

From the Grave to the Stars: Analyzing Developments in Racial Power Dynamics from Black
Youth Poetry from the Civil Rights Era to Now

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Abstract

Despite the intense racial history of the United States, the dominant cultural belief of the 21st century is that the problem of race has since been solved. I have analyzed poems from two different sources, *Freedom School Poetry* from 1965, and *Dear Brain* from 2012, by using a cultural studies framework that allows me to examine the authors' interpretations of the racial power dynamics in the cultures they live or lived in. This paper argues that, although the nature of racism has not progressed as much as many like to think—i.e., it still exists—those who are negatively impacted it can still exert some agency despite oppression through writing.

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Introduction

Like many other young people of color, I've always had an understanding of the idea of race, no matter how rudimentary it may have been. Even a decade ago, when I didn't know words like 'model minority' or 'institutional discrimination,' I knew what race was. For an Asian-American, that manifested in a constant low-level sense of being an outsider, even in a community like my own that was at least 30% Asian. I did not yet know what exactly marginalization or whitewashing meant, but I knew that—even if I was surrounded by people who looked like me and spoke like me—I did not quite fit into the American mainstream.

My journey as a writer reflects that tumultuous relationship with race: my earliest stories are filled with white heroines and white love interests. Slowly, along the same time I learned that my struggles were common across the Asian community, I transitioned into writing about characters that had the last names 'Nguyen' and 'Hoang' instead of 'Smith' and 'Johnson.' And when I realized that the world was much larger than myself, I began writing stories that reflected how I saw America—as a patchwork of skin tones, eye shapes, hair textures, and accents.

In this way, writing allowed me to express myself and write out my struggle with race. Even my earliest and arguably most problematic writings were a vital exploration of that relationship, because the whitewashing I wrote of was a reflection of the culture I was embedded in. As ugly as the stories were, I needed them, if only to get the words out *somewhere*, so that someone—even if it was just myself, five years down the line—would see them and hear me.

Race in the United States has always permeated the world of writing, language, and literature—and continues to do so. The debate over 'Ebonics,' or "black sounds" (Vuolo, 2012),

of the late 20th century and the legitimacy of a dialect spoken by black people has carried over to today, in the co-opting of AAVE (African American Vernacular English) by non-black, primarily white, voices. Literature class curricula in high schools all around the United States are dominated by the writings of white male authors, perhaps with the occasional exception of the featuring of a female or non-white writer for a unit on gender or race. One can imagine, for instance, the irony in teaching about how universal and relatable Jay Gatsby—an affluent white man—is to a majority-minority class. Scholar Henry Giroux (1996) describes the issue with this unrepresentative educational system for students of color: “[youth] find themselves being educated and regulated within institutions that have little relevance for their lives. This is expressed most strongly in schools. Strongly tied to the technology of print, located within a largely Eurocentric curriculum, and often resistant to analyzing how racial, class, and gender differences intersect in shaping that curriculum, schooling appears to many youth to be as irrelevant as it is boring” (p. 13).

Given a white-centered education system that overwhelmingly features white stories and white voices, what, then, can young children of color—especially black children—do to have voices like their own heard? While there are a number of different strategies to address this issue on a varying spectrum of scales (a large-scale strategy being implementing more diverse or diversely-minded curricula within public schools in America, for instance), I will be focusing on one smaller-scale strategy in particular: allowing these young students the agency to be the writers and storytellers themselves. My objects of study, then, are selections from two collections of student-written poems from two different time periods: the first, *Freedom School Poetry*, is a collection of poems written by black students of the Mississippi Freedom Schools published in 1965 in the height of the Civil Rights era. The second, *Dear Brain*, is also a collection of

student-written poems published in 2012, the authors being mostly (but not all) black youths. I have chosen two particularly striking poems from each of these collections for comparison.

