

CURRENTS is the annual publication of the SOURCE community, highlighting the work of students of color and international students so that we can create and showcase our own representations of ourselves. It is an important forum through which we can creatively express and embrace our multicultural and cross-cultural perspectives. Reflections of racial and cultural identity and the fight for equality have long been expressed through voice and vision. Artistic expression has the ability to reach many people and inspire multiple readings without losing its own meaning. The goal of Currents is to continue in tradition and give voice to those who are under-represented on campus.

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Jay Griffin  
Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich  
Damali Jackson  
Miatta Kawinzi  
Jessica Kim  
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Natalie Millis  
Prateek Rajbhandari  
Terell Richardson  
Brittney Sampson  
Sanju Sebastian  
Esme Vandraager  
Katrina De Wees  
Chris Williams  
Ashley Young

# CURRENTS

2008



**Claire Lau**



**Christian Baer**

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## ACCENT, VERSION 8

I am pushing out my accent  
Trying to fill with identity  
the places where it is sagging.

My accent has green chile between its teeth.  
It eats with a fork and knife  
Because that's where my grandmother walked it to  
With her gentle steps of genteel table manners  
Learned from watching the fancy ladies at Sanbournes.

My mother has strong convictions about her children carrying this on.  
Parenting chews with its mouth closed.  
My grandmother congratulates her daughter  
In murmurs for how lightskinned the nietos are.  
Momma changes the subject like one might use a handful of feathers  
to knead clay.

When I speak Spanish,  
My tongue and teeth ripple like a flamenco dancer's skirt in a fast escobida.  
The words fall like water  
On this garden of self.  
Its flowers that have one fat lip, one thin.  
My accent changes

Yall twangs like a curlicue at the end of a jagged graffiti tag I've been  
making with string over this thing my dad told me,  
He told me "you're not of color"  
And I want to hold jumbo markers like little kids hold markers  
They make a fist  
I want to draw a net around my inability to say much back to him

I am an open hand  
I am writing this poem for the rest of my life  
I am not from here)

This accent is my reassurance.  
I got to college and the mariachi ay! took up residence in my cheeks,  
Playing the air around me like a drum.  
Otherwise I sleep with my head between the sense-administering fry-  
ing pans,  
Head dented with how I should already know the Hampshire flow  
and go with it

I worry about losing the blue sky holding my chest open.  
It's gotta desert for a tongue.

# UNTITLED

You, not much to say  
Except for the arch that I climbed into  
Nuzzled there against warm brick  
Impossible to break through  
But I remained content with fingers laced between  
Face resting in slope of neck  
Quiet  
Quiet like sound never existed except for  
Moans escaping from the depths of throats  
Breath and whimpers blowing across earlobe  
Bed creaking under the weight of bodies dancing  
You were my ocean  
My tangerine I never tried to peel  
And while I tasted juices sweet,  
I never knew the sweetness of you  
Never pried you open with my lips, throat, fingernails  
scratching the surface of your back

Now, familiar distance  
In silences stretching tight  
like cellophane

## FOR LAURA NELSON

Mother you are floating  
Above  
Onlookers think they got you  
Think they got your son too,  
Thieves in the night,  
They stole you away  
You precious jewel,  
Wrapped noose round our  
Neck  
Hung you from bridge for all to see,  
Mother,  
The pictures they took  
Tell a story they refuse to recognize  
Your beauty and strength  
Eventual peace  
Kingdom of God welcoming you,  
Letting you leave that body behind for them  
To reconcile.

That body carries epic tales for the western breeze to read like brail,  
Bring your stories to the natives whose blood is also dripping into this  
stream beneath you  
Bring the myth of your freedom to the horn player playing his sorrow,  
Let him breathe in your story and expel it in notes reserved for God  
and the godlike,  
Let those notes travel like love letters from brown hand to brown hand  
in Ms. Ruth's second grade class,  
Let the end of your tale be entwined in the beginnings of theirs, of cin-



namon hands embracing, long black legs chasing, of full lips whispering dares  
To kiss  
To love  
To hold  
To live  
To never let go  
To remember  
To never let go

Let the wind carry the scent of their crime to their kitchen tables,  
The rain wash your blood into their bathwater.  
Let each quake of this bridge remind them of your fierce audacity  
    To motherhood  
    and love.

