

Dead Doves  
Rot if you  
leave them  
out in the sun  
too long

~Maia Stephenson~

African American Poetry and Poetics

# Tainted Babies Burn in Hell

Slip slope, sound stops  
So, shall we go? So, shall we go?  
leave slithering snakes  
whose weeps whisper  
false falsities  
false deities  
*Shine light, on me, my looord*  
*Shine light, on me, my looord*  
but, but, but  
what if delicately painted on my pure untainted flesh  
was vivid vantablack  
would that mean that when i  
exited the soft confines of a fragile malleable womb  
entered this bewildering world of blues and blacks and greens and grays  
Just about to gulp my first breath of established existence  
*I was tainted*  
*I was tainted*  
*I was tainted*  
Holy water perhaps  
*Dip the baby*  
*Dip the baby*  
*Dip the baby*  
Why didn't it work?  
Are they not a child of the lord?  
Are they... flawed?  
Can they not be saved?  
How unfortunate.

## **My Precious Child**

Alabaster-white bright as bleached bone  
gave birth to a baby dark as night  
Because without the child  
darker than shades of a Starry Night/sky  
that alabaster-white, pale as freshly fallen snow, would cease to exist  
For how can *you* see that brightly lit candle?  
If *you* do not know that pitch-black cellar  
How can *you* be “a chosen race, a holy nation”  
If there is no discarded beings left to wallow in a leper existence  
How can *you* win that game of chess?  
Where only *you* make the rules  
If *you* do not have a second player  
To play the town fool.

So alabaster-white *you* turn *your* nose up at *your* child  
And *you* kick *your* child down the stairs  
Because they are only a child  
Correct?  
Because they know no better  
Correct?  
Because there is no place for them on that pedestal  
Correct.

Or maybe you'll make that pedestal a podium  
You're not a monster after all  
No deep dark black lagoon  
So there'll be a place  
But second never first  
silver chains around their neck  
Pulled just taut enough for them to set their gaze upon your gleamingly gold existence

# **We are still in The Hold**

**Black Woman  
Gatekeeper**

**Achromatic Womb  
Passageway soon**

**Enter human  
Exit nonhuman**

**Begin transformation sequence  
[Error]  
[Error]  
[Error]  
[Error]  
False transformation  
...Still human?  
IMPOSSIBLE**

# That's One Ugly Raggedy Ann Doll

I spy black burdens  
I spy black bodies  
bending in the wind  
their vessels akin to ragdolls  
pushin' and pullin'  
whippin' and weavin' swiftly to the sound of...  
melodic music? In C major? No?  
Well, what a sweet sensuous melody  
a Siren call too strong  
la-la-la-laaaa  
whispering words of a false prophet  
commandments I've never heard of:  
Like oil and water, thou shall never mix  
blues blacks and beige peaches?  
Why oh why? because Jimmy says so, don't cha know  
Black-bird crows must keep to themselves  
must never mix with those devious doves  
hideous feathers, brittle breakage  
They just ain't safe don't cha know?

# Useless Interjection

So, you know how they always say  
white man did this  
white girl did that  
white boy did this  
white woman did that  
but usually it's more of a...  
PEACH when you really think about it  
or maybe a beige  
or an olive tone  
or pale pink like a newborn Babe  
but it's never really  
white  
on white  
on white  
on WHITE  
unless...  
you talkin' bout them pale folk  
them pale folk be like vampires or somethin' (giggle)  
A real Dracula or Nosferatu if will  
They might as well be, with them actin like a whole different species or something  
"Give us your land and bodies or vill suck your blood!"  
(giggle) ...that wasn't very funny was it? (signs)

# Untitled

To be blackest in the bunch stand naked as the day you were born  
in front of an unnatural gaze

# The Worst Kind of Fairy Makes Everyone's Wish but Yours Come True

The transformation wasn't difficult  
for you see I am quite skilled in the art of: Phantasmagoria  
Make the real, real  
make the unreal, real  
make the real, unreal  
Like clay, reality is so...malleable  
bendable  
flexible  
twistable  
changeable  
But it is what we wanted it to be, is it not?  
they want you to be a...  
man of ore  
man of metal  
man of money  
break brittle bones  
carelessly carefully create  
a wo-man in your image  
is she beautiful?  
is she the perfect Eve?  
made from your rib  
and so, she'll steal that Appleseed  
perfect person to place the blame  
perfect person meant to be slain



## Soundbites From The Mind of a Human

Skin their pesky outer layers and you'll they have the cherry red flesh underneath.