My goal is to analyze these two bodies of work through cultural studies theory, which marries textual¹ analysis with historical, social, and cultural contexts. Key to this study is the dynamic of power, and how it informs the lives, decisions, and texts produced within a ‘culture.’ Through this analysis and subsequent comparison, I aim to show how the nature of power within these different cultures across time has changed (if at all).

The Cultural Studies Framework

It is difficult to define what exactly the field of cultural studies is, because the field itself is interdisciplinary and borrows from, and is used to build on subjects of varying topic. Priya Parmar (2005) states that, although cultural studies is typically associated with popular or youth culture, it also includes discourse regarding female, black, and other minority-group or marginalized groups, “in order to analyze and evaluate the hierarchy that separates the culture of ‘others’ and so-called ‘high’ culture” (p. 5). Douglas Kellner (2009) offers a model that captures this transdisciplinary nature and emphasizes what he describes as the field’s inherent aim to overcome one-sided studies that focus on singular, isolated issues—cultural studies, in order to be cultural studies, must be “radically contextualist” (Grossberg, 2009, p. 33), because no single topic of study exists in a vacuum. The field of cultural studies is not reductionist because one cannot simplify or remove ideas, issues, or topics from their context, because everything informs something: the law, for instance, interacts with crime, which interacts with media, which interacts with public values, and so on and so forth. Douglas Kellner’s tripartite model calls for

¹ Though I specified ‘textual’ here, cultural studies can really be used on and applied to different mediums, such as music.

analysis of social/political/etc. context, cultural texts, and audience reception, although he qualifies his position by indicating that this model is merely an overview that indicates the need to use different varying disciplines in analysis, as opposed to a checklist of requirements in cultural studies research.

Another important aspect of cultural studies—arguably a critical point in this field—is the emphasis on the nature of power within a culture (Giroux, 1996). Giroux (2009) defines culture as a space in which people, groups, and entities translate “the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns” (p. 88) and is made up of identities constructed by practices, ideologies, agency, and power. With agency, of course, comes a limited amount of power, but Giroux (1996) differentiates the two in that power informs a certain capacity to shape an aspect of culture, such as (but not limited to) education and knowledge (p. 19); agency, on the other hand, does not necessarily guarantee that degree of influence. Furthermore, Parmar’s (2005) definition of cultural studies gives particular emphasis to the nature of power structures, in particular how they interact with culture and knowledge. Kellner (2009), too, “insists that ... cultural studies should contextualize its object and analysis in the field of socioeconomic and political power” (p. 8).

Taking the information from above, I aim to synthesize the fields of literary studies (conducting textual analysis), history (providing context), and race studies (examining power structures and dynamics) to analyze the poems of my object of study. This is a partial adoption of the Kellner model, with the exception of analysis of audience reaction—given that my objects of study do not have the kind of audience as, for instance, TV ads, it is simply not possible to gauge the responses of readers.

Selected Poems

My first object of study is from *Freedom School Poetry*, a collection of poems published by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, one of the more prominent activist groups of the Civil Rights era. As an “interracial group advocating nonviolence,” the SNCC participated in several political efforts, including the Freedom Summer in 1964, which was a dual project of voter registration and public education. One result of this campaign was the establishment of 41 Freedom Schools and provided over 3,000 young black students with education in the heavily segregated state of Mississippi (“Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, n.d.). *Freedom School Poetry* is a collection of poems written by the students of these same schools, with a foreword written by the famed black poet Langston Hughes. This poetry collection is made out “To the memory of Emmett Till,” with the following dedication:

In the summer of the year 1955, Emmett Till,
14 years old, was murdered in the state of Mississippi
for allegedly ‘whistling at a white woman.’

Nine years later—out of the same society that
allowed the killings of Emmett Till, Herbert Lee,
Lewis Allen, Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman,
Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and many more
whose names we will never know—these poems
and paintings have come. These are the expressions
of the young freedom school students of Mississippi. (“Freedom School Poetry,”
1965, p. 7).

