

Shattered mosaic



The African American and Diaspora Studies Journal of Undergraduate Research
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– Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz and Kitty Jo Cox

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Editor's Note

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

I created this cover based on an idea from Kitty Jo Cox. I recall sitting together in the African American and Diaspora Studies lounge, waiting before our class on Black Education, when Kitty Jo raised her hand and made the anchor-down symbol over her mouth, fingers spread downward, palm facing in, covering her lips. Her eyes lit up. "I have an idea," she said. That gesture, the anchor-down symbol used in place of the pointed index finger that so often signals silence, became the heart of the cover's art. It stands as a response to the silencing that frequently occurs in discourse around the question of Blackness in higher education.

I chose the collage medium because it embodies a fitting metaphor for the student body of Vanderbilt — different people arriving from different places, brought together to create something new and whole.

The title "Shattered Mosaic" is a double entendre, reflecting intersecting elements that together shape the experience of Blackness in higher education. First, Mosaic, a student organization that partnered with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to support cultural and ethnic diversity in the admissions process was abolished, this school year due to the current government's anti-DEI initiatives, highlighting the tangible consequences of dismantling inclusion efforts. But the phrase resonated with me for a deeper reason too: isn't a mosaic already shattered? It may seem redundant, since a mosaic is already purposely composed of fragmented pieces. Yet I use "shattered" to emphasize something further, that the education system itself can be understood

not only as fragmented, but as intentionally and structurally broken in ways that produce and sustain that fragmentation. Sadly, the system of schooling is not broken. Rather, it is doing exactly what it was designed to do: create racially disparate outcomes. Similarly, a mosaic is not broken; it is doing precisely what it was meant to do.

“There Would Be No Lynching If It Did Not Start in the Schoolroom”

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Carter Godwin Woodson was a monumental figure in advancing Black people's representation and recognition within institutions of education. Woodson, a profound thought leader, was born in 1875 to formerly enslaved parents who were illiterate. Although known for many things, amongst the most important was his founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915, and through this organization's effort, the emergence of Black History Week in 1926, which evolved into what we now know as Black History Month. The aim of ASNLH, which later became the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), was to amplify the “neglected aspects of Negro life and history.” The organization's mission was a direct response to the sociopolitical climate of the time, which deliberately silenced Black intellects; knowledge, Woodson understood, was a pathway to liberation, which stood directly in opposition to the preservation of white supremacy.

Woodson's oeuvre described the systemic ways in which systems of education reinforced the success of the whites at the peril of Black people. Specifically, *The Miseducation of the Negro* has important implications today. Woodson refers to the worst kind of lynching as teaching, that a “Black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless.” In this passage, he explores the powerful grip of mental subjugation, and how this *mis-education* facilitates the future control of a Black student's actions. In this, Woodson incites a call to action by demonstrating that the Black mind has been continuously wounded by the unjust desire of whites to mold and shape the brains of those they deemed as “inferior.” In other words, he

suggests that slavery is not only a physical conquest, but also a mental one. Controlling the thinking of individuals is the most powerful *commodity*. Woodson writes: “If you can control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one” (Chapter IX: Political Education Neglected).

The schooling system possesses immense responsibilities, and often this power has been misused; an example of which includes the widespread dispersal of propaganda resulting in the littering of young Black children's minds and intellectual confidence. This abuse of power reminds me of a James Baldwin quote in *The Fire Next Time* (1963, p. 8), “The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear.” Woodson importantly acknowledges that the school curricula imposed on Black students are carefully curated by the minds of *so-called* men who can justify slavery, segregation, and maltreatment toward people they regard as inferior. To believe such labels is to accept inferiority and failure before even trying to combat the race issue in America.

In Woodson's *The Education of the Negro Prior To 1861*, he speaks to the inception of the systems of education. Education, historically, was linked to servile insurrection; effectively, the gaining knowledge renders “the Negro” incompatible with the “condition” of servitude. Through this certainty, laws were passed to silence Black intellectuals and to make it nearly

impossible to learn, an approach that has contemporary chilling echoes today. To teach Black students became illegal and heavily scrutinized, disincentivizing teachers. Woodson writes (p. 13), “Thereafter, the documents which mention the teaching of Negroes to read and write seldom even state that the southern white teacher was so much as censured for his benevolence.” The ability to have open conversations based on mere intellectualism was determined dishonorable or illicit, eerily akin to contemporary conversations in higher education that challenge intellectual freedom, and disproportionately affect marginalized students, all based on Trump’s 2025 Compact, which uses the illegitimate justification of eliminating “Cultural Marxism.” Although expressed in modern language and context, the policies reflect a similarity in their attempt to regulate knowledge as a means of preserving power.

The contemporary resurrection of intellectual censorship is horrifying, and it poses the question: *Did educational suppression as a means of preserving white supremacy ever really die? In other words, has educational censorship been resurrected from non-existence or merely adapted to fit our present moment?* The answer seems clear with current enactments of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, LGBTQ+ restrictions, and the abolishing of Critical Race Theory, all while simultaneously defunding schools that support intellectual freedom. We are living in a critical time for higher education, as the current federal administration has deliberately put *our* education under attack.

We, as students at Vanderbilt, face cosmic implications straddling the burden of our complicity at this institution (which bears a grave history of maltreatment) while concurrently paving the way for its new legacy that embodies the values of community and growth. Vanderbilt has instituted tools such as “institutional neutrality,” defined as the “university’s neutrality with respect to free inquiry, while retaining the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints” as

stated in the University of Chicago's 1967 *Kalven Report*. However, this poses the question: *Is institutional neutrality ever fully neutral?* In just this past year, the African American Diaspora Studies Department faced the prospect of ceasing to exist, *and* on December 8th, 2025, MOSAIC, a student organization that partnered with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to support cultural and ethnic diversity in the admissions process, was abolished. All due to the Supreme Court's ruling against universities' use of race as a factor in admissions, followed by executive orders limiting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. These legal precedents demonstrate that we are at a critical inflexion point in higher education where regression has become the norm and progress towards academic excellence is shunned. Our use of critical thinking is a tool; some may even say a *weapon*, and the federal administration is doing everything in its power to *disarm* us.

This year's issue of the *African American Diaspora Studies Journal of Undergraduate Research* aims to serve as a direct opposition to our current times. The theme was chosen in response to the current state of higher education, which reflects a broader attempt to narrow what knowledge is considered legitimate, whose histories are preserved, and whose voices are allowed to exist within educational spaces. Rooted in history, our special issue journal acknowledges that both historically *and* contemporarily, Black voices have been excluded, erased, and actively silenced within higher education through policies that intentionally restrict(ed) access, criminalize(d) knowledge, and devalue(d) Black intellectual traditions. Contemporary attacks on DEI initiatives echo these same patterns of exclusion by framing equity-focused work as unnecessary or harmful, despite its critical role in creating access, representation, and belonging for marginalized communities. Centering Blackness in higher education is an act of resistance against this erasure, asserting the importance of preserving the narratives that challenge

institutional power, exposing systemic inequities, and affirming Black presence within academic spaces. In this year's special issue, we have chosen to employ art in all its forms, from creative writing and photography to visual art, with pieces that sit at the crossroads of these genres. Art through *all* mediums is immensely powerful and provides an avenue for sociopolitical change.

“But art is not simply works of art; it is the spirit that knows Beauty, that has music in its being and the color of sunsets in its headkerchiefs; that can dance on a flaming world and make the world dance, too.”

— W.E.B. Du Bois

This is *your* call to action.

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The Politics of Perception

Kitty J. Cox

Access to education for Black people in America has been deliberately polarized since the founding of the United States. Black people were not considered citizens, but rather chattel, and were not granted access to education. Education is not only a social good, but a powerful mechanism for civic participation, autonomy, and influence. Restricting Black access to education has thus long functioned as a means of preserving social and political hierarchies. The narratives surrounding Black access to education have persisted across centuries, adapting to new contexts while maintaining their core function: to question, limit, or delegitimize Black participation in learning. From laws forbidding enslaved people to read, to segregationist rhetoric portraying Black intellect as insufficient, to contemporary attacks on affirmative action and DEI initiatives, these narratives have evolved but never disappeared. They continue to shape how society views Black students and professionals, influencing who is seen as deserving, who is considered capable, and whose education is valid.

Education as a Threat

During slavery, anti-literacy laws explicitly prohibited education among enslaved Black people. These laws were rooted in white anxieties surrounding potential insurrection, as literacy was understood to be a pathway to autonomy, communication, and resistance. The *South Carolina Negro Act* of 1740, enacted in the wake of the Stono Rebellion, sought to keep the enslaved “in due subjection and obedience” by criminalizing their access to education (Keyser, 2020; Rasmussen, 2010). Early anti-literacy laws thus reflect the emergence of the “education as

threat” narrative, which worked alongside beliefs in Black intellectual inferiority to justify the systemic denial of educational access.

In the post–*Brown v. Board of Education* era, this narrative persists but is adapted to contemporary norms. Rather than outright prohibition, it operates through the delegitimization of Black-centered educational spaces. Programs such as ethnic studies, diversity initiatives, and Black student organizations are often framed as exclusionary or unnecessary. This framing reflects discomfort with spaces in which Black students develop critical consciousness and community, again suggesting that an empowered, educated Black identity is destabilizing. This tactic is evident in state-level responses to AP African American Studies, particularly in Florida, where officials have rejected or restricted the course on the grounds that it lacks “educational value” or promotes particular viewpoints (Kim, 2023; Kolluri, 2023). A curriculum designed to center Black history, thought, and culture is thus recast as inappropriate, revealing an underlying resistance to Black intellectual autonomy. Similarly, contemporary attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives reinforce this narrative. Organizations such as The Heritage Foundation, in projects like *The Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise 2025*, frame what they term a “Great Awakening” as a threat to national values and outline plans to dismantle DEI and discussions of race in all levels of education (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). The Heritage Foundation argues that “the noxious tenets of ‘critical race theory’ and ‘gender ideology’ should be excised from curricula in every public school in the country.” This language is significant not only for its content, but for its framing. The Heritage Foundation broadly, and inaccurately, applies the term “Critical Race Theory” to K–12 discussions of racism, inequality, or even basic Black history.

By characterizing discussions of race as “noxious,” disruptive, and fundamentally un-American, the document positions education about systemic racism as a threat to social cohesion. In doing so, it mirrors earlier narratives that framed Black literacy and intellectual development as dangerous. Rather than explicitly prohibiting education, it delegitimizes specific forms of knowledge by casting them as ideological corruption. The labeling of critical race theory as harmful or divisive functions as a contemporary extension of the “education as threat” narrative. It shifts the focus away from structural inequality and instead constructs the *study* of that inequality as the problem, reinforcing the idea that certain forms of Black-centered knowledge must be controlled to preserve existing social order.