You are floating,  
Above.  
They  
Are forever tied to this bridge.

Your spirit shines like the edges of a seaside sunset,  
Translucent and mystifying,  
Your spirit swims upwards in circular, joyous motions leaving iridescent  
swirls against a mournful pink sky,  
To take its place among the righteous.

And we dare them to forget you,  
In Jena, in Prescott, in history.  
Thank God they took your picture,  
Silly fools leaving us collective memory,  
combined strength,  
historical solidarity,

You, mother,  
Laura,  
Your legacy swims

blows  
dares.

# My Body is a Forest

My body is a forest.  
Tall and twisted, dark and deep  
The things hidden there might terrify you.

I am always moving, always dancing,  
Swaying softly in the breeze,  
Running, jumping, hiding,  
Searching for something.

I keep my limbs outreached,  
Hands over my head,  
Trying to grab hold of the sky,  
That warm blanket of light,  
To pull it downward,  
To pull me forward,  
To keep me from staying grounded.

My lips blow kisses and  
whisper secretes to the stars-  
Those faithful lovers-  
And I keep my ear to the wind  
Awaiting their responses,  
Breathy in my ear,  
A hushed "I love you" heard from  
Millions of miles away.

And yet still, I am not satisfied.  
My body is a forest, but you-  
You are a fire.

Your lips leave kisses  
Down the trail of my spine  
While your fingers burn my skin.  
Your touch hurts.

I try to run, but I am rooted.  
I try to scream, but my mouth fills with smoke.  
I try to fly away, but the sky and the stars,  
They have abandoned me.

My long limbs, once graceful  
Are now brittle and stale,  
No longer good for dancing,  
No longer good for anything other than firewood.  
What was once my beauty now lies  
In ashes around my feet.

You have disarmed me.  
You have destroyed me.  
You have won.  
My body is a forest,  
But my heart is in flames.

# ONCE UPON A TIME

I feel her heart on mine,  
beside mine  
and I open my eyes.

She moves and her breath is warm, lazy  
my neck prickles  
and I look at her face

I know it's only been the night,  
but I'm in love  
and I can't look away.

It's her fault she told me to stay  
no way out cause her hands on mine  
and I closed my eyes.

# UNTITLED

This dis-enchantment  
This dis-placement  
This dis-enfranchising  
It's getting me to a point where I'm gonna flip out on some unsuspect-  
ing white person  
This dis-, getting dissed all the time  
By friends, co-workers, the institution, society  
Life disses us in only the most ultimate ways  
It takes people from us when we least expect it,  
Or when we do, life makes it hurt enough so that we could never  
wash away the scar it leaves  
We just gotta make it, uh huh, just gotta make it  
Well, we need to understand that making it means moving on  
But how do we ever move on when shit is still on our minds?  
Do we have to get rid of the thoughts of longing or wanting or lov-  
ing?  
Feelings are so complicated  
They help us cope with life, but we still get dissed due to the fact that  
feelings can get in the way of our decision-making process  
It only goes to show how human we are  
We care and we love but at the end of the day, what do we have?  
Feelings of loneliness, sadness, worry, fear...  
We are left with the frame of mind that things will be better but are  
they really?  
You go through life, one less...  
One less person, one less emotion, one less thought

We get dissed – we get hoodwinked, bamboozled  
Turned away from the present and reflecting on the past  
What we could have done or should have said  
Or how much life would be different if we did...something  
Life disses every decision we make because in every choice, there is  
always a 2nd option  
We believe in the greater good  
And we believe in life's roller coaster either staying up or evening out  
But we hate when the ride looks like there is no bottom.  
The dizzying discourse of life leaves us in our own private whirlwinds  
This dis-appointment  
This dis-allusion  
This dis, we are involuntarily expected to hegemonize ourselves for the  
greater good  
Being institutionally categorized means being silent when my voice  
needs to be heard the most  
I cannot talk with you about how oppressed I am  
Because by me telling you my experience, you will look at me and  
never have to wonder what it's like to be me, what it's like to be dissed