From *Freedom School Poetry* I have selected two poems for analysis: “I am Mississippi fed” and “I am a Negro.” The first of these is a short, somber piece that laments what it means to be as denigrated as a black person in Mississippi. By contrast, the second is far more positive, with the uplifting starting lines of “I am a Negro and proud of its color too, / If you were a Negro wouldn’t you?” (See Appendix A)

The second collection of poems is *Dear Brain*, a collection of poems written by high school students from Bell Multicultural High School and Ballou Senior High School in Washington, DC. *Dear Brain* is published by 826DC, a nonprofit organization that provides after-school tutoring and is, in their words, “dedicated to supporting students age 6-18 with their creative and expository writing skills, and to helping teachers inspire their students to write. [Their] services are structured around [their] understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success” (“About 826DC,” n.d.). This poetry collection is one of many incarnations of the organization’s major project, the Young Authors’ Book Project, which is an annual effort that turns DC students’ creative writing into a professionally published work (“Programs,” n.d.).

From *Dear Brain* I have selected—as I did above—two poems for analysis. The first, titled “DC State of Mind,” is a dedication to how the author, Tiana Minter-El, sees her home city, flaws and all. The last, which has no title, explores the legacy of Barack Obama—more specifically, his impact on the author, Kenya El-Massie. (See Appendix B)

Analysis

From *Freedom School Poetry*

Published in 1965 as a project of black schools in Mississippi, *Freedom School Poetry* makes no secret of its racial subject matter. For starters, this publication date sets this collection after some notable events of the Civil Rights Movement, including the Brown v. Board ruling in 1954, the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963. Furthermore, the table of contents shows a trend in the poems—although there are some that are not necessarily about race—with titles like “A Negro Condition,” “Because I’m Black,” “Three

Strikes to Freedom,” and “Segregation Will Not Be Here Long” that indicate that race and race-related matters are certainly at the forefront of Freedom School students.

The first of the poems I selected, titled “I am Mississippi born” by 12-year-old Ida Ruth Griffin, is a short six-line, two-stanza poem that follows a fairly traditional rhyming structure of AAB/CCB. Griffin repeats the word ‘Mississippi’ and also uses a simple structure—“I am.../I am.../Nothing but.../I am.../I shall.../Nothing but...” —that conveys a sense of monotony and dejection.

The repetition of ‘Mississippi’ is, of course, likely due to the fact that Griffin is a resident of the state. But Mississippi’s history with race relations provides a chilling context: it was only nine to ten years before the publication of this poem that, in the very same state, Emmett Till was brutally murdered, in response to a claim of harassment that has since been shown to be fabricated (Weller, 2017)—the poem’s resigned “Nothing but a poor, dead boy” naturally evokes this grisly image. But Till was only one of many of Mississippi’s black victims: eight years after, in 1963, anti-segregation activist Medgar Evers was murdered in Jackson, Mississippi. And even closer to the poem’s publication date of 1965 were the deaths of three civil rights workers, during the Freedom Summer (“Freedom Summer, 1964,” n.d.). The Southern Poverty Law Center (2011) attributes these murders to the White Knights of Mississippi, a terrorist organization described as surpassing any other Klansmen in ruthlessness and violence (p. 29).

Griffin’s subdued tone, combined with the historical context she lived in, almost seems to give an impression of mourning. “Nothing but a poor, black boy” points out race as a reason for denigration. The poem, despite being written in the 20th century, refers back to the conditions of slavery, and in the line “I shall be buried in a Mississippi grave,” implies a sense of inevitability that blacks will always face this misery. Historical context allows us to fill in the blanks: the state

of Mississippi has a history of slavery and racial violence, segregation was illegal de jure but still lived on and kept blacks oppressed, etc. However, the overwhelming indication of “I am Mississippi fed” is that blacks are in a position of submission and oppression, doomed by circumstances—such as the legacy of slavery and the violence of segregationists—that seem almost too big to fight against, to become “Nothing but a poor, dead boy.”