Cultural Deficiency and Meritocracy

The cultural deficiency narrative reframes educational inequality by shifting responsibility away from structural barriers and onto Black communities themselves. Rather than explicitly denying access, this narrative suggests that Black students underperform because of deficiencies in culture, family structure, or values, such as a supposed lack of emphasis on education, discipline, or intellectual engagement. In doing so, it transforms systemic inequities into cultural shortcomings, allowing institutions to avoid accountability while maintaining existing disparities.

Segregationist rhetoric made this logic explicit. Figures such as Thomas R. Due argued that, “The two races are not only distinct, but... so different in their physical and moral constitution, that they can never be placed on an equality,” (1832). Likewise, Alexander H. Stephens asserted that racial inequality was a “natural” condition (1861). Although contemporary

discourse rarely makes such claims explicitly, similar logic persists in more coded forms. For example, Charlie Kirk, when addressing disparities in educational outcomes, attributes them to culture, stating that “it is a cultural norm that has then turned into the cycle of poverty,” (2024). While this argument does not directly assert intellectual inferiority, it shifts responsibility for inequality away from structural conditions and onto Black communities themselves. It mirrors earlier cultural deficiency narratives by framing the consequences of systemic inequity as evidence of cultural failure.

This narrative frequently operates alongside the meritocracy narrative, which claims that Black students or professionals have not legitimately earned their positions. The evolution of this logic is evident in the rhetoric of Charlie Kirk, who states:

If we would have said that Joy Reid and Michelle Obama and Sheila Jackson Lee and Ketanji Brown Jackson were affirmative action picks, we would have been called racists. Now they’re coming out and they’re saying it for us ... You do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously. You had to go steal a white person’s slot to go be taken somewhat seriously...it is very clear you could not make it there on your own." - The Charlie Kirk Show, July 2023 (Daily Kos, 2025).

Such statements exemplify how meritocracy is invoked to question the legitimacy of Black success, framing achievement as contingent on institutional support rather than individual ability. These narratives permeate American society and inform political action, including efforts to dismantle affirmative action policies. In doing so, they devalue Black educational access and

systematically exclude Black identity from being recognized as intellectual or academically legitimate.

Assistant Editor Statement:

To occupy educational spaces as a Black person is to carry history into every room. From the criminalization of literacy during slavery, to the enforced separations of segregation, to contemporary debates over affirmative action and diversity initiatives, there persists a throughline: a persistent questioning of whether Black students belong, whether we have earned our place, or merely been permitted it.

Because of this characterization and its contemporary manifestations, the narratives we produce and circulate demand careful attention. Narratives are not passive; they shape the conditions of our reality. They inform policy, justify exclusion, and seep into the interior lives of students who must navigate institutions that simultaneously admit and interrogate them. When our presence is politicized, when our legitimacy is made conditional, it does not remain external. It fractures inward.

W. E. B. Du Bois names this fracture *double consciousness*, the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of a society that regards you with suspicion or diminishment (Bruce, 1992). In academic spaces, this manifests as a constant negotiation between self-definition and imposed perception, between intellectual authority and the lingering demand to prove it.

This third edition of AADSJUR positions itself as a refusal of that demand. It is a form of protest not through opposition alone, but through presence, through the deliberate articulation of

Black thought, experience, and scholarship. By foregrounding these narratives, we seek not only to affirm Blackness within academia, but to make space for those still in the process of claiming it. For the Black scholar who has not yet secured a stable sense of scholarly identity, this journal insists: you are not an anomaly within these institutions. You are part of a lineage, and your presence here is neither accidental nor undeserved.

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*Behind Closed 'Dores: The Lack of Opportunity for P.O.C. and
First-Generation Students at Vanderbilt*

Chance Brown

As I sat on the couch of my childhood home and started my favorite cartoon, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, I began my daily tradition. As the elements danced across the screen, the door opened, and my mother and father began *their* daily tradition.

She kissed him on the cheek and, as always, asked, “How was work?” He always just replied, “Work.” He tossed his toolbox in the closet, pulled off his work boots with a grunt, and headed straight for the shower. That day, I asked Mom, “Why does Dad look so upset when he gets home?”

She replied, “Chance, in life you have two choices: work with your back or your brain. Your dad works with his back, and it’s not easy to be on that roof all day in the sun.”

In childish ignorance, I responded, “Why would someone work with their back?”

My mom then explained, “Not everyone has a choice. That’s why it’s important that you work hard in school. You are so bright. If you work hard with your brain, you’ll never have to work hard with your back.”

From then on, school became my first priority because, like many first-generation college students, I was always told that college was a path to escaping poverty. That, by simply being admitted to college, I would have access to jobs and opportunities otherwise unavailable. While this is partly true, what often goes unsaid is the harsh realities of college for many students like me.

I am first generation. My parents didn't finish high school, and now I attend one of the best universities in the country. My hard work and high school success made me believe in the meritocracy my parents instilled within me: "You are a Black man; you have to work twice as hard for half as much."

When I arrived at college, I had an inflated sense of self. School has always been a place of affirmation and support. Despite extreme financial and familial struggles, I had made it to Vanderbilt, and the journey toward financial and personal freedom had begun...or so I thought.

When I landed on Vanderbilt's campus, I assumed that all my peers and I were at the same place professionally. While I had heard that college was more difficult for students of lower socio-economic backgrounds, in my 18-year-old naivete, I believed that my four years of private schooling had equipped me to navigate white and affluent spaces. Because of this, I saw admission to an "elite" college as the universal equalizer. However, I quickly learned this was not the case. Much of the "success" seen in elite universities is actually rooted in systems of privilege that predate admission.

A distinct phenomenon at prestigious universities is the presence of "elite organizations." These highly competitive groups are typically tied to pre-professional pathways. For example, at Vanderbilt, business fraternities and exclusive clubs serve as paramount signals of future success. While the benefits these organizations provide are impactful, they are often exclusionary by nature. In fact, most accept fewer than five percent of applicants, creating a funnel that disadvantages students unfamiliar with the "hidden curriculum" of corporate, affluent, and often predominantly white professional spaces.

This cycle is self-reinforcing. Experience and connections are needed to enter elite clubs. These clubs provide access to internships, which in turn lead to full-time employment offers. While admissions claim to weigh “business acumen” and “potential,” clubs often rely on arbitrary, nebulous, and entrenched biases to select members. The time and financial commitments can also exclude low-income students who must work to support themselves.

I participated in recruitment for a pre-professional fraternity at Vanderbilt. The process had four rounds: a résumé drop, a small group interview, an elevator pitch, and the final round. At each stage, about half the students were cut. The applicant pool shrank from about 500 to 150, then 75, then 30, before the final cohort of 20 was chosen.

Before the third-round elevator pitch, I attended a fraternity workshop for first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students. Only 75 applicants remained; 7 identified as FGLI. I counted the applicants and was shocked: “How could so few FGLI students be remaining?” Noticing my puzzled expression, the DEI chair asked what I was thinking. When I shared my surprise, he said, “This is amazing! During my recruitment, only 2 FGLI people made it to the elevator pitch.”

Unfortunately, I was a victim of the dreaded elevator pitch. I was not granted entry into the fraternity. Of the final cohort of 20 admitted members, only 2 were FGLI students (10%). This resulted in a 1% acceptance rate for the club. The likelihood of being both an admitted member and FGLI was 0.1 percentage points.

This lack of representation does not reflect a lack of talent or ambition among FGLI students. Instead, it shows how elite organizations and their selective processes reinforce systems of privilege. Unspoken norms and the hidden curriculum mark who belongs to the social

“in-group.” I argue that vague ideas of “business acumen” and “potential” act as coded proxies for closeness to dominant (often white, upper-class) standards of professionalism, rather than true assessments of ability or future success. This shows that professionalism is less a neutral evaluative framework and more a socially constructed standard shaped by white, upper-class norms.

This hegemonic professionalism does not exist in a vacuum. The lack of opportunity for POC and FGLI students has been further compounded by recent attacks on DEI by the current administration. Programs and pathways that supported marginalized students in entering exclusionary industries—such as management consulting, investment banking, law, and finance—have dwindled significantly due to federal mandates. As these programs vanish, students from different backgrounds compete for the same limited positions under the guise of 'equality.' This competition rewards those with access to the networks, social capital, and cultural knowledge within these industries. Without these support structures, campus involvement has become even more important. Thus, the pathways that once bridged the gap between unprivileged students and prestigious careers have been eliminated.

My mom was right: education opens doors. But not all doors are equally accessible. At Vanderbilt, I saw that success often reflects access to networks, hidden curricula, and privilege, not just ability or effort.

Thus, the proclaimed meritocracy championed by conservatives is, in reality, the reinforcement of a system of inequality under the guise of fairness. Selective recruitment and the elimination of diversity programs not only limit opportunity but also define who is seen as competent. This increasingly narrow definition of competency forces students from

underrepresented backgrounds to navigate persistent structural barriers within institutions that claim to reward talent but continue to privilege those who are already most advantaged.

For higher education to deliver the economic mobility so often ascribed to it, institutions must change. Otherwise, opportunity cannot depend on exposure, nor can potential hinge on proximity to a hegemonic ideal. Until change occurs, less privileged students must rely on their brains *and* their backs: their minds meet academic goals while their backs toil against systemic barriers that minimize and ignore their abilities.

Biography

Chance Brown is a first-generation college student from a working-class background, raised with the understanding that education was the path to a different life. This understanding shaped his commitment to academic excellence and led him to Vanderbilt University, where his studies have centered around the intersection of race, class, and educational equity.

Artist Statement

This autobiographical piece reflects my disillusionment with education. I arrived at college after a rewarding high school experience with a deep belief in meritocracy. I knew my background would present challenges, but I also believed that hard work alone would allow me to overcome these difficulties. Instead, I encountered rejection and systemic barriers that shattered my naivete, quickly revealing how different my upbringing was from that of the “typical” Vanderbilt student.

What inspired me to write for the journal was a professor’s mention of the decline in Black student enrollment. When I checked the common data set, I discovered that the class of 2028 had an 11 percent Black admission rate. Within one year, that number was cut nearly in half, as just 6

percent of the class of 2029 is Black. This decline, alongside the dismantling of DEI initiatives, creates a vicious cycle where lessening the Black presence today ensures an even smaller Black presence tomorrow.

The Importance of Black Studies

Sonji Hargrove

“Who are your people?” It is a deceptively simple question, but one that asks quite a bit of you. I first encountered it during my second-to-last semester of undergraduate studies while studying the life and legacy of Ella Baker. Since then, it has followed me, shaping not only what I study, but why I study it. I did not enter my first African American and Diaspora Studies course with many expectations. I enrolled in *The Making of the African Diaspora* with Dr. Tiffany Patterson thinking it would be a class secondary to my academic path. Instead, it fundamentally transformed how I understand history, power, and myself. It taught me that history is not neutral. It is constructed, contested, deeply political, and shaped by whose stories are told, whose are silenced, and whose are deemed worthy of preservation. What I didn’t realize at the time was that the question “Who are your people?” would become a framework for how I understand education as rooted in community, responsibility, and history.