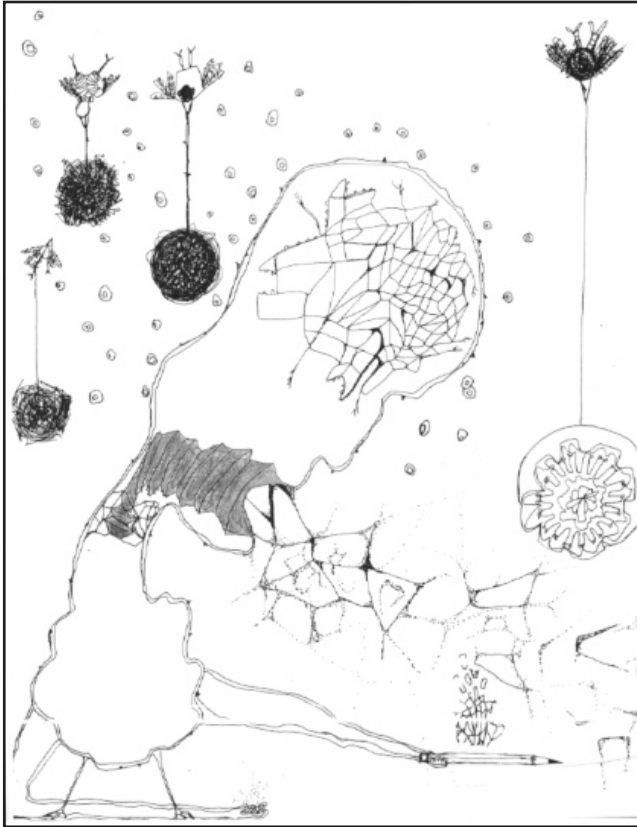
# THE SPECTACLE

Extend Frequencies  
through static radio  
technological communication  
reverberates through hollowed halls  
as rhythms in the electronic continuum

Florescent lights  
cascade over cold barren floors  
of industrial tile  
off white  
with black specs  
that are dirtier

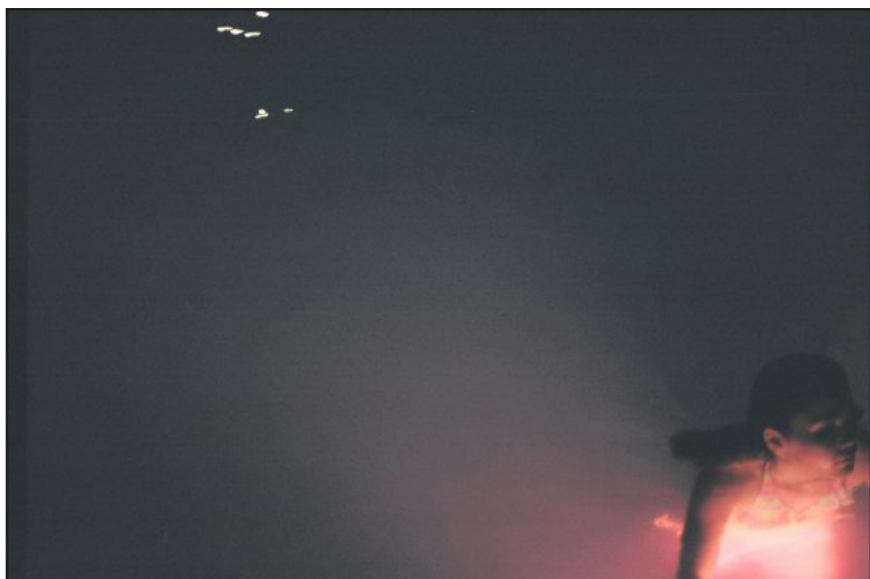
we reminisce and relive the ardent orange sunlight  
spring flower scents accompany our coworkers  
mesmerized by televised phenomena  
and abstracted essence

we conceptualize brilliant plays for the resilient screen  
and call out to fictional representations of fictional characters  
We dream together in the spectacle  
united through out estrangement, our division  
we lead lives base on lies  
fed to us so other can capitalize  
on our estrangement, our division  
we dream together