The second poem, “I am a Negro” by Rosalyn Waterhouse, is a marked contrast in tone, with the writer immediately starting with, “I am a Negro and proud of its color too, / If you were a Negro wouldn’t you?” Structurally, it is also short, and also follows a traditional rhyme scheme of AABBCDDE, with single sentences split into rhyming couplets. Waterhouse affirms her black identity with repetition of the phrase (and variants of) “I am a Negro,” and initially seems to show contentment (“I am glad of just what I am now / To be and to do things I know how.”), but by the end of the poem, expresses a sense of wistfulness (“I want to be free as any other child”) and understanding that—despite how proud she is of her “Negro”-ness, she is still limited in some ways because of her identity.

Historical context corroborates Waterhouse’s sentiments: although by 1965, many of the major legal restrictions on the civil rights of blacks had been removed, there were still far more obstacles. By this point in time, interracial marriage was still prohibited, discrimination in housing was still legal, and countless racist hate crimes were being committed against black civil rights workers. But on a more optimistic note, Waterhouse’s celebratory statements can be interpreted as a reflection of the growing sentiment of black pride, which began in the Civil Rights Movement and would eventually give birth to the immensely prominent Black Panther Party in the late 60s. Finally, Waterhouse’s last, plaintive line (“I want to be Free, Free, Free.”)

echoes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s iconic ending words in his 1963 speech "I Have a Dream": "Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last."

Although "I am a Negro" displays a kind of proto-black pride, I contend that this poem's language still indicates some sense of powerlessness. Waterhouse links her Negro identity, something she takes pride in, with the qualification that she wants to be "free as any other child"—essentially indicating that, because she is black, she knows that she cannot experience certain things (i.e. freedoms) that white children are permitted, such as "wander[ing] about the house and the woods and [being] wild," which could also be an allusion to the nature of segregation and the limitations it placed on black mobility. And her allusion to Dr. King's speech uses an interesting twist, saying "I *want* to be Free" as compared to "We *are* free," showing that, perhaps for Waterhouse, she has not experienced these new freedoms the law has afforded to her.

From *Dear Brain*

826DC published *Dear Brain* in 2012, before the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown—two events after which the Black Lives Matter movement began to explode in popularity, especially following the protests in Michael Brown's hometown of Ferguson, MO—but after that of Trayvon Martin. I give this context because although 826DC's mission statement does not name a specific group (i.e. a racial or ethnic one) outside of DC students as a whole that they aim to help, their constituency is overwhelmingly young students of color, which reflects the racial makeup of DC public school students: in the 2015-2016 school year, the combined black and Hispanic percentage of the student population was 82% ("DCPS at a Glance: Enrollment," n.d.). These students are the same young writers who may, at this point, not have been exposed to the phenomenon of BLM, but understand and have lived with issues of race such as gentrification and displacement (Blessett, 2015) and education inequity (Barrow, 2002).

In short, while 826DC's student writers may not live with the same open threats that Ida Ruth Griffin and Rosalyn Waterhouse did, it does not mean that the problem of race ended with Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s. Rather, as the following poems will show, race-related issues have merely developed into subtler institutional problems. For young people of color in DC in particular, these may manifest in the form of displacement and gentrification or health care inequity.

The first selected poem, titled "DC State of Mind" by Tiana Minter-El, is a tongue-in-cheek freeform (no particular rhyme structure to be found) piece that almost seems to be written to be read, given its casual use of AAVE ("We still ain't got our lessons / And we busy in the projects / Stressin', but I need to tell you / It ain't over yet."). Minter-El hints at her perception of her city by associating it with "Go-go and monuments," but also describing her conditions as "bad"—however, she expresses resilience and a desire to "still keep on scheming."