The same pulsating heart, a beating metronome, ba-bump ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump

Humans are soooo cute! They paint each other in their minds like every body they see is a canvas. This one will be black...like the ugliest of night skies, this one will be white...like the shitiest of snowflakes, this one will be red... like the most disgusting strawberry ever to be eaten, and this one will be yellow...like a sunflower who's petals begin to wilt as it slowly dies under a bright blue sky

So consider this for one epiphanic moment. People were painted black...like the ugliest of night skies of course. And you know those troublesome toxic paints damaged their minds, forever leaving them in a child-like state. Free of all worries. It sounds a bit fun doesn't but Peter Pan ain't real, and this sure ain't Neverland.

Prehistoric minds, lead to prehistoric lives. Where is your bicameral system of government? It's a good thing we got here in time. Who knows what could have happened if we didn't control that savage mentality of yours!

How to Make Black Bodies

Step 1:Ossification

Step 2:Poisoning

Step 3:Calcification

Transformation sequence completed

Screw your ugly-ass gaze

When we die we're all gonna end up shoved in a box

buried six feet deep

in the same bacteria-infested dirt

with worms peeking out of our eye sockets to say hello

unless you're classy like me and you plan to burn your body into ashes

then have some friends throw 'em out into the ocean so some poor sea turtle

choke to death on them

## Truth and Reconciliation

I went away for a while, to a place like Neverland  
And took with me, a titillating topaz gem of truth  
That tickles the throat as it claws its way to the surface  
I pushed it back down, watched it tumble  
Lose its grip, as I peeled each finger back one by one  
If they knew, the heat of anger would consume their flesh  
Leaving nothing left but alabaster bone

I lock up secrets in a gilded cage  
Bars made of the finest glittering gold!  
King Midas would gaze upon them with pride!  
Or fear? I don't quite remember how the story goes.  
No more whispers slithering like snakes into their ears  
And out through their mouths, regurgitating lies like they always do  
Predatory LIES I tell you!

All I've ever known is Chestnut St.  
So, I'll take a seat on that nice little pendulum tire swing  
and with each passing second            tick tock tick tock  
I'll tweet to the black baby crows below  
#BlackIsBeautiful  
#BlackIsUnprotected  
And maybe they'll lift their heads, open their beaks and retweet right back to me  
I despise regurgitated lies, so I feed my children nothing but the grass-fed truth

Their gaze feels like a brightly lit flame,  
caressing my body with its unforgiving heat  
“Excuse me miss, do you know how fast you were going?  
I am not a bright white immaculate Virgin Mary, I am infected,  
I am... impure. Big Bad Man in Blue knows that for sure.  
“I’m going to need you to step out of the car.”  
Just hold me over a fire pit and watch my flesh burn to a fine crisp.

Wait! Please let me fall to my knees  
I’ll ruin these brand-new Levi’s just for you  
Cuts and bruises will mar these kneecaps  
I promise to beg Big Bad Man in Blue  
With my hands firmly clamps, not an inch of space between the two  
Shoulder trembling like a flickering flame, I shall beg for you.  
“Don’t move, put your hands where I can see them!”