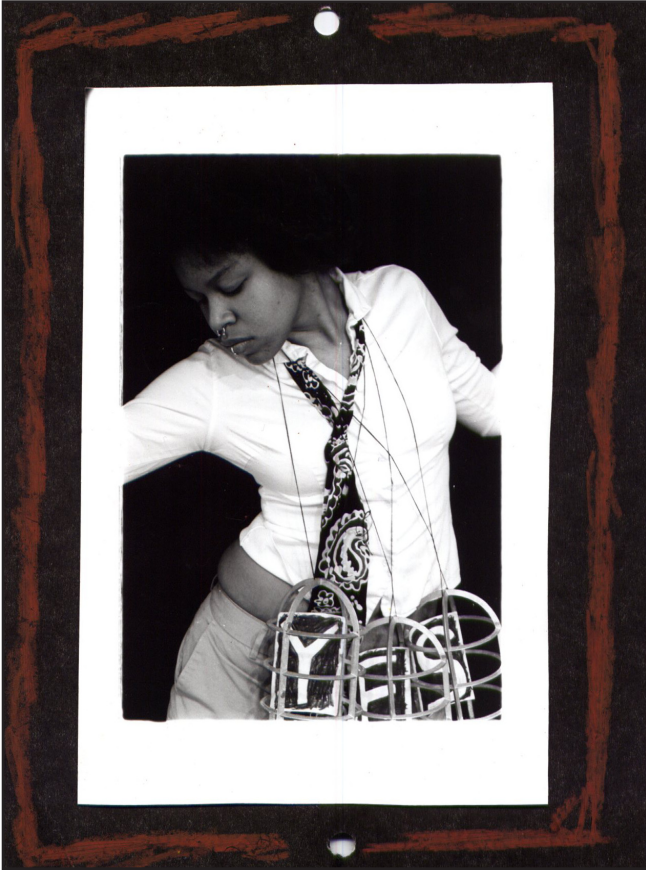


**Esme Vaandrager**





**Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich**



**Miatta Kawinzi**

## A REVOLUTION OF SYLLABLES

you say struggle and you say  
paths laced with the heavy  
breath of history, a weight  
too large to take residence within  
the mind, understanding that  
grows within the curves  
of the heart.

you feel my pulse and you feel  
the heat of centuries of voice,  
resistance to established histories,  
wisdom emanating from old folk's  
faces, a reworking of the  
very tongue.

you say survival and you say  
ancient skill, a cartography of lashes,  
skin extra thick but just  
as soft, you say starry  
night and border patrol,  
you say lanterns.  
you say visas, say the sneaky  
reach of empire, the static  
sprawl of conquest.

as if we don't have dust beneath our eyelids.  
as if these backs weren't fit with wings.  
as if it does not take a special intonation  
to foster life through centuries of silencing,  
as if the song of struggle is not echoed beneath  
our very feet.

you say triumph and you say  
the places where true verse is  
sculpted, articulation that resonates  
within the bone, you say letters pouring  
from the pen where once they were  
restricted, you say honeyed throat  
chords plump with use.

## VERSATILITY

Nineteen-ninety-something. I'm twelve playing basketball on the blacktop outside of school. There's a bunch of us just shooting around, fighting for rebounds and paying Respect if the dude makes it in. A bunch of older kids show up. They wanna get a game going. Captains pick the teams, and eventually one of them points at me and says, "Fine I guess I get milkman over there."

Lets call this Lesson Number One: To a bunch of black kids, this half-Indian, quarter-Lebanese, light-skinned-but-clearly-not-entirely-white kid, for all purposes, is just plain old white.