"DC State of Mind" touches on several different topics. The lines "Getting them out of the Barry Farms, / And Kenilworths, on the path / To their freedom" name two neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River, in historically black neighborhoods of the city. That Minter-El "[schemes] about making this place / Every black person's kingdom" by getting blacks out of these neighborhoods she's mentioned, implies problems (i.e. of infrastructure, funding, safety) within those areas. Studies indicate that it is exactly neighborhoods like Barry Farm and Kenilworth that are worst impacted by gentrification (Duggan, 2016)—an issue that has long since plagued the city, particularly its residents of color. Furthermore, "Still got to stop clogging our arteries / With Yum's. / Even though it might be tasty" may be a dig at the disproportionate rate of obesity in blacks, due to a variety of different factors including socioeconomics, genetics (Caprio et al., 2008), and lack of access to healthy food options.

Minter-El's words "Even though the million march came, / ... / It ain't over yet" allude to the Million Man March of 1995, connecting past events concerning black liberation with the present and indicating an understanding that the legacy of racism has not died in her time. As racism is an institutional imbalance of power, Minter-El's indirect admission shows her acknowledgement of this dynamic. However, her defiance ("My conditions may be bad, / But I still keep on scheming,") shows resilience and empowerment, even in the face of gentrification, health disparities, and racism.

Whereas Minter-El acknowledges racial issues and pushes through them, "Untitled" by Kenya El-Massie expresses less lofty confidence, but rather a more surreal atmosphere in her poem. In it, El-Massie uses free verse and metaphor to tell a story of seeing inside a painting of Barack Obama, who then comes out of the painting and becomes a "riding star" to help take El-Massie to the height of her goals at "rocket ship speed."

El-Massie's painting of Obama features him saying, "Yes we can," a reference to his 2008 presidential campaign slogan. This campaign was, of course, successful in making history, and making him the first black president of the United States—in that way, it makes sense that he is depicted in El-Massie's poem as a guiding figure, "just as / Strong as a wise man." Her metaphor of Obama as a "riding star" who helps her towards her dream can be interpreted as the way in which role models, by setting a positive example—whether it's of achievement, or simply bravery or virtue—empower and encourage youths to follow paths they might otherwise be discouraged from.

Finally, El-Massie's repeated emphasis of dreams—both hers and Obama's—evoke the language of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream." But rather than merely *having* a dream and not necessarily seeing it to fruition, El-Massie depicts Obama as already having "got to" his: of

being president, of making history as the first black man in the Oval Office, etc. As for her, it almost seems to be only a matter of time until she can achieve hers. In this way, she shows herself as the culmination of Dr. King's own dream: a young black girl with dreams bigger than the sky, and nowhere to go but up.

Comparison

The most evident differences between the poems from *Freedom School Poetry* and those of *Dear Brain* are the changes in tone and message: "I am Mississippi born" is a resigned and woeful condemnation of the fate blacks living under the system of Jim Crow were doomed to. While "I am a Negro" displays more enthusiasm, i.e. about black identity, this sentiment is qualified by an acknowledgement that it is due to that same blackness that the author is denied certain freedoms. By contrast, the *Dear Brain* poems show a greater sense of empowerment and agency: Tiana Minter-El speaks with self-assured AAVE and slick panache of her community and how she wouldn't trade it for anything despite the problems it faces, which she "schemes" against. And even though Kenya El-Massie in "Untitled" doesn't display the same kind of braggadocious sureness, she speaks with a dreamy, quiet, starry-eyed confidence, because with the examples of her forbearers, she can do anything.

However, I argue that the power dynamics—from blacks in subjugation to them on completely equal footing to their white counterparts—are not totally reversed between one body of work, and thereby one era, and the other. While perhaps the issues in *Dear Brain* are not quite the same as those in *Freedom School Poetry*—Minter-El and El-Massie are not, for instance, as likely to be harassed by racists on their way to school, or as likely to face the same legal barriers that Griffin and Waterhouse did—they still exist. The ugly face of racism has not disappeared, but rather appears slightly differently: instead of bombed churches, it is the displacement of

black communities from their historic neighborhoods; instead of segregated public spaces, it is the black exceptionalism of Barack Obama (Huebenthal, 2012), which can even be internalized, as El-Massie indicates in her writing.