The beauty of Black Studies is that it does not offer easy answers. Instead, it equips you with the tools to ask better questions. What does it mean to be Black? American? A citizen? Who writes the narratives we are taught to believe, and why do we believe them? At their core, these questions are asking the same thing: who are your people, and how does that shape what you know and how you move through the world? These questions pushed me to approach my political science coursework differently. Black Studies became the intellectual grounding beneath my political analysis, giving me the historical context and moral clarity that traditional frameworks often assume away. Where other disciplines sometimes prioritize abstraction, Black Studies insists on accountability by grounding ideas in real experiences.

The practice of constantly locating yourself in relation to others is not new. This practice of asking better questions is deeply rooted in the work of Ella Baker, whose organizing philosophy centered on collective empowerment rather than charismatic, top-down leadership. Baker believed that education should not produce passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants capable of shaping their own communities. As she famously stated, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.” Her work emphasized that leadership is not about visibility or hierarchy, but about cultivating the capacity of ordinary people to act collectively. When Baker asked, “Who are your people?,” she was not asking for a simple declaration of identity. She was asking for accountability, and for a recognition that we are shaped by and responsible to communities, histories, and struggles larger than ourselves. Knowledge, in this framework, is not something to possess, but something to use in the service of others. In this way, “Who are your people?” becomes more than a question, but a method and way of thinking that ties knowledge to responsibility.

Black Studies asks that same question of its students. It challenges the illusion of individualism and detachment that often defines higher education and instead centers community. It teaches that learning is not confined to the classroom or measured solely through grades, but rather it must be applied. Knowledge should transform how we move through the world. It asks students to move beyond individual achievement and instead understand themselves as part of something larger. To study Black history, culture, and politics is to be called into a deeper relationship with the past and a more intentional responsibility to the present.

This commitment is precisely why the growing attacks on Black Studies and DEI initiatives are so concerning. On college campuses—including Vanderbilt—these shifts are often framed as administrative restructuring or responses to political pressure. But they carry

significant intellectual consequences. The scaling back of DEI programming, reduced funding for culturally specific initiatives, and broader national rhetoric that frames Black Studies as “divisive” signal a deeper devaluation of the field. When institutions treat Black Studies as optional or disposable, they send a clear message: histories and experiences that challenge dominant narratives are expendable and critical engagement with race, inequality, and power is not essential to a university education, but supplemental.

What is lost in this process extends far beyond Black students. What we lose is not just a department or a set of courses. Without Black Studies, we lose the tools to analyze inequality honestly. We lose frameworks that help us understand how past injustices shape present conditions. We lose pedagogies that teach students to ask who benefits, who is harmed, and who is left out. Perhaps most importantly, we lose the ability to recognize that so-called “neutral” education has always been anything but neutral. Traditional curricula often present themselves as objective while quietly centering dominant perspectives and excluding others. Black Studies disrupts that illusion. It forces us to confront the reality that knowledge is produced within systems of power.

If we stop asking the questions that Black Studies demands, we risk becoming complacent, accepting incomplete histories and unchallenged narratives as truth. We risk divorcing education from responsibility, reducing it to a series of credentials rather than a tool for transformation. Education becomes something we earn, and not something that encourages growth. Black Studies resists that outcome. It insists that education should be rigorous, ethical, and intellectual, but also grounded in lived experience. Ultimately, Black Studies is not a field reserved for those who already see themselves reflected in it. It is an invitation for all students to think critically, historically, and ethically about the world they inhabit. It asks not just what we

believe, but who we are accountable to. It reminds us, again and again, that education is not simply about knowledge, but about purpose.

And so, the question remains: Who are your people, and what does that require of you?

Biography

Sonji Hargrove is a senior at Vanderbilt University with a double major in African American and Diaspora Studies (AADS) and political science. Hargrove's academic interests center on Black political thought, organizing traditions, and the ways Black communities have produced knowledge within and beyond institutions of higher education. At Vanderbilt, her work and leadership have consistently focused on questions of equity, accountability, and how students are shaped by the intellectual environments they move through.

Artist Statement

This piece was inspired by my experience studying Blackness at Vanderbilt at a moment when Black Studies and DEI initiatives are increasingly treated as optional or expendable. I wrote this piece as both a reflection and an intervention. It is an attempt to name what is at stake when fields rooted in Black intellectual traditions are framed as secondary within the academy. The question, “Who are your people?”, drawn from the organizing and pedagogical legacy of Ella Baker, guides this work and shapes my understanding of education—not as credentialing, but as responsibility.

I am grappling with tensions between institutional narratives of inclusion and the material realities of support for Black Studies on campus. The piece explores who knowledge is produced for, whose histories are protected, and how students learn to understand power when critical frameworks are marginalized. I am particularly interested in how Black Studies undergirds my

political science education, offering the historical depth and ethical clarity necessary to analyze policy, governance, and inequality honestly.

I chose the op-ed form because it allowed me to write directly to the Vanderbilt community while blending personal reflection with public accountability. Writing this piece left me wondering what Vanderbilt might look like if Black Studies were treated as foundational rather than disposable, and what responsibility students carry once they are given the tools to see the institution clearly. It also surfaced gratitude for the Black intellectual traditions, faculty, and staff at Vanderbilt that have shaped my education, even in moments of institutional uncertainty.

*An Open Letter to My Grandfather Whose Death Gave Me a Broken
Chair*

Gabrielle White

Dear George,

Yesterday, I listened to your voicemail again. It's been in the 'deleted' section of my voicemail inbox for quite some time, but I never found the strength to delete it. Unlike stereotypical sweet last voicemails from deceased loved ones, yours was—for lack of better words—a plea for help, for freedom, for someone. And, when you begged, "please call me... Somebody, please call me," I knew that 'someone' was definitely not me, I just received your message instead.

Nevertheless, I blamed myself—my younger and more naive self—for not answering when you called, not being the granddaughter you desperately needed, and not understanding why you called me and not your sons.

As a child, I placed you on a pedestal of righteousness where you could do no harm in my eyes. I spent my summers in your ground-floor apartment, digging through the white fridge, planting cheap strawberry seeds, and swimming in the community pool. I watched you, in almost everything, as you loved everyone in our family: from instantly quitting smoking at my little sister's request—ending a thirty-year addiction—to bringing my grandmother's presence into every place, even posthumously. Children are impressionable, and I was no different. I loved you unconditionally, and in all of your righteousness, because I believed that my naivete was you. I created such a secure and imaginary form of you that it became seemingly unbreakable. Yet, after your death, I was forced to reckon with the blanket of ignorance your mythical image

had kept from me.

Admittedly, I have not completely left that protective blanket because it's comfortable. I do not pretend to know the closed-door conversations you had with my father, nor your relationship with him. But I do know the silence that your name produced. When I asked my father about you, there was always silence before he answered. And I've realized that this silence was not him thinking about what to say, but rather how much to reveal. Your relationship with my father was complicated—to say the least. You were often stubborn in your ways, highly critical of their every move, and a not-so-stellar listener. Despite it all, you all loved each other in your own way.

I recognize now that you showed them tough love: a distant, and often removed form of love, one that is seen and not heard. To you, tough love would protect them from the racialized brutality you experienced; tough love would encourage them to pursue college education, unlike many others in our family; tough love would keep them alive.

To them, tough love was a chair in the corner of the living room—the one that you always sat in. For fifteen years, you sat in that reclining chair until the wear-and-tear of time and constant moving rendered it useless. After the first chair, you assumed your position in that corner in the same way. Even when the chairs would rip or lose pieces, you would shrug and sit back down; the chair couldn't be the problem. When we change the chair, we cannot ever realize that our sitting—as an exemplification of emotional distance—was always the problem. We show our children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations that emotional distance and tough love are inevitable. As they grow older and create their own families, they refuse to put a chair in the

corner like that, at least at first. Slowly but surely though, the familiarity of the chair—and tough love as the only love they’ve seen—can reel them back in because we loathe distance until we create it ourselves. So, although we all know how much a broken chair can cost, the darting gaze from the corner, or the immovability of the furniture that’s just too physically-taxing to carry, they may choose to sit as well.

But instead of taking up the chair in the corner—like you did—my father sat next to me at the table. From an early age, he nurtured my interests and encouraged me to critically question everything around me, all while ensuring that I did not know enough to question you.

Despite the resentment and guilt I will always carry with me about your death, I have both you and my father to thank endlessly. Without the continuous encouragement to explore Black American history, I would’ve never found the academic subject that has now overtaken my life. It is a light, a superglue, and life-raft that sustains me in a moment when the world seeks to destroy it—and me. So, thank you for pushing: pushing me towards the academic field I can no longer live without and my father closer to me, my siblings, and my family.

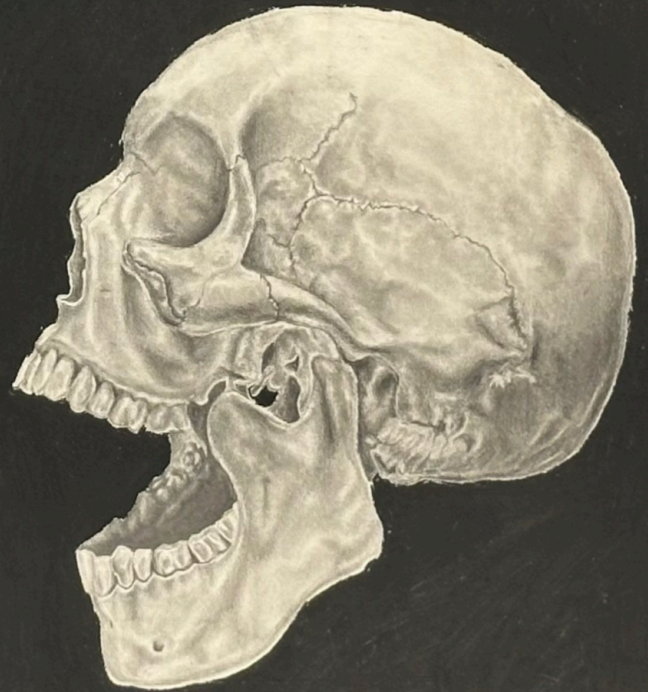
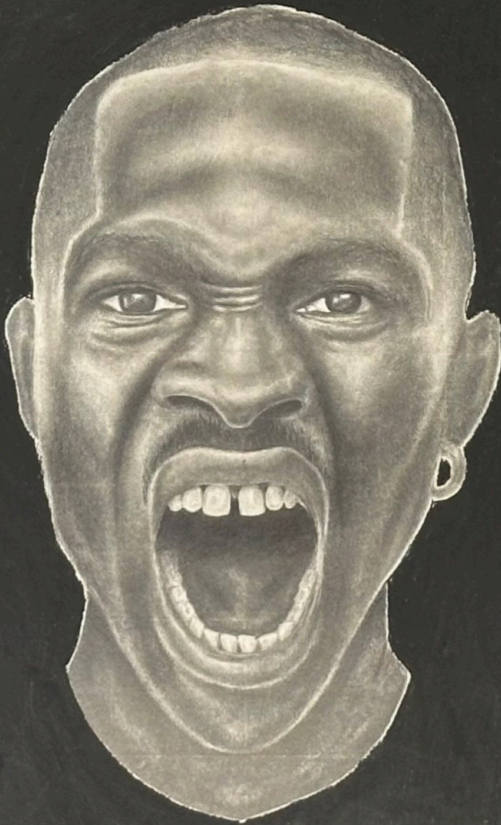
To me, tough love produces broken chairs in a storage facility—the ones piled under old suit jackets and paperwork, just accumulating dust. And yesterday, my family and I went back there to see the chair one last time. We stood there silently as the dust floated around us. Then we turned the lights off, shut the door softly, and went home.