Here's another event, which is inextricably linked to the event above:

I'm still twelve. I'm on that same blacktop, but on the other side of it, next to the bike racks. We're playing two-hand touch. My team is on defense. I got my eyes on the QB. He throws, dude catches it, he's tagged, and the QB gets the ball back quick and calls "Hike!" He does it quick cause he know he's cheating and grabbing another yard. I call timeout. He says "What for?" And I say: "Cause you're back there, n—a." And he looks at me like he wants to fight. "What did you say?" My face drops, and in my head I'm like oh shit. I swallow and say, "You're back there." He says, "Nah, that's not what you said." And he storms off cause he know he'll get in trouble if he beats my ass in front of the lunch aides.

Lets call this Lesson Number One A: Your average white kid learns this around the same time he learns how to tie his shoes: never-ever-ever-ever-ever-ever-ever-ever say that word. But, you see, my career as a whiteboy had only just recently started, so I was a late learner. I'd heard

that word (that word being the one that ends in ‘ga’ as opposed to ‘ger’) used to express camaraderie, and because I said it to someone who was my friend, someone I sat and ate my lunch with and played football with everyday at recess, I assumed it was okay. The fact that I’d only heard it said by black people towards black people didn’t signify anything to me. In short, I didn’t understand why the kid was offended. It didn’t make sense to me. I went through the possibilities in my head, and they all just seemed stupid, too arbitrary. The fact that the kid was black, the fact that I’m light skinned, the fact that the word has a history of hate, did not add up for me because I believed that this word’s definition – like that of any other – should be forgiving based on the perpetrator’s intent. They told us not to judge people based on the color of their skin. And I didn’t. How come he judged me?

And because I didn’t understand why I was wrong, I said it to a different black friend of mine, on the same blacktop, playing two hand touch with the same old group of kids. This time they suspended me from school.

There was not a single adult who could understand where I was coming from, why I was such a little racist. The mother of the first kid I offended called my house and my dad picked up the phone. Bear in mind my father immigrated to this country when he was twenty-eight years old. After he hung up the phone, he turned to me and said, “Sanju: that is a very offensive word.” No shit, Dad. But Indian fathers have bad tempers, so I nodded like he had dropped some serious knowledge on me and did not bother trying to explain myself.

I had to talk to the vice principal, this old Italian guy. He asked me why I said it, why I said “that word”. I told him I didn’t mean it as an insult, it just came out. I said it was like saying “man”. He said, “Don’t give me that,” like what he meant to say was, “Don’t give me that bullshit.” He made me talk to my guidance counselor, an old black woman, and I told it to her, too: I honestly didn’t mean it as an insult. She asked me if I would have said it to a white kid. I thought about it and then said, “Yeah, I guess I could have said it to a white kid, too.” She looked at me like I was crazy.

There was one person, a single person, who grasped the whole situation: my friend Ibn, who grew up around the corner from me. When I said it the first time, when the kid stormed off to refrain from kicking my ass, Ibn pulled me aside and walked with me. We were both quiet, and then he

spoke. And this is what he said: "Damn, you shouldn't have said that." Yes, yes, I know: it's almost exactly the same as what everyone else told me, but with that handful of words and the way he said it, it was clear to me that he understood all of it. That some black kids said the word all the time, that it was part of our generation's (obviously not only my generation's) book of slang, that hip hop made this slang appealing, and that the combination of hip hop and my black peers made me want to use that word. Q-Tip called it a 'term of endearment', a word that black people took back from their oppressors, that, when said to one another, acknowledges their collective struggle. And out of my white-ass lips that term can only be interpreted as a term of hate. Ibn knew this; he knew all of it.

You know how it sucks to be racially slurred? Well I only knew that it probably sucked without actually knowing what it felt like until I was nineteen. Maybe eighteen, I can't remember which. There was a time when I believed I was beyond that sort of treatment. So imagine how surprised I was when it happened:

I was at a trade show with my father in Chicago. He owned a small jewelry manufacturing company. The manufacturers all have their little booths, and the retailers walk around to look at the merchandise and place orders. This old white guy came by our booth, sixty or seventy years old. He said hello to my dad. They had done business together before. Then the old man shook my hand, introduced himself, I don't remember his name, and I introduced myself: "Hi, I'm Sanju." And he looked at me in confusion.