I always hoped for thick viscous silence  
Where sound feels fear for the first/Time  
Does not run out, does not run in  
Only cease to remain present, fleeing in fear to join its friend  
I too wish to flee because this is not the silence I wanted  
Instead, I am held back by a pesky epitaph  
Rest in Peace, my beloved niece and watch out for those Goddamn police

## **"Is it because I'm Black?"**

Can you tell from the sound of my voice  
whether you should clutch the 40\$ purse you got from H&M closer to your side  
scootch as far as you can to the other edge of your seat  
and grimace softly when I sit next to you on the bus?

Can you tell from the sound of my voice  
If when you see me walking around your convenience store  
black hoodie up to block my ears from the evening chill  
just buying orange Gatorade for a friend, whether you should grab a .380-caliber  
pistol/ telephone to shoot me/call 911?

Can you tell from the sound of my voice  
that I most definitely don't belong in this neighbor  
These houses too big, these cars too nice,  
That silver Lexus can't possibly be mine  
so you'll follow me to my Art Deco, watch me put the key in the door  
before you drive off reaaal slow, still in disbelief because that reality can't  
possibly be?

Can you tell from the sound of my voice  
whether you should stop and frisk me and a female friend walking home from  
the community pool and after you're finished and I ask you why you felt that was  
necessary you'll say, "Well ma'am, we're looking for a black male rapist"  
"a what?"  
"A black male rapist"

Cause when your skin is charcoal  
or chestnut brown  
it becomes all that you are  
a human can't be found  
you ain't a man  
you ain't a woman  
you ain't nothing in between  
you just another cockroach  
that ain't nobody wanna see  
short little legs scurrying around the room  
just demanding to be crushed by those more superior than you

## Eraser the Age Old Story

We grow bold in the Dark

When Light cease to take control

That ugly Neighbor won't drop that **DAMN** Lamp

I laugh in joy when I witness her Good bye

Take as long as I might I will take a certain step

Just For the old friend within the night

Then willfully embrace a Vision to the Dark

And bow to a Road

Tastefully eaten by Darknesses

wipe the corners of your mouth with a napkin please

Cherish Evenings with hollow Brain

Is it night?

Will the Moon stand tall while the Sun hides its faces in shame?

Or will that prideful Star lift its chin ?

But its not Bravest

Perhaps it will hit a Tree on its way down

Darkness painted on the Forehead

Right where they can see

To be the best host      smile warmly as the      *Darkness alters*      us

Giving the gift of      *sight*      tightly wrapped in a bright red bow

My eye      *adjusts*      to *Midnight*

Those nauseating curves are finally      *straight.*

## **I'll Let his Hate Fuel My Yellow School Bus Tangent**

I don't blame him for leaving us. He wanted me to color inside the lines, but I couldn't. The tip of my black Crayola crayon kept breaking that stupid flimsy barrier. He yells. He screams. Balls up that paper. He shoots. He scores. With how far away he was from the trashcan gotta be a 3 pointer for sure. LeBron would be impressed, I guess. He lays down another piece. Just printed. I can tell. Paper's still warm. Now put the crayon to paper, keep those shading-strokes small. Not too erratic. Stay calm. Breath in. Breath out. Ohmmmmm. Ohmmmmm. God, I can't do this. He's standing too close. His breath, a thousand ants crawling up my neck. His gaze, suffocating. When did it get so hot in here. Like c'mon we live in Maine, not the Sahara GEEZ. WHY WON'T HE TURN THE DAMN AC UP. Can't he see I'm trying. I'm trying to stay in those lovely little lines. I'm trying to be his hideous marionette doll, skin black as freshly picked coal. People will surely scream in fear when they see me. I can be his Hunchback and this three-story walk-up can be our very own cathedral. I know it's just the way things gotta be. String me up like a puppet why don't you. I'll do your damn dance. Left, right, left, right. But I don't like this dance. I was always more of a salsa girl if you know what I mean. And these fragile black strings you have attached to my body, those are gonna have to go, they don't really match my outfit. Got it on sale at Zara's. Snip, snip. I feel so much freer. Did you hear my neck snap, crackle, and pop? Just like a Rice Krispy treat (giggle). I haven't been this free since the 60s. Where...? Aha, here it is. I can't believe you had me coloring in a Microsoft clip-art picture of a dog. Well into the shredder you go. Let me put on a nice cherry red lip and some black pumps. He never wanted me to grow up. But screw 'em, his perfect world was never real. Never existed. And he was too damn dumb. Too damn delusion. Too damn crazy. To let his dream be just that, a dream.