Biography

Gabrielle White (She/Her/Hers) is a junior with a double major in African American & Diaspora Studies and culture, advocacy, and leadership on the pre-law track. Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, Gabrielle has developed a deep passion for exploring social advocacy, the Black American experience, and the criminal justice system—specifically in the American South. With aspirations to become a juvenile public defense attorney, Gabrielle seeks to defend the humanity and rehabilitative potential of youth within a system that attempts to diminish their humanity.

Artist Statement

Gabrielle’s work, “An Open Letter to My Grandfather Whose Death Gave Me a Broken Chair,” explores her multi-faceted relationship with her now-deceased grandfather and how it has impacted her navigation of higher education. Although Gabrielle often understood her grandfather—and his legacy—through rose-tinted glasses, his untimely death helped her to recontextualize his legacy, their relationship, and the disadvantages of tough love in the modern context. Although her perspective of grandfather was destined to change, Gabrielle struggles with holding her wholly positive experiences in tandem with the emotional distance he often maintained with the rest of her family. Despite the resentment she may carry for her previous naivete, Gabrielle simultaneously recognizes her grandfather for the academic influence he had on her, specifically by encouraging her interest in African American history and social resistance. Left with questions unanswered, mixed emotions, and the weight of being the eldest granddaughter, Gabrielle utilizes this open letter to address how she will continue to reckon with her grandfather’s legacy in its entirety as she navigates Vanderbilt and higher education spaces.



Memento Mori

Biography

Jade Smith is a junior at Vanderbilt University, majoring in chemical biology and minoring in English. Smith loves doing research and is very passionate about pharmacology, healthcare legislation, and regulation. Smith hopes to obtain both a J.D. and a PhD to not only engage in research but also legislation and policy.

Title

Memento Mori

Artist Statement

This piece was created as a final project for my introduction to drawing course. We were given a theme for the project, but were also told we could deviate if we wished. The theme was *memento mori*, which translates as "remember to die." Typical *memento mori* pieces include elements such as skulls, hourglasses, and flowers, all of which symbolize the inevitability of death. I wanted to take elements of this theme but integrate my own style. As an African American student in STEM, I have few opportunities to express myself artistically and reflect my own struggles and experiences in the work that I produce. This project felt like an opportunity not only to draw in a style that I am familiar with, but also to depict black people in my work. When I first approached this project, I knew that I wanted the subject of the piece to be Black, because I felt underrepresented as the only Black person in my class. I wanted to find a way to force my peers to reflect on those who look like me in the work I created.

Throughout the course, I often found it difficult to resonate with the given project themes and assignments and struggled with fully immersing myself in the drawing that I created. I chose this

subject on the left specifically because I wanted the frustration that I experienced to be felt by the audience. I wanted the subject to be directly facing the viewer, almost in a confrontational manner. As for the subject on the right, I chose a skull that mirrored the pose of the subject on the right but faced the subject rather than the audience. This was my way of integrating the original theme into the work. The skull facing the subject on the left served as a direct reminder of the coming of death.

To me, this piece represents my personal experience as a Black person in higher education in multiple ways. The piece feels like an embodiment of the frustrations I feel as a Black person struggling to find modes of artistic expression at a predominantly white institution. It also conveys the balance between identity, personal artistic style, and the regulations imposed through higher education courses that so many Black students struggle to find here at Vanderbilt University.

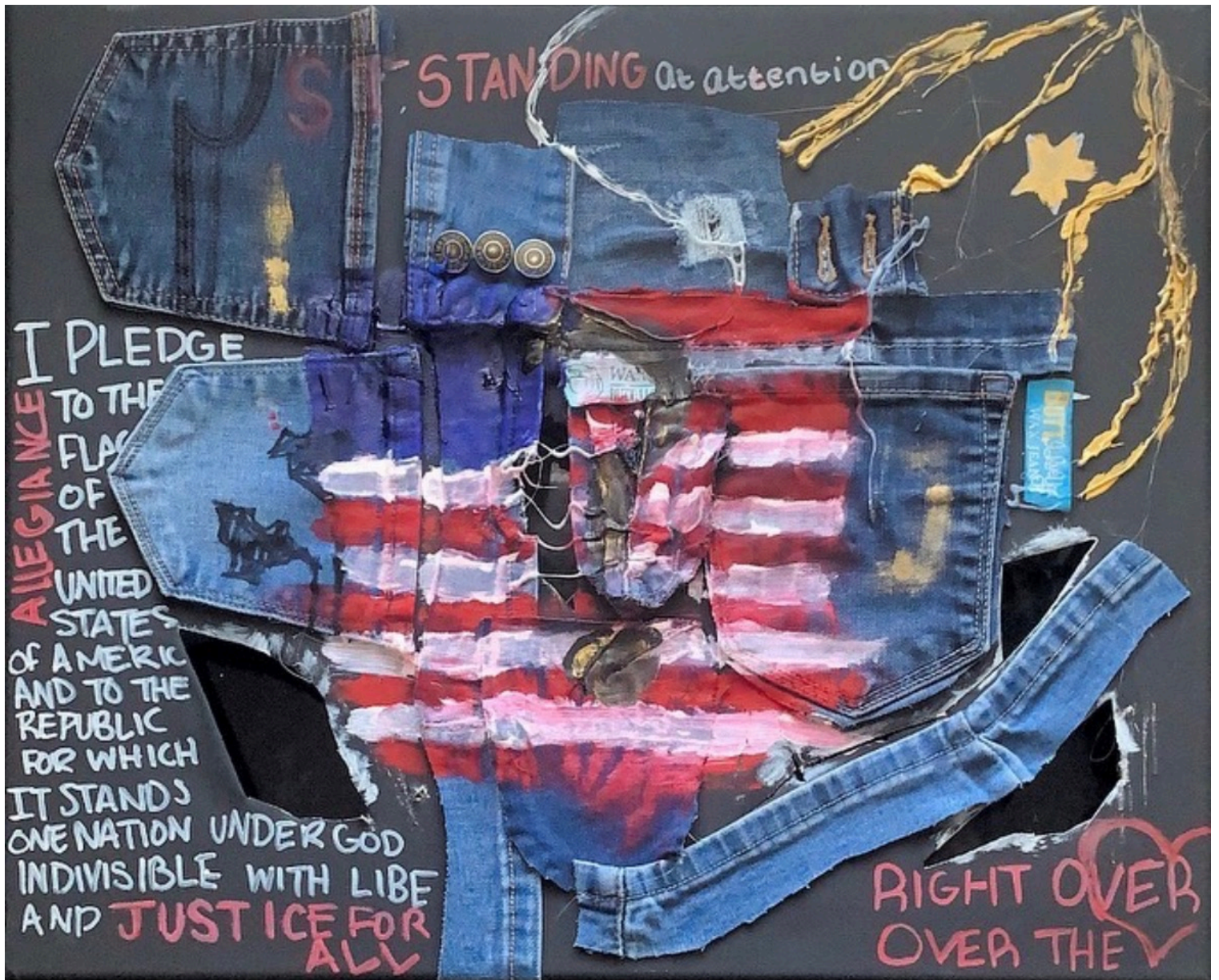


A Body Sometimes Filled With Doubt

Artist Statement

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

A Body Sometimes Filled with Doubt attempts to encapsulate the feeling of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, incited by academic pressure and a lack of self-efficacy. Often, success or failure is already determined by what an individual *believes* they can do, underscoring the importance of believing in their capabilities as a student. In higher education institutions, there is often less diversity and representation, which can send implicit messages such as “you are incapable” or “you do not belong here.” This collage represents how I feel when imposter syndrome sets in, and doubt takes over. For me, the process of moving past that feeling often sits within me, requiring a moment to pause and acknowledge all that I have worked on to get to where I am now. Initially, I wanted to entitle the piece *I Pray, To What God, I Do Not Know*, representing the ways in which doubt can appear in so many facets of existence, even in the processes of healing. However, *A Body Sometimes Filled with Doubt* felt more fitting, as I am referring to academic and social doubts. As I have spent more time here at Vanderbilt, I have realized that doubt can be used to propel me, to put out the best work possible by holding myself accountable, *or* it has the potential to cultivate stagnation, and it is up to me.



Biography

Taliyah Bradberry is a junior majoring in studio art and history of art and minoring in African American and Diaspora Studies and museum studies.

Title

?

Artist Statement

? reimagines the American flag through recycled denim, a material deeply connected to the cultural narrative of being “American.” By cutting and layering the denim, the work disrupts the illusion of unity often associated with patriotic imagery. Instead of presenting a complete image of the flag, it appears fragmented, reflecting the growing polarization of our country and its educational systems. The inclusion of the Pledge of Allegiance, something many of us are taught the second we enter the educational system, is showcased in red to emphasize the conservative takeover of patriotism. In the current moment, marked by initiatives such as Project 2025 and the rollback of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, this language takes on new weight. While the Pledge claims unity and justice, these policies often work against the very inclusivity they imply. Directly inspired by ongoing debates surrounding patriotism, “wokeness,” and DEI in higher education, this piece interrogates what it means to belong in institutions that uphold national ideals even as they obscure systemic racism. Ultimately, this work serves as a critique of the growing alignment between conservative patriotism and higher education, exposing the gap between the ideals we are taught to uphold and the realities many students, particularly Black students, continue to navigate.