Let me explain:

For those of you with immigrant fathers who do business in this country, maybe you understand. My father's name is Subhash Sebastian. Some immigrant businessmen hold on to their funny sounding names, and I mean, why shouldn't they? But my dad did business as Sebastian. It became his first and last name. Why? I think my dad looked at it like this: Successful businessmen make their customers feel at ease and comfortable. This is a white country, with white businesses and white customers. When a white customer introduces himself, and you tell him your name, and he can't say it after three tries, there's a problem. Nobody is wrong; it's not his fault for not being able to pronounce a name he's never heard

before, and it's not your fault for having an uncommon name. But there is a problem, because he's a potential customer and you just made him feel uncomfortable. He probably won't want to do business with you because he'll be embarrassed about the awkward introduction. So that's why my dad went by the name Sebastian.

Back to the old white guy at the trade show:

So he looked at me in confusion. He asked me for my name again, and I said, "It's Sanju." And he said, "No, no, no, your other name." I said, "What other name?" He looked appealingly at my dad, and my dad looked at me, and told me with his eyes to please be quiet. That's when I understood: this asshole meant my American name. What is your American name? What is it?

I used to think my skin color gave me versatility. I can walk into any room and feel comfortable. I'm comfortable in a room full of white people, because I'm partially white. I'm comfortable with Indians, Asian people as a whole because I'm Asian. And I feel comfortable with pretty much any American minority group, because I'm a minority. But another way of looking at it is that my skin color alienates me. Indians don't even know I'm Indian until they hear my name is Sanju. White people don't know what the hell I am, but they know I'm not quite white. This doesn't bother me. I'm comfortable; if my race makes someone feel uncomfortable that's their problem.

There isn't really any kind of conclusion to this mess. It's just that race is a four-dimensional topic. When politicians say we need to put the "race problem" behind us, they don't know what the hell they're talking about. Or maybe they say things like that because they're speaking to a white audience who doesn't understand that it will always be a "problem". And I hated how in public school people would hear the word "race" and immediately think about white and black tension; people ignore the rest of the spectrum. I also hated how my Chinese friends in high school would get mad at me if I mistook a Korean person for Chinese. Most people can't tell the difference between Indians and Pakistanis. Or Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. That shit's okay. The trick is, don't assume one way or the other. Keep your mouth shut if you don't know what you're talking about. People just need to understand that they are at least a little racist. I promise you. And you know, get over it. Act accordingly. Try not to offend people. Be nice. ...Yeah.



# MAMA ROCK IS DEAD

## MANIFESTO

Here in lies mama rock  
She is dead  
gone, buried among dirt and gravel  
earth opened, body in, closed shut

Here in lies mama rock  
invisible women  
mammi, big breast ready, half human, full thick, and nothing but emp-  
tied  
rock face, grey aged thing, mindless memory-less bundled bits of dead  
earth

mama rock was  
a nurturer,  
belly warm for huggin, pillow crafted body  
sold over and over and over,  
hands on her hips  
“do you know what time it is?”  
grumpy old women  
with a rock for a face  
alone, lonely, always alone, waiting  
living for her children to come home  
flat feet, bare foot, always in the kitchen preparing  
ready, waiting and willing  
always willing

and her body  
was a sexless thing  
cause mama had had all the children she was ever gonna have  
and sex, sex is for young skinny things  
for those not fully lived their life yet things  
sex is something other people do  
so mama hid her body  
behind layers of clothing, behind closed doors  
behind herself for nobody to see  
cause she was never a body  
she was just mama

mama rock died of young age  
she died because she wasn't as old as she thought she was  
she died because she realized that she had never really given herself  
that name  
she died in the house fire of herself  
she died slow  
until nothing was left  
but what she always was  
nothing left but her own self,  
and the name that her own mama gave her