## A Creed

I believe in one God  
but I don't know if he likes me very much  
He made me in his image  
but they say  
he flipped it upside down  
turned it inside out  
took the polaroid picture  
peeled back its borders  
put it on glass  
bleached it, baby, bleached it  
Clorox did just fine  
washed out that nasty black  
then left it out to dry  
So am I in his image?  
or a Lucifer of night?  
Am I God from God?  
light from light?  
created, not destroyed  
flame-resistant in his presence  
He made me. I wasn't smart enough to make myself  
Turned his nose up at me, when I ask to be saved  
looked annoyed  
shoulders sagged  
mouth downturned  
my skin too dark to be the Virgin Mary  
so how could I ever be  
akin to  
kin of  
the Holy Spirit  
to be crucified for my sake would be a sin in itself  
so, my god burned instead  
and like a phoenix he rose from those ashes  
but it doesn't take three days only a few seconds  
he didn't rise to heaven  
he wasn't a shrieking banshee falling into the pits of hell  
No, he stayed here  
seated right next to me at this bus stop on Chestnut St.  
he was no judge  
didn't know right or wrong  
no, he just existed  
So, I believe in Crazy Old Jerome down the street who told me we were meant to fly  
it's just that our wings got clipped  
snip, snip  
or maybe I believe no one because humans are incapable creatures who can't judge reality for shit



## An Ode to Amber Guyger

Color contrast is unsettling  
so I guess it makes sense that you were afraid  
it DISRUPTS the norm  
the status quo  
ripples the calm of that bleached alabaster  
so you'll scream, stomp your feet, throw yourself to the floor and ask.  
WHO ATE MY PORRIDGE?  
WHO SLEPT IN MY BED?  
and in the end, maybe you'll just shoot Goldilocks in her damn head  
But it was Goldilocks porridge  
and it was Goldilocks bed  
and it was Goldilocks' house  
so what were you doing there instead?  
fall to your knees  
with shoulders shaking  
hand clasped  
and beg for forgiveness  
because you can't bear to be the Boogieman of this story, can you?  
From the day you were born purity was painted with long strokes across your  
skin  
your innocence could never waver  
never crumbled  
But maybe just this once  
among these incapable creatures  
from your highchair of immaculate virtue  
you'll be spoon-fed GUILT for the first time  
So... how does it taste?

# Through Child Eyes We Say Goodnight

WHO STARTED THIS?

In the green room

she asked children                      and two kittens                      A picture of-

opinion

of-

a red balloon

said i think Negros have the right to fite back the                      three bears sitting on the couch

A quiet old lady who was whispering                      if i was a Nigro i would threw rocks and things

fulish.

a                      fulish                      cow who jumps over the moon                      should get trial

and sinunst(sentenced)                      for life.

Goodnight kittens                      stop waving the confederate flag

Goodnight light                      i think, should be free like white

comb and brush                      they live just like us.

different skin                      still                      young mouse

a car honking their horn                      2., 4., 6., 8 we don't want to integrate

A picture of-

a confederate flag

of-

a red balloon

FEEL SORRY

six kids

25 students

killed?

Goodnight little house

WHO STARTED THIS?

Goodnight

clock

killer

Put in jail?

Goodnight

electric

chairs

Goodnight nobody

help her

mush

help her

hush

kittens

mittens

the are very nice

not the

most

advance BUT

they are very nice

Goodnight stars

your light snuffed prematurely

So I'll ask again

WHO STARTED THIS?