My Roots Dance Beneath the Soil

Artist Statement

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

My Roots Dance Beneath the Soil is an art piece I created last year in a class with Dr. Claudine Taaffe, entitled *Curating Black Lives*, which centered on artistic curation based on the experience of being Black on Vanderbilt's campus. This is a mixed-media art piece that incorporates collage materials and paint markers. A motif throughout the piece is the imagery of tree roots, which holds deep symbolism. The main premise is that tree roots form an intricate, complex system that connects trees underground, effectively providing and sharing nutrients amongst themselves beneath the soil. This is representative of the Black community in understanding the importance of connection, community, growth, exchanging nutrients, and symbiosis. Roots can also represent the importance of self-identity and understanding to the extent that faulty institutions of racism or maltreatment cannot uproot your sense of self. Within this piece, I have used a lot of imagery; the butterfly represents transformation and self-growth, a direct embodiment of this time period in our lives as college students. I deliberately placed the butterfly in the girl's mind, representing a transformation by way of learning in this environment. Here, we have access to a wealth of knowledge, and depending on how we use it, our minds have the potential to flourish and *take flight* into the real world beyond this bubble. I used a fist holding a flower, representing Black empowerment, with the potential to grow and *bloom*. The use of the brain represents the role of higher education and how we are actively practicing intellectual growth.



Dual Awakening

Artist Statement

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Dual Awakening

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*).

“One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*)

In this creative piece, I was inspired by Du Bois' notion of double consciousness. I used a collage to create this double-minded being, embodying the notion of two-ness within one body, a contradictory and complex way of living and existing. Each piece of paper is a fragment from a magazine I ripped up, representative of how the mind and what we think are often reflections of many things compiled together.



From Kings Queens to Presidents. 2023

Biography

Isaac Bevin Boakye is a Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist and a senior at Vanderbilt University. His work explores African identities, memory, migration, and the politics of space. As an international student, he is deeply interested in how institutions both physical and academic shape belonging. His practice often investigates how Black histories are preserved, displayed, or contested within public spaces.

Title

From Kings Queens to Presidents. 2023

Artist Statement

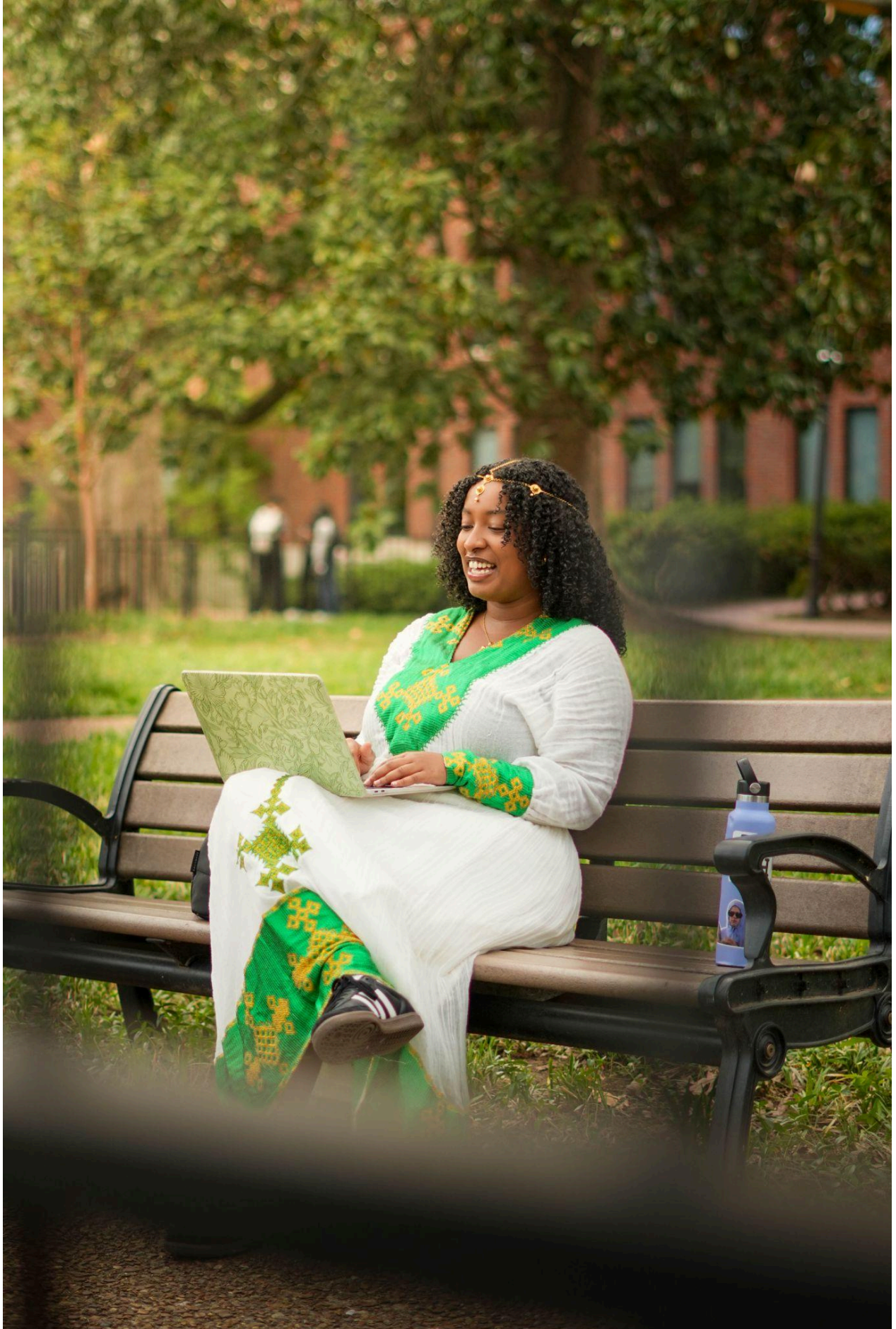
I encountered this mural in Montgomery, Alabama, along the road toward Selma and the Edmund Pettus Bridge where marchers risked their lives demanding voting rights. It reads, “From Kings Queens to Presidents,” positioned beside a portrait of Barack Obama and the words, “Hands that picked cotton also picked a president.” The scene struck me because it compresses centuries of Black history into a single visual declaration of transformation.

In the context of higher education, this photograph reflects the tension between a long lineage of people and the limitations and oppression they have faced. Universities often teach curated, sanitized versions of history, yet traveling through Montgomery on an educational trip, I felt the raw emotional and psychological weight of history. The industrial backdrop, which is ordinary, weathered, working-class, alongside the bold purple bus, complicates the mural’s royal language. This contrast mirrors the experience of Black students in higher education, carrying ancestral brilliance while navigating institutions not originally built for them. The bus also parallels the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the long walk across the bridge. It suggests the migration,

progress, and collective travel of Black people as they fought access to education and voting rights. Photography allows me to document moments like this and gives me and my viewers enough room for introspection. This particular shot leaves me wondering how we can continue to take control of the narrative inside academic spaces. At a time when Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives and Black Studies are under attack, it is crucial to remember who we are and what we are capable of.



Making Belonging Visible - EESA







Biography

Bekawak "Bek" Mathewos is a junior at Vanderbilt University majoring in Human & Organizational Development with a minor in Data Science. Born in Ethiopia and raised in the Philadelphia, PA area, Bek brings a unique perspective shaped by his multicultural background and creative spirit. He is the founder of Beksproductions, a creative services business, and expresses his passion for storytelling through YouTube vlogs and social media campaigns. Bek is also a proud member of the Ethiopian & Eritrean Student Association (EESA), a community that has been central to his sense of belonging and cultural connection at Vanderbilt.

Artist Statement

The presence of EESA on campus has played a significant role in shaping what belonging at Vanderbilt looks like. It wasn't until 2019 that a centralized Ethiopian and Eritrean student organization existed on this campus, and that absence mattered.

EESA changes this. EESA makes our identity communal and felt. This student organization isn't about cultural celebrations or performance, but about continuity. Whether it is seeing my people wearing a kemis or a netela on campus, hosting coffee ceremonies (buna time), or simply hearing Amharic, Oromo, and Tigrinya spoken in common spaces, these moments normalize our presence. Culture no longer becomes something to explain, but rather something to embody. Beyond cultural significance, EESA has also functioned as an academic and emotional support system. At an elite institution such as Vanderbilt, competition, isolation, and comparison run rampant. With that, having a community that understands the immigrant narrative and the pressure placed on first generation students to succeed creates a safe space for reassurance and accountability. EESA represents adaptation. Nobody waited for Vanderbilt to define our students'

experience; EESA organized around what was needed. With EESA on our campus, we become more than an organization; we become family. Strengthening not only our community but the broader campus culture.



Power

Biography

Bethel Derege is a sophomore majoring in history and theater, with an interest in visual storytelling through film, theater, and photography. Derege uses art to express emotions and experiences that are often difficult to put into words. As a Black student in higher education, Derege is constantly navigating spaces where she feels visible yet misunderstood.

Title

Power

Artist Statement

This photograph connects to the theme of Blackness in higher education by exploring how power shapes Black identity as something scrutinized, judged, and diminished. The central figure covers their face, symbolizing exhaustion, pressure, and the emotional toll of constantly being evaluated. Surrounding hands point inward, representing how institutions, peers, and systems of power place blame, expectations, and stereotypes onto Black students. The word “POWER” behind the subject highlights a contradiction. Although Blackness is powerful, that power is often overshadowed or suppressed by those who control academic and social spaces.