Given the nature of the cultural studies framework, it is impossible to analyze these poems without their historical and racial contexts. “I am Mississippi born” posits that blacks are subject to a lifetime sentence of essentially being “Mississippi slave[s]” like their ancestors, i.e. in a position of subjugation to a more powerful, white class. “I am a Negro” hints at beginnings of Black Pride and ‘Black is Beautiful’-type movements that defy white authority figures with radical self-love, but still acknowledges the presence of a racial disparity—whites are still essentially in control of public spaces, which are prohibited or severely limited to blacks, putting them at a systemic disadvantage.

In comparison, the poems of *Dear Brain*, despite being generally more to do with empowerment than those of *Freedom School Poetry*, still depict and describe racial issues, albeit of a different nature. Although in “DC State of Mind,” Minter-El persists despite the issues her community faces, those problems are still real and prevalent, and very much rooted in the racism of the *Freedom School Poetry* era. Poverty—undoubtedly inherited from the opportunities denied to blacks in the past—manifests itself in health issues and gentrification, the latter of which is reminiscent of the theme of segregation in “I am a Negro,” and how whites controlled (and in some ways continue to do so) public spaces at the expense of blacks.

And perhaps the most telling example of an inherited legacy of racial issues lies in the publication of these two poetry collections and the motivations behind their organizations. *Freedom School Poetry* was published in 1965 as an effort by the Freedom Schools, which were established by volunteer civil rights advocates in the state of Mississippi because—although

schools were technically to be desegregated by this point under the law—it was physically dangerous for black students to attend mixed-race schools. *Dear Brain* was published by 826DC in 2012, an organization that provides tutoring and other such educational support services for DC public school students—an overwhelming majority of whom are students of color, who have been shown to be far more disadvantaged in terms of school choice and quality than their white peers² (Barrow, 2002). Even though the subject matters of these poem collections may differ—826DC’s isn’t necessarily intended to be racial in nature, even if some of the poems in *Dear Brain* happen to be so—it is indicative that racism has certainly not died, as both 826DC and the SNCC provide(d) educational aid to students of color due to an institutional failure.

Conclusions

Using a tripartite cultural studies theory that analyzes text, historical context, and power dynamics, I argue that the comparison of poems from *Freedom School Poetry* (1965) and *Dear Brain* (2012) shows that, although racism has perhaps taken a less overt and emphasized role in the concerns of these young black writers, it has not disappeared altogether, but has rather taken on new and different forms that manifest from the past.

Of course, it would be erroneous to suggest that the findings of this analysis are either new or somehow representative of the experiences of every black person in America. Rather, I argue that the developments in subject and tone in the selected poems from *Freedom School Poetry* and *Dear Brain*, respectively, indicate that, although the poets of the latter wrote in a vastly different—and certainly fairer, by comparison—world than their predecessors did, they still indicated concerns about their communities, and those concerns are naturally race-related,

² Although addressing this systemic inequity is not an explicit part of 826DC’s mission statement, the nature of DC’s demographics translates to their serving of majority-minority students

given their roots in legalized segregation and other overtly racist institutions of the 60s and before. There is a plethora of different issues that existed (or continue to exist) that were not addressed in all four of these poems, but, simply, the analysis of power dynamics within the poems showed that, within the context of the students' expressed concerns, an imbalance of power still existed and continues to exist.

However, this is not necessarily an *identical* power imbalance. *Freedom School Poetry* showed (among other things) resignation to or acknowledgment of crushing oppression, and white domination of public space. By contrast, *Dear Brain's* authors wrote about being ambitious and setting lofty goals, and a city that was unequivocally *theirs*, even if it wasn't all picture-perfect. These writers of the 21st century wrote with hope, with attitude, with *agency*, if not total power—but even then, that is changing with the landscape of social media and its ability to give its users the power to reach a wide audience with any desired message.

