARCH PLATFORMS***



codedcommunication

Message



225 posts

35 followers

3 following

Nia Alexander Campbell

Artist

Encouraging dialogue amongst Black American women. Gathering info for my MFA thesis. No personal ID recorded. 📷 aren't mine unless otherwise indicated

[www.niaalexanderart.com/codedcommunication](http://www.niaalexanderart.com/codedcommunication)

Followed by ablackwomanshotthis, flemingj, mascurlo +2 more



Images II



Quotes



Interviews



Images

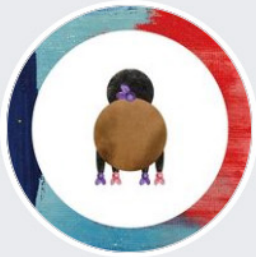


Project Bck...

POSTS

TAGGED





Nia Alexander  
@niaalexanderart

Home

Photos

Videos

About

Posts

Community

Create a Page



Like Share Suggest Edits ...

Send Message

### Photos



What is the next  
thing you are going  
to do?

### Community

See All

104 people like this

106 people follow this

### About

See All

Contact Nia Alexander on Messenger

www.niaalexanderart.com

Artist · Writer · Designer

Page Transparency

See More

Facebook is showing information to help you better



Completion Date 02-Jul-2020  
Expiration Date 02-Jul-2023  
Record ID 37289386

This is to certify that:

**Nia Campbell**

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher** (Curriculum Group)  
**Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher** (Course Learner Group)  
**1 - Basic Course** (Stage)

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).

Under requirements set by:

**Ministry of Public Health, Qatar**

**CITI**  
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at [www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wed2c24f4-3818-45eb-b6d6-0bd9d898dac9-37289386](http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wed2c24f4-3818-45eb-b6d6-0bd9d898dac9-37289386)



# ENDNOTES

- 1 Johnson, "African American Women's Shifting Scale Development."
- 2 Morton, "Review of The Devil's Lane."
- 3 Winters, *The Mulatta Concubine*.
- 4 "Africans in French America."
- 5 Storyteller, "The African American Crown."
- 6 Staff, "Extraordinary Crowns."
- 7 Lisa Tran, *Prescriptivism and Descriptivism in English Language*.
- 8 "Quote by Alice Walker."
- 9 Asara, "Misogynoir: The Unique Discrimination That Black Women Face."
- 10 Hallam, "The Slave Experience: Men, Women & Gender."
- 11 Hallam.
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