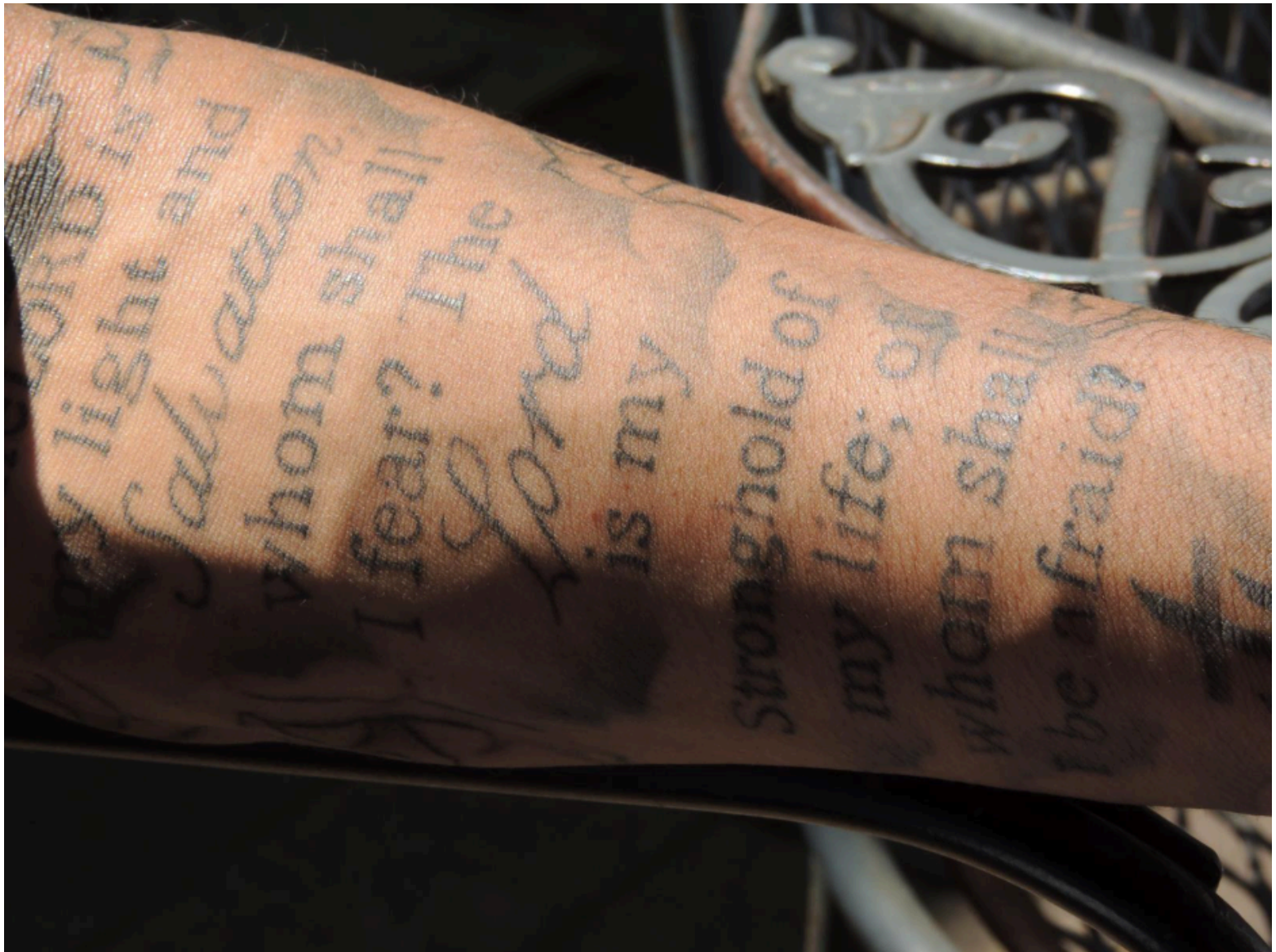
I was inspired to create this piece after reflecting on moments when I felt overwhelmed by assumptions about my intelligence, behavior, or worth. In higher education, Black students are often expected to prove themselves repeatedly, while carrying the weight of representation. This work explores the tension between internal strength and external pressure, and questions why Blackness is so often framed as a problem instead of a presence.

I chose photography because it allows viewers to immediately feel emotion without explanation. The visual language of gesture and body positioning communicates stress, isolation, and resistance all at once. Creating this piece left me wondering how long Black students are expected to endure these pressures quietly, and what it would look like for institutions to truly recognize and support Black humanity.

This work brought up feelings of frustration, vulnerability, and honesty for me. At the same time, it reaffirmed that naming these experiences is a form of power in itself.

With Melanin,

Bethel Derege



“Accessories, and Tattoos as a Form of Self-Identity and Resistance”









Biography

Carter Vidale is a sophomore from the Bronx, NY, majoring in African American and Diaspora Studies.

Title

Accessories and Tattoos as a Form of Self-Identity and Resistance

Artist Statement

Since I was nine years old, I've been a Black student at a PWI. I've seen the ways in which Black students are expected to, and in some cases forced, to conform to the expectations of the white elite. For some, accessories like jewelry may simply be meaningless pieces of metal. However, I assert that jewelry, whether customized or not, functions, for the Black individual, as a tool of identity-building and resistance in spaces where they are expected to be as minimalistic as possible. The expectation of Black minimalism in academic spaces comes from the desire to assimilate the Black student into the mold of what White academia believes a student should look like. Clean (which has its own racial connotations), minimal jewelry (chains and necklaces) and in applicable cases, little to no tattoos. Jewelry-studded and tattooed students may, at Vanderbilt specifically, be mistaken for student athletes or even visitors, an affirmation of the idea that "If you do not conform, you do not belong." With the Black population at this institution shrinking, it is more important now than ever for Black students to build not only community but strong self-identities. Through that process, we actively engage in resistance against socially reinforced respectability politics as well as the system that tells Black students to conform or leave. In this collection of photographs, I showcase the various ways in which

necklaces, bracelets, beads, and tattoos work to not only showcase individuality but also self-expression. I believe that photos are the best way to explain what I mean, as simply writing it out could not possibly capture the beauty of individuality and of Black skin itself.

The Cyclical Exchange

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Greetings Mr. K,
a shackled mind is worse than anything at all.
tied tight like a caterpillar in its chrysalis,
to be suffocated by your own armor,
that happens to be the creation of your
freedom,
the hard times are just that,
because your freedom is spiritual
and this life is a beautiful tragedy,
a paradoxical complex arrangement
you remind me that every now and again—
accept yourself before you accept the world,
they are reflections, Mirror –
like a glass pond that has not yet
been shattered by the rippling effect,
grasp onto the bits of innocence
that existence holds in the web of its essence
know that this is not an endless void,
dark tunnels distinctly weave,
mimicking a feeling
of being stranded down a path your mind thought it knew
but still, your eyes hold happiness
like you hold the world in your palm,
there is no need to close your hand to form a clenched fist,
because you know Mother Earth will still go round,
So, for now we do what we can, and that is enough.

Artist Statement

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

This poem is inspired by Keith LaMar, an incredible human with so much insight, wisdom, intelligence, and perspective who is *unjustly* on death row in solitary confinement. I met Keith in a book club I was a part of in high school. We often spoke about systemic oppression, racism, and philosophy. I notice an unwavering connection between Keith's experience and an AADS class I am taking with Dr. Gilman Whiting, *Black Education*. In this class, we have learned about the unjust system that is the school to prison pipeline, referred to as *The Cyclical Exchange*, in my poem—a carefully curated system that entraps, most often, young Black boys, thrusting them into the prison system.

I also watched a film entitled *13th*, which speaks carefully to the details of the prison industrial complex, with a focus on the 13th amendment: abolished slavery and involuntary servitude throughout the United States, except as punishment for a convicted crime. In this film, I learned that many companies are quietly invested in prisons. For example, there is skyrocketed pricing for phone calls, but to make a phone call you must work for free labor, a perpetual and “cyclical exchange.” Other examples include the ways in which different healthcare providers use prisons to make a lot of money, yet they do not actually maintain the health of the prisoners. Black men account for 6.5% of the US population, but they make up 40.2% of the US prison population. There has never been a moment in US history where the law and order branch of the state has not operated against the freedom and liberty of Black people. (DuVernay, A. (Director). (2016). *13th*). The 13th amendment is a tool. It is privileged and held to a higher esteem due to being written in the constitution. Black men are continuing to be enslaved but in a manner that is

somehow deemed acceptable by our government. The documentary referred to convict leasing, as a new form of slavery, and how that has really evolved into mass incarceration. This demonstrates the ways in which Black men are really targeted in the US and used as a *machine* for American success, which really means rich *white* success.

This system unfortunately starts in our **education system**, with disproportionate punishment towards our Black and brown students, leading them astray in irreparable ways.

Keith LaMar's sentence is the result of the 1993 Lucasville Prison Uprising, which included the death of a prison guard and other prisoners.

- State investigators did not observe any evidence or the crime scene.
- There was proof that jailhouse informants were paid to create false narratives that blamed Keith.
- Keith had no connection to any of the groups that were involved in the commotion.
- Ohio withheld evidence that would prove the innocence of Keith LaMar.
- The *actual* perpetrator admitted to murdering an ***alleged*** victim of Keith's.
- Racism was rampant in Keith's case; there were no Black jurors, and the environment was an *openly* racist one.

Visit Keith's Website and support his journey: <https://www.keithlamar.org/>

'For the past 31 years, Keith has maintained his innocence from solitary confinement, researching and studying his death penalty case from inside a steel cage the size of a closet. In spite of being unable to touch grass or feel the wind against his skin, Keith LaMar has cultivated a beautifully perceptive understanding about life and the system that railroaded him.'

Take Action Here



<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/free-keith-lamar>

**THE COUNTDOWN HAS
STARTED
WANT TO GET INVOLVED
FOR AN INNOCENT MAN
ON DEATH ROW ?**

1 SIGN KEITH'S PETITION
WWW.ACTIONNETWORK.ORG/PETITIONS/FREE-KEITH-LAMAR

**2 FOLLOW & SHARE JFKL ON
SOCIAL MEDIA**

**3 DONATE TO KEITH'S
LEGAL DEFENSE FUND**
WWW.KEITHLAMAR.ORG/DONATE

**4 READ KEITH'S BOOK,
CONDEMNED**
WWW.KEITHLAMAR.ORG/CONDEMNED

American son, is your sun burning you

Bilen Gimikael

A booming city over a faulty line

We see the same moon
Your fate's soon gonna be mine

A storms abrewing
Farther than the eye can see
And yet we are so caught up
With the space in between you and me

Summer's Gun has begun
Gone are the days of fun in the sun

We were once children who wonder

Now, adults who ponder
Doesn't it feel like life's getting longer

You celebrate all the wars you've won

Unaware the next will involve your son

Unbeknownst to what you've done
You journey back to you playing in the sun

Playing dumb, you ask
"What's life become?"
Can't march to the beat of your own drum

You've subtracted all from the sum
Left with none
Now,

Inches away from becoming the corner store bum

Biography

Bilen Gimikael is a sophomore who is interested in studying the intersection of environmental racism. Her rhythmic poem details her hometown, Memphis, Tennessee, and current environmental issues.

Artist Statement

As a born-and-raised Memphian, I was deeply concerned about this new xAI Project coming to my neighborhood. Because of my background and knowledge of my city, I felt entitled to write this informative piece. I analyzed the projected benefits and drawbacks of this new facility and considered the city's current environmental and infrastructure conditions. I knew I had to write this piece because I saw no one else doing it at the time.

My poem connects to the theme of Blackness in higher education by assessing how exactly Black spaces are systematically ignored and harmed. As a Black woman in higher education, I use my platform to address these ongoing challenges in my hometown. Memphis, a historically significant and predominantly Black city, frequently suffers from neglect. I wanted this poem to give a voice to Memphis residents who are tired of suffering in silence.

*Oh Com*Kitty J. Cox

Oh Com,

When Lincoln asked if the Confederate's vessel could be stopped,
you named the Vanderbilt,
its bow a promise of ruin,
its weight a measure no rebel could bear.

The ironclad rose once,
a warning to the South,
guns trembling at your bow.