And there is one thing that Ida Ruth Griffin, Rosalyn Waterhouse, Tiana Minter-El, and Kenya El-Massie have in common: even if the content of their words speaks to some oppression or challenge they face, the very act of writing itself is to some degree empowering—because given a history where black people have been killed for whistling or dreaming (Button Poetry, 2014), an action as small as composing a poem about wanting to be free can be radical.

Poetry can both delight and disturb. It can interest folks. It can upset folks. Poetry can convey both pleasure and pain. And poetry can make people think. If poetry makes people think, it might make them think constructive thoughts, even thoughts about how to change themselves, their town and their state for the better. Some poems, like many of the great verses in the Bible, can make people think about changing all mankind, even the whole world. Poems, like prayers, possess power. – Langston Hughes (*Freedom School Poetry*, 1965)

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Appendix A

Poetry Selections from *Freedom School Poetry*

“I am Mississippi fed”

I am Mississippi fed,
I am Mississippi bred,
Nothing but a poor, black boy.

I am a Mississippi slave,
I shall be buried in a Mississippi grave,
Nothing but a poor, dead boy.

-by Ida Ruth Griffin, age 12, Harmony, Carthage

“I am a Negro” by Rosalyn Waterhouse, age 11, Meridian

I am a Negro and proud of its color too,
If you were a Negro wouldn't you?
I am glad of just what I am now
To be and to do things I know how.
I'm glad to be a Negro so happy and gay
To grow stronger day by day.
I am a Negro and I want to be free as any other child,
To wander about the house and the woods and be wild.
I want to be Free, Free, Free.

Appendix BPoetry Selections from *Dear Brain*“DC State of Mind” by Tiana Minter-El

Chicken and mambo sauce
 Go-go and monuments,
 That’s what DC’s about,
 So don’t forget it.
 I’ve been in this place for
 15 years, and I don’t think
 About leaving.
 My conditions may be bad,
 But I still keep on scheming,
 Scheming about making this place
 Every black person’s kingdom.
 Getting them out of the Barry Farms,
 and Kenilworths, on the path
 To their freedom.
 Freedom from oppression.
 Even though the million march came,
 We still ain’t got our lessons
 And we busy in the projects
 Stressin’, but I need to tell you
 It ain’t over yet.
 We still got obstacles to overcome
 Still got to stop clogging our arteries
 With Yum’s.
 Even though it might be tasty
 Your foot could get numb
 And then amputated.

“Untitled” by Kenya El-Massie

A work of art,
 A painting, moves me.
 The cars zoom in the street.
 Inside the paint, see a window
 To one more. Ain’t it cool
 How we can put something
 Into something too small to
 See?

But for a painting inside a painting, it is so big.
 Obama smiles, but tied lips move.

Say, "Yes we can." He pops out
To me holding my hand, just as
Strong as a wise man.

He holds on to me holding me until I get
To my dream, for he's my riding star
That will put me on the moon, way
Past the people dreaming on the stars.

Stop on one star says hi, but I tell
It you have to say bye-bye. Move at rocket ship
Speed, but I want to stop
It. He got to his dream. He
Can help me get close
To mine.

Reflection Essay

I've always loved libraries. Growing up raised by a single working mother meant that I was often left to entertain myself after school, and I found myself doing so through the written word. Growing up raised by a bilingual immigrant parent meant that I read to myself the stacks of books my mom checked out for me, and I continued to do so, burning through book after book. It was easy, then, to dip my toes into the next natural step: writing.

That passion for reading and writing that carried me through my childhood and beyond was what brought me to volunteer at 826DC for my service-learning UW. 826DC is a local nonprofit that encourages children to develop their creative writing skills through a variety of different programs, such as a writing hour during after-school tutoring, and an annual publication of students' works in an anthology. 826DC aims to empower youths in the District by allowing them a medium in which they can express themselves and their experiences.