Because her mama  
has everything to do with mama rock,  
bed bond, tied to her mind mama  
pill after pill after pill mama  
that rock trying to rescue her  
years of a little girl falling into quicksand,  
waiting, hoping, wanting for her health  
now knowing she can't save her own mama  
she can only save herself

So now that mama rock is dead  
now that she is gone  
now that she is buried in the deep, deep  
solid final ground

Here's what she  
what I will no longer do

No, I will not make you pancakes after your long nights  
of fuckin escapades while you lick your syrupy stained lips  
only to bury your head in my chest for comfort and talking and crying  
then walk away when you are done just to come back for breakfast  
the next day

My chest is mine

No, I will not untie my red bandanna from my untamed head  
to wipe your tears and let your snot cover my sleeves,  
"Baby, you just let it all out. You tell mama all about it"

Fuck that

No, I will not be your twisted face of sleep, a rock,  
a core unturned, unbroken, solid heavy weight for you to  
stand upon when the ground has come out from underneath you

There are more surfaces for you to stand on, and honey, it ain't me

No, I will not kiss your boo-boos, mend your torn clothing,  
be your late night phone call, your ass better call Tyron

I will not be your butt wigglin' hugger, one-way lover  
breakin' her back to please you  
mama

that shit is done, its finished, it's cut

Cause I am tired of fulfilling everybodys expectations,  
of people thinking this body  
is just a house

walkin in, haven't even taken your shoes off

all up on my couch, kickin and screamin  
eating the marrow from off my bones to purely nourish yourself  
and you didn't even ring the damn doorbell

well I have neighborhood watch now  
and they know if and when you are coming  
and only I can open the door to my own house

Cause I will no longer, sacrifice who I am, what I am or how I am

My body  
is a pleasant, soft, curvy, mine  
she screams, yearns, breaths,  
opens, fills with laughter, fills with self  
and is sick and tired of digesting your poison  
you can't feed that shit to her any longer

My body is capable of receiving love  
real love, sweaty, tense, sticky, urgent loving  
harsh, real, endless, honest love

and I am not a rock,  
I am a human being, capable of breaking  
ready for the constant hurt of change  
ready for those ready to listen

and this skin  
changes shape but never changes color  
defines and redefines but is never defined

so now I honor mama rock  
by returning her to the earth

no tombstone, no funeral, no nothing  
just a simple gathering, a few words

she would have wanted it that way

I know, I was her once  
Suffocating under her weight  
Under the way I thought I owed it to the world

But now, I only owe it to myself

Don't cry for her  
cause she was dying all along  
she was just waiting  
waiting for her fat sparrow wings  
to spread and fly  
free

Here in lies mama rock  
and what's left is me

## SNOWFLAKES IN BABYLON

My vision is blurry,  
but it's not astigmatism.  
It's your smell, your look;  
It's you.  
I'm up high, a snowflake.  
Waiting to glide down and  
be lost.

I stand out clear, bright and  
melting on your sleeve  
with its delicate ink  
stabbed into your skin.  
The words carved in,  
indelibly.  
Just like summer camp with  
names etched on underwear.

The word is written,  
and it is Anomia;  
chaos, law without order.  
A deep dysfunction,  
a gulf between us and  
no, Luke didn't dream  
of hips and lips  
of a bed split.

I am Babylon and you  
Judea.  
You are the righteous sword,  
The Chosen.  
I am a savage in the wild.  
Say the word!  
I am yours, taken  
a willing hostage.

No.  
I am a snowflake  
and I am melted.  
Barely a memory.

## UNTITLED

my penis is seeming like a new thing this autumn  
dirty against clean peach toilet seats  
    can't ever have been used for any good  
foreign foe between my legs

i get anxious  
when i suspect white women have seen my brown penis  
and have been hurt  
their delicate effeminacy  
torched by disgust  
or even lust

my penis  
sleeping and barbaric  
in their daughter's bed



# LOVE IN F-MAJOR AIN'T SO SWEET LIKE YOU THINK : A DIARY OF SORTS, IN VERSE FORM

(Afternoon sun pours through the living room windows,  
Mother leaves for church in her best brown suede shoes)

Fred Astaire loves the girl in color this time.  
He is dancing on the ceiling and my brother  
Is still young enough to believe.