Now, oh Com, your legacy lives
in polished steps and donor whispers,
in policies that favor gold over justice,
and the pride of rebels
is again measured
in the quiet exclusion of the free.

Artist Statement

Vanderbilt University was established during the Reconstruction era, a period often framed as an effort to expand education and rebuild the South. Its founder, Cornelius Vanderbilt, was aligned with the Union during the Civil War and materially supported its efforts, even offering his steamship *Vanderbilt* to aid. Reflecting on this contribution, he emphasized the ship's unmatched power, asserting that no Confederate vessel could withstand it.

Vanderbilt later married Frank Armstrong Crawford Vanderbilt, a Confederate sympathizer who played a key role in encouraging his financial support for the university. In her own words, she wrote, "Com. is proud of my being a rebel. Takes pains to tell it."

The founding of Vanderbilt cannot be understood as separate from the historical conditions that shaped it. Vanderbilt emerges from a moment in which the promise of education was entangled with the unfinished project of racial justice.

To revisit this history in the present, particularly amid challenges to diversity, equity, and inclusion, is to recognize how these legacies endure. When institutional responses to such challenges remain limited, and when shifts in policy correlate with declines in Black student representation, I raise a critical question: not simply who has access to these spaces, but how meaningfully that access is supported, defended, and sustained.

Citation: The Commodore's Civil War. (n.d.). *Vanderbilt University*. Retrieved March 25, 2026, from <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2011/04/11/the-commodores-civil-war/>

*Ain't I a scholar?*Kitty J. Cox

They call me strong before they call me anything else. It comes before my work, before my ideas, before my name even settles into the room. Strong, like a preface. Like a quiet agreement that whatever happens here, I will withstand it. That I will absorb what is difficult without interruption. That I will carry what is heavy without asking who put it there.

And the truth is, I am strong. I have been. I know how to endure. I know how to take what is given and make something of it. But somewhere along the way, that strength stopped being a description and became a demand. It became the reason I am expected to keep going, no matter the cost. It became the justification for why I am allowed to be worn down.

Because if I can survive it, then it is survivable.

And if it is survivable, then it is permissible.

So I am told I must survive.

I survive by learning how to take from myself.

Not all at once. Not in ways that would alarm anyone. It happens gradually, in small extractions that look like discipline from the outside. I give up sleep first, because that feels negotiable. Then I give up rest, not just the act of it, but the idea that I am entitled to it. I ignore hunger until it becomes something dull and distant, something that no longer interrupts the work. I quiet the parts of myself that want softness, that want care, that want to exist without being measured.

Each time, I tell myself it is temporary. Necessary. Worth it.

But it accumulates.

There is a point where it stops feeling like sacrifice and starts feeling like consumption. Like I am sustaining myself on my own depletion. Like the only way to meet the demands of this place is to become a resource for it, to feed it pieces of my body, my time, my health, until there is just enough left to keep producing.

And the most unsettling part is how well it works.

I am successful. I am articulate. I am exceeding expectations. My work is careful, thorough, undeniable. I have learned how to make it airtight, how to anticipate every question before it is asked. I have learned how to present myself in a way that cannot be easily dismissed.

But I can feel what it is costing me.

In the way my body no longer feels like something I live in, but something I manage. In the constant tension, the exhaustion that sleep does not fix, the sense that something inside me is always being asked for, always being taken. There is a distance growing between who I am and what I produce, like the work is being built from parts of me that are not being returned.

They call this resilience.

But resilience, when it is expected, becomes something else. It becomes a quiet permission for harm. It becomes a way of normalizing the conditions that require it. Because if I continue to rise, to succeed, to endure, then there is no urgency to ask why I have to.

So I rise. I succeed. I endure.

And in doing so, I participate in my own depletion.

There is a particular kind of loneliness in that realization. That the very thing that allows me to remain here, my ability to adapt, to push through, to make something out of nothing, is also the thing that keeps me in a cycle of taking from myself. That my strength is both my survival and the mechanism through which I am slowly undone.

I keep asking the question, but it has changed.

It is no longer just about recognition. It is no longer just about belonging.

It is about whether there is a version of this life where I do not have to harm myself to inhabit it.

Because if being a scholar requires this, this constant negotiation with my own limits, this steady erosion of my health, this quiet, ongoing act of self-consumption, then I am left wondering what, exactly, I am being asked to become.

Ain't I a scholar?

Or am I only ever almost one

as long as I can keep feeding the version of myself

that this place knows how to recognize?

Artist Statement

This prose piece reflects my internal world as I navigate my identity as a Black woman scholar. “Ain’t I a scholar?” echoes Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I a Woman?*, a speech that exposed how Black women were excluded not only from womanhood, but from the protections and assumptions attached to it. In a similar way, my question interrogates what it means to be recognized as a scholar within institutions that have historically positioned Blackness as incompatible with intellectual authority.

Black women are highly educated, as the percentage of young Black women earning bachelor’s degrees has risen to approximately 38 percent, compared to just 26 percent of Black men (JBHE, 2024). Yet, Black men still hold a majority of Black professorships and senior roles (JBHE, 2019). In my experience, Black women occupy a uniquely demanding position in academic spaces. Societal expectations frame us as inherently resilient, self-sufficient, and responsible, qualities that can translate into persistence and high achievement, but also into silent endurance.

The “Superwoman Schema” articulates this pressure, describing how Black women often feel compelled to suppress vulnerability, overextend themselves, and succeed despite adversity (Nelson et al., 2025). What is framed as strength becomes obligation. What is praised as resilience becomes expectation. And what appears as excellence often conceals a quiet, accumulating cost.

I have felt that cost in my own body. During my time at Vanderbilt University, I have developed a number of health issues, most notably an autoimmune condition, one that is exacerbated by stress, lack of sleep, and the very patterns of overextension that academic success seems to

require. There is something deeply unsettling in this: a body turning inward, cells attacking what they are meant to protect. A mutiny from within.

I cannot ignore the parallel. The way I have learned to push past my limits, to ignore signals of exhaustion, to sacrifice care in the name of achievement, mirrors my internal unraveling. I have, in many ways, participated in my own depletion. Not because I am careless, but because I have been taught that to be anything less than exceptional is to risk being dismissed altogether. Mediocrity is not afforded to me as a stage of growth; it is constructed as confirmation of doubt.

So, I strive for excellence. Relentlessly. Carefully. At times, destructively.

But even as I meet those expectations, the question remains unresolved.

Because if excellence is required for recognition, and recognition is always conditional, then what, exactly, is the endpoint?

When does performance become identity?

When will I finally be a scholar?

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Cultural Navigation

Angel Akpovi

Cultural navigation,
something I have struggled with my entire life.
Spending most of my days lost
in my own hair,
my own style,
my jewelry,
my language.

From the sports we play to the food we eat,
cautious in the way we greet our elders,
our aunties.
Anxious about how I will be judged
for what I do,
for what I wear,
for who I am allowed to be,
as if every action of mine
reflects an entire ethnicity.

So when you tell me to be calm,
to just sit in silence and pause,
I cannot meditate in an
atmosphere of peace.
For those of us whose skin carries more melanin,
the only choice is to open our eyes
and realize
we were born into never ending protests,
in the midst of a war my people were called to.

We helped you flee,
we helped you fight,
yet through it all, you planned our demise.

So forgive me if I question your intentions
when you interrogate me,
asking where I am from,
putting me under a scientific telescope,
studying me as if I do not belong.

So when you fiddle with my hair

like it is a toy on your shelf,
 forcing me to wonder,
 why am I a joke in your book?

You cause me to lie, to procrastinate.
 Tomorrow I will state my truth.
 Tomorrow I will be myself.
 Tomorrow I will build a nation far greater.
 Always lost and never found,
 being born in Africa, the home of civilization.
 It taught me everything, but maybe nothing.

Every night I dream of
 the eternal motherland,
 its beauty and wonder everlasting and enriching.

But since that doomsday,
 I have been unable to grasp the warmth my country once provided,
 the beautiful scenery,
 the food and languages,
 an intelligent community we all loved as a family,
 the rich, ravishing gold and oil flowing through our land.

How culture is a marvelous thing.
 It is not what makes us unique.
 It is what makes us different.

But in a world where we are told to just be ourselves,
 as long as we fit into society's unreal standards,
 I have had no choice but to search and search,
 from the English Channel to the Mediterranean Sea,
 endless days,
 restless nights.
 Yet I cannot find the space left
 for you and me to be different.

Maybe you can tell me where this passage is,
 where I can journey to the motherland my Oni Onome described every night,
 so I could sleep and dream
 without falling prey to a land that refuses to say my name,
 asking me to shorten it or change it
 before even attempting to pronounce it.

Order in the court, my name will not be part of your justification.

Cultural navigation,

something I am forced to face every single day.

If only I could journey to
a land that holds barrels of history,
a land full of unseen creativity.

Till this day, still recovering from empty sailor words
that meant we were stripped of our rights in 1448,
colonized by Britain,
colonized by Germany,
colonized by Portugal, Spain, and Italy.

And you wonder why our people are tired.
You wonder why our government is corrupt.
So when I stick up for my human rights,
do not call me an angry Black woman.
Do not sit there and play judge.

Leave me out of your venn diagrams
that states I must act in a certain way.

So I agree.
No justice, no peace.
A phrase I have always known.

Your words cause no affliction anymore.
Your empty promises to build a nation
only bear foreshadowing and hindrance,
for I have been hurt by much more.

So when I look for the cause of why
my sisters and I feel we have to compete with one another,
do not turn a blind eye
as you have all my life.

We blame society,
but we are society.

But maybe, if I could journey back
and learn more than Migwo and Vrendo,
the only two words and four syllables
you graciously allowed me to flee with.
Cultural navigation.

Biography

Angel Akpovi is a freshman majoring in culture, advocacy, and leadership and cognitive studies, with a minor in cinema and media arts. Previously mentored by John Bernard, Coventry Poet Laureate, she is a writer and performer dedicated to the intersection of art and social justice. Akpovi's work includes a short film featured at the Royal Shakespeare Company's 100th year commencement ceremony and performances at the Fair Education Alliance Summit. She is passionate about how creative expression can serve as a tool for advocacy within academic and social structures.

Artist Statement

My work engages Blackness in higher education through the concept of the Black Border, a psychological space where cultural inheritance and institutional expectation converge and conflict. This idea emerges from my experience preparing to travel to Nigeria, where I found myself suspended between Black British identity and ancestral belonging. Within the university, this tension often appears as a negotiation between authentic selfhood and the quiet demands of academic respectability.

I interrogate what I call the institution's scientific telescope, a gaze that positions Black students as objects of scrutiny rather than authors of knowledge. Why are we so often observed, measured, and interpreted instead of recognized as intellectual agents in our own right?