In entering my research project, I knew that I wanted to write about something that would be of some relevance to this place I'd spend so much time in. At the same time, I wanted to incorporate history (one of my passions) into my research. With those factors in mind, I settled on a comparison of writing across historical periods to examine whether or not racial relations in the US had changed at all. As a young person of color myself, I was interested in studying what other young minorities had to say about the environment they lived in, and if there was as much progress in the struggles we face from an era as tumultuous as that of the Civil Rights Movement to now. To me, the comparison between a period like the 60s and now was natural, given the focus on Black Lives Matter that has been at the forefront of US media recently.

Because 826DC annually publishes a collection of writing by their students, I already had an ideal object of study that was related to DC. From 826DC's publications, I chose a poetry

anthology titled *Dear Brain*, published in 2012. After that, I was able to find through GW's database a collection of poems written by young students in 1965, titled *Freedom School Poetry*. This particular resource was ideal for my research because it compared well with *Dear Brain*: both of these collections were poems written by young black students, and both were written in periods of prominent racial turmoil.

The biggest problem I encountered during my research was finding a framework through which I could adequately analyze and compare my two objects of study—I wanted to use something that would take into account both the social and historical contexts the two collections were written in, but would also be able to critically examine the writings themselves. After a few false starts, I booked a research consultation with Dolsy Smith at Gelman, during which Mr. Smith guided me through different research databases and how I could use them, and also gave me suggestions for different topics relating to black poetry that I could look into. One of his most helpful suggestions was to look through the bibliographies of sources to find more research that was relevant to my topic. We had done a similar activity called 'concept archaeology' in my UW course with embedded librarian Bill Gillis, so I already had some experience with this strategy.

From the GW Library databases, I found an article titled 'Cultural Studies and Rap,' written by Priya Parmar, that briefly described what cultural studies was, and cited several scholars from that field. From Parmar's introduction, I was able to get a sense for what this field entailed, and from her biography, I was able to track down other scholars who'd written on the subject of cultural studies. GW either had online access to these different authors cited by Parmar, or physical copies of books written by them, so I was able to judge that concepts from cultural studies would be applicable to my research, given the field's emphasis on power dynamics as well as different forms of analysis (textual, historical, etc). In this way, both GW's

extensive archives of print resources and its access to academic databases like JSTOR were key in helping me develop a strong framework.

With my objects of study chosen and an appropriate framework to examine them through, I was able to then analyze my sources. In examining the text of the poems themselves, I found that there was a change over time in how the authors perceived the nature of power (i.e. the author felt empowered); when I researched the historical context of these poems, I found resources that indicated to me that some of the race-related issues brought up by the authors had simply been reincarnated from the 60s to now, i.e. segregation into to gentrification today. It was fascinating to see that, although, as a person of color, I am aware that racism still exists, the nature of modern racism manifests in ways that were clearly rooted in forms of the past.

I initially expected my research process to go quite smoothly: I would serendipitously find a framework to complement my chosen sources, and easily discover the ideal sources to back up my claims. This is likely in part due to how I relatively easily found the anthologies I analyzed, and how I expected the search for a frame of analysis to go similarly. Of course, it was anything but that. I felt like I was treading water until I signed up for a research consultation. It wasn't that I didn't know how to write a cohesive paper—but I didn't have all the pieces just yet, and the support GW Library system provided me the knowledge to find them.

It's in that way that, for me, libraries have been the setting to formative parts of my life. When I was eight, it was among the dusty, well-loved bookshelves of my local library that I fostered in myself a voracious love of reading and storytelling. Ten years later, the Brutalist architecture of Gelman was the backdrop for sleepless nights sifting through a seemingly endless wellspring of resources, building my research brick by brick, judging sources' validity and restructuring sentences and becoming a better writer, one paragraph at a time.