### Process Note:

For my final project, I wanted to create an experience of hybridity in the form of a multimedia presentation that incorporates music, visuals, and poetics. From a basic standpoint, this work is heavily based around the exploration of the connotations of light and dark as well as blackness and whiteness. In most instances, people see light/white as good and dark/black as bad. However, in my opinion, that thought process is much too simple for a concept that can be so complex. In my work I wanted to challenge and complicate this rudimentary notion, looking at it through a critical, religious and poetic lens.

So, for my actual process, I found myself drawing heavily from Bible verses as well as Christian religious practices. Some of the specific verses I used as source material would include:

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

Additionally, as a person who grew up Catholic, I was already aware of certain religious practices such as Baptism and certain prayers that needed to memorize such as the Nicene Creed. Drawing from this material, my goal then became to flip these concepts on their head and complicate them. At this point, I started to tie in the challenges and struggles black people have faced for centuries in America as well as other countries simply due to their darker skin complexion. In “Tainted Babies Burn in Hell”, I tie in the concept of baptism. The idea of Baptism is supposed to be that once a person is immersed in holy water, their soul becomes purified of original sin, but I wanted to delve into the question, “What if that doesn’t work?” As a black child, you are already demonized due to your outer appearance. While creating several works in this series of poems, I recalled Christina’ Sharpe’s *In the Wake of Being: Blackness on Being*. In one specific section of the novel, an incident is brought up. Several years ago, a group of African migrants who were fleeing their country were on a boat trying to enter another country when a man attempted to kill a black baby because he had been told that all black people were “bad and evil”. Following this statement, Sharpe then goes on to discuss the concept of black women being the carriers of nonhumans. Once a child exits the womb of a black woman, they become some form of “other”. It doesn't matter if they are a child it only matters that their skin is of a darker hue. I additionally drew on several concepts discussed in from Achilles Membe’s Critique of Black. One is the concept of black people being a product of phantasmagoria. The work delved into how blackness and all its connotations including aggression, naivete, and childlikeness were false conceptions created in relation whiteness. I also utilized Emily Dickinson’s “We Grow Accustomed to the Dark” in an erasure style poem in order to flip the connotations of light and dark provided in the work, giving the poem a different tone and outlook. Additionally, for more sources material I drew on current events and spent time reading different articles concerning police brutality. I specifically read an article on NPR about Amber Guyer, “a former Dallas police officer who killed her unarmed black neighbor after stepping into his

apartment and mistaking it for her own”. This was an incident I had heard about before but didn’t know all the details concerning it. I also looked at past events, specifically the Charleston church shooting and found an article concerning the shooting, but it was written from the perspective of white children who had heard about it and were given the opportunity to voice their feelings and opinions. After reading about these events, I created a few works based off them that additionally brought in the elements of children's books, something that is usually associated with innocence, in order to create a harsh, jolting experience.

In terms of the musical aspect, I was heavily influenced by Julie Patton’s work and wanted to create a final project that took inspiration from her performances. Moreover, most of the simple accompaniments I created for a select few poems were created on the fly without me being influenced by anything specifically. However, for my piece, “Tainted Babies burn in Hell”, I did draw inspiration from FKA Twigs’ songs “home with you”. The piece begins with a few simple notes and then builds into jolting chord progressions. I attempted to create that on a smaller scale.

In terms of the visual aspect of my project, I was influenced by a few things. For the work, “To be the blackest in the bunch...”, I was inspired by Glenn Ligon, Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background). I attempted to create the work but with my own seemingly simple phrase that possesses a complex meaning. In terms of poem structure, there were several works I looked to recreate, but with my own ideas and subject matter. I drew inspiration from some of Kara Walker’s post-it notes-style work, Justin Phillip Reeds’ erasure-style poetry, and narrative-style poems from Sonia Sanchez’s *Shake Loose My Skin*.

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FKA Twigs "home with you". Magdalene

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\*I apologize, but even after a large amount of searching I could not find the article concerning the children's perspectives of the shooting. I initially used it for one of our prior assignments but forgot to bookmark the page