Free verse poetry became my chosen form because it mirrors this condition. Its fragmentation and fluidity reflect the nonlinear experience of inhabiting multiple cultural worlds at once. The form resists containment, much like the identities it seeks to hold.

This process also revealed a deep vulnerability, raising an urgent question: What would an educational system look like if it did not require us to abbreviate our names, our languages, or ourselves to belong?

By centering these tensions, my work resists the ongoing erasure of Black intellectual and cultural traditions in higher education and insists on their visibility, complexity, and authority.

*Education is*James Robinson

To be educated is to hold the reins of your life
Seize control and not relinquish your personhood recklessly.
To hold the cards of fate close to your chest
Knowing when to go all in or to fold.
To be educated is to be open-minded
Closed books do not get filled with words
To hone your strengths and temper your weaknesses
Learn from a quiet master and dismiss the deafening buffoon.
To be educated is to grapple with the futility of life
The sun rises and the sun sets
Some scream “Everything is meaningless!”
While others sigh “nevermore.”
To be educated is to be dangerous
The power inside propels men towards the sun
Will I fly or will I fall?
I’m too much of a fool to think about that

Biography

James Robinson, a sophomore from Brooklyn, NY, majoring in African American Diaspora Studies, is deeply interested in African American history in urban spaces through the route of community organizing. Robinson has composed written pieces about the Black Panther Party, Black masculinity, and mental health.

Artist Statement

Coming to Vanderbilt has exposed me to literature and the works of Black poets, thinkers and activists. Through this exposure, my understanding of my own Black identity has evolved, as has my awareness of Blackness in higher education. There were many times in class where I sat down discussing ideas of liberty, individualism, and freedom, and recognized these same concepts were intentionally excluded from Black people. The theories of equality contradicted the reality of the experiences of Black people. Education itself is not inherently limiting; rather, it is the content that is prioritized and taught that remains constrained.

This work is inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. In chapter two, Du Bois states, "The South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men strive to know." Being part of a collegiate institute is a monumental milestone that cannot be overlooked or forgotten. To attend a university in the Southern United States—where African American people were historically denied entry, basic rights, and even their humanity—is profoundly meaningful. Understanding where we come from, who we are, and the significance of our lives has been essential to the survival of Black people.

I chose to write a poem because poetry is one of the most accessible forms of expression. Black thinkers have long used poetry to articulate their hopes, dreams, and grievances, and I want to be a part of that legacy. To me, that is the most rewarding part of Blackness in higher education: legacy. To know people like you have walked on this campus, through the halls, and on that graduation stage is exhilarating and powerful. I am left wondering what education means to everyone else. Is it empowering? Chaotic? Overwhelming? I can't pinpoint what education is to me. It simply is.

*For Immigrants and Children Masquerading on Stolen Soil (Part III)*Eva Cheraisi

Today, and yesterday, and many days prior
my consciousness departed
from my constitution.

The familiar stranger curled
under the weight
of a borrowed independence.

Sometimes I wonder
if it's just me or the rest of us
immigrants and children
masquerading on stolen soil
who toil
with the feathers of our being
manipulating air and skin
for the promise of flight.

They told us to be grateful
to bow,
to hem the seams
of our frustration
without an inch of thread.

They told us to fold
our tongues
like pressed linens,
to sand the edges
of our voices
until they softened
and bled, until

they sounded smooth,
like rivers without mouths.

Today, and yesterday, and many days prior,
they said we were lucky to be here.

I say,

lucky is the land
that gets to tremble
under the weight
of our hunger;

lucky is the land
that names the captive free
while tightening her chains

Biography

Eva Cheraisi is a senior majoring in English with a minor in computer science. Cheraisi is a Kenyan American writer, poet, and student at Vanderbilt University. Her work lives at the intersection of memory, identity, and inheritance, often tracing the quiet violences and fragile resurrections embedded in language, family, and ambition. She writes with an attentiveness to displacement, both geographic and emotional, and is particularly drawn to questions of belonging within institutions that were not built with her in mind.

Artist Statement

Cheraisi's poem, "For Immigrants and Children Masquerading on Stolen Soil III," emerges from a sustained meditation on what it means to exist within higher education as both beneficiary and critique—as someone told to be grateful while simultaneously being asked to diminish herself. The work was inspired by the tension between visibility and erasure: the ways Black and immigrant students are celebrated rhetorically, yet often pressured into silence, assimilation, or performance.

At its core, this piece explores the emotional and psychological labor of navigating predominantly white academic spaces. The repeated insistence—"they told us to be grateful"—mirrors a broader institutional narrative that frames access as generosity rather than as something earned, while obscuring the histories of exclusion that make such access feel conditional. The poem resists this framing by reimagining gratitude, shifting it away from submission and toward reclamation: "lucky is the land / that gets to tremble / under the weight / of our hunger."

I chose poetry as my form because it allows fragmentation, breath, and rupture, because it mirrors the disjointed experience of holding multiple identities within a single body. Poetry lets

me compress contradiction without resolving it. It lets me sit in tension rather than explaining it away.

This piece left me wondering about the cost of endurance. About what is lost when voices are "smoothed" to be palatable, about whether belonging in these spaces requires transformation, or whether transformation itself is a quiet form of disappearance. It also left me considering what it would mean to move through higher education not as a guest, but as someone who alters the ground beneath her.

Ultimately, this poem is not just about survival within these institutions. It is about destabilizing them—insisting that our presence is not incidental but formative. That we are not lucky to be here. That something in these spaces shifts, irrevocably, because we are.

Women of the Blue Tree

Kiarra Walker

Women of the blue tree

You've convinced yourself you're doing a good deed

Better than those white folks in Virginia

Who would've called me a Nigga

But you don't call me out my name, right?

You just pick on me until I prove your different little stereotypes right.

Angry little black girl from the southside.

Too much mouth, too much expression

who talks so much and just doesn't listen

Caring for the poor and underprivileged

"Those black and brown babies need my assistance"

You isolate,

interrogate,

and then cry when you don't get your way

You run off of assumptions

and I'm done with running

If you want conflict Imma give it to you

Pen and paper because I know you're waiting for me to prove your theories true

Angry black girl with too much attitude

"I'm trying really hard but I need you to take it down a notch or two"

Threatening emails with passive aggressive tones

But when I'm direct about an issue I need to watch my own?

Women of the blue tree you disgust me

You think your proximity to black and brown bodies make you different

You're no better than an overt racist

Saying the same shit with a better vocabulary

Manipulation tactics because our body language is viewed as an adversary

Something to corrected and not accepted

If you don't want to accept the terms and conditions of this program you can leave

But I promise you won't find anyone better than me

Young black child say good bye to your future and your dreams

The same ultimatum I've been hearing for the past 3 years

Saddened that I let this song and dance keep me here

But to be crystal clear

Your fear tactics don't scare me

See this perseverance is ingrained inside of my personality

So with or without that funding I'll still make it to where I need to be

And I'm sorry that you can't appreciate my honesty

Or honestly, any truth that isn't music to your ears

You tune it out

But unfortunately for you "I'm too loud"

and I refuse to take this laying down

So when you hit me you betta knock me out

Because if not I will be right back up again

Still that same little black girl with too much mouth and too much expression

Let me remind y'all that my presence is an example of black excellence

That the universe has blessed me with the experience of having brown skin

Regardless of your attempts to get under it

So no I'm not sorry that you think I'm regressin'

That you've lost on this failed investment

Because I'm not what you *expected*?

But I promise I'm better than the future you imagined for me

Based off of preconceived notions of my abilities

That I can't reach much farther than what you believe

And I'm supposed to be grateful for what you did for me?

To all of the other victims of the women of the blue tree

That have endured suffering at the hands of people who are supposed to be caring

I pray that words spoken to you don't stain your colorful array of personalities

Simply because you aren't the success story they want you to be

Please take it from me, never let anyone compromise your integrity

Just because they can't handle your complexities

Or rather the things that make up your very identity

Oh and to the Women of the Blue Tree I hope that one day you too find healing.

Biography

Kiarra Walker is a sophomore majoring in child development. She is a writer and scholar whose work explores the intersections of race, education, memory, and identity. She writes from her lived experience; interrogating institutional structures and the often-unspoken ways power operates within them. Centering Black life, resistance, and intellectualism, Walker engages poetry as both a critical and creative practice, documenting and questioning the world. Walker's work is particularly concerned with the emotional and psychological landscapes shaped by exclusion, as well as the resilience cultivated in response.

Artist Statement

“Women of the Blue Tree” comes from my experience within a college program shaped by racial imbalance, where authority was largely held by white women. The poem reflects the dissonance between the institution's stated values and its lived reality.

The poem traces how racism can manifest in interpersonal ways, through tone and expectation. This piece is not only about harm but also about awareness. It seeks to name what is often left unnamed and to challenge the normalization of these experiences in academic spaces. Through this work, I reclaim narrative authority, transforming personal experience into a site of critique, reflection, and resistance.

Accent

Rachel Johnson

Confession: This place is my prerogative. The beautified emeralds shine in the mist of the congregated sea. I see myself adrift upon errors, the stray dog left to find its scraps. My existence relies on bong bongs from the riptide shore colliding with my experimental thought. The value skyrocketing as I place my measly piece of equitability in the acquaintance's hand. People streamline from left and right into the overwhelming circumvent of riches. Shaded into the crowd, I check for my people.

Dazed I am greeted by a husky voice that says, *Whatcha saying man*, as I barely catch on to the concerted figure. He asks why are you unknown?

I say because I've been away, forcefully taken into the perceived animosity of individuals who would laugh at my accented C.

I've been taken into the precipice of white animosity and away from centrality.

My stance is neutralized in order to comprehend the complexities of Black and Caribbean.

You claim my island as unordered and disordered.

You proclaim sentences of extremity while my people settle for nothing.

You contemplate my future with a small piece of paper.

No choice was made in preservation of Black bodies when you descended into my land.

Now I pay the price in normative forms of self-expression of language.

I pay the price in bold mannerisms of rights.

I pay the price every day as I unconsciously assimilated to stagnantness.

Biography

Rachel Johnson is a senior majoring in English literature, with interests that merge faith and writing to display her testimonies. Inspired by narrative poetry, Johnson loves the details in sentences. Writing “Accent” two years ago, Johnson reflected on her identity as a Black Caribbean and how often she has been between cultures, never fitting completely into one. In this piece, she explores awareness around code-switching as someone from both cultures.

Artist Statement

I chose to write this poetically because it expresses the multiplicity of languages. I am left wondering what other voices are missing from this work? I wanted this piece to portray the exchange of thought, culture, and language that happens when I am apart from my native culture. This work transcends onto the page as I choose to let my transactional experience speak for the many lives that don’t have a part in writing their own story but have always had it told for them. I want the audience to ponder the voices that are still across the water, the ones that do not have a chance to speak.