He turns his head upside down to see pirouettes right side up,  
he presses one hand to the television screen as if checking for a pulse.

My brother wants to know  
what it is this guy's got  
that lets him beat

gravity.

(The apartment is street level. Sometimes I walk by and look in. The kitchen  
table is the same. Less grand as a surface for onions and tomatoes than  
nights when it was my debut stage.)

My childhood babysitter liked to dress in vintage Missoni  
To sing aloud to The Spinners.

Make-up in hand, he'd say "Who do you want to look like tonight?"  
and I'd try to think up someone good. swaying atop a pair of his stiletto  
heels,

four sizes too big.

Those shoes might've meant death for a weaker eight year old.  
I couldn't have cared less. In those hours  
I was the girl of my dreams.

(We dangle our feet over the edge of the abandoned dock. For a second  
it's as if we are a place very beautiful, where things are entirely simple. But  
the rivers all run toxic here.)

His mother once threw their pet dog, against a wall, for barking too  
loud.

Her hysterics and the dog lying at his feet all made him sick.  
He kicked its limp body and left the house a ghost.  
An hour later he kissed me and I thought nothing  
of his silence except to ask if he thought misery  
really loved company. To this day I remember his answer,

"Only the quiet kind," he'd said.

(The 4 train is a kind of purgatory for bored sinners. Under overcast  
horizons the Bronx is like the graying eaves of a back split in half by the  
elevated green-line track racing through like a spine.)

A man plays the penny whistle for captive travelers.  
The notes sound like parakeets circling in formation,  
Like the sound of cartoon shooting stars  
in flux. Each of his fingers  
doing their best slapstick,

as they try to get as close as they can to his mouth  
without falling in.

(It's cold and windy and I can barely turn my face to look up at smoke  
rings ascending his lips like angels heading home  
beneath the streetlight.)

His poetry reminds me of old men talking dirty under the cover of dark.  
He has no respect for pursuits of compassion, or grammar.  
He is defendant and gavel both.

So how come his verse is like the scripture undressed before me?  
How come he can make that woman in the third row bite  
Down on her fist as if to keep afloat?

He talks in a southern drawl in bed.  
He likes his women beneath him where they can feel his weight.  
When we are supposed to be asleep I watch him have nightmares  
worse  
Then I have ever seen.

"Describe me in a single phrase," he requested once with a smile,  
because the only questions he ever truly had were about himself.

"Door to door salesman," I said.

(The green screen behind him will eventually be an animated city. Cars  
will move, windows will open and shut, the weather will not remain the  
same. In real life, the director will break every few minutes to pat the star's  
face down matte and the spotlights will leave everyone but him in the  
dark.)

When rappers straight talk, their sweatshirt hoods are always down.

"You need to be good to what is yours," he will say to future viewers,  
"And these streets, they are yours."

Later as he applies eye drops, face tilted, he will say to me alone  
"I believe in ideals rather than politics, also I am a Muslim,"

he will say to himself with a shift in his stature,  
"I would have seen myself the conductor of great orchestras.

But there was no music program in my high school,  
and anyways brass and ivory are too expensive.

So I make hip hop."

I want to tell him

his music gives morning sparrows pause,

that in today's news  
infamous works of art  
have been excavated from a city dump bordering  
city limits.

(In my mother's church women dress up fine to get down on their  
knees.

A moment where the divisions blur. Baptist's rock back and forth just like  
Muslims bow to bury their faces in their hands like Jews summoning  
ancestors over Sabbath candles, eyes closed as in the wringing of rosaries  
through hands, over cathedral candles lit in prayer. )

There is an over the hill rhythm and blues singer who now in retirement  
lives with his daughter on east 3rd street.

Afternoons he spends seated outside the C-town on Loisaida Avenue.  
He is the one who told me long ago, angels taught all people to sing  
in answer to one boy's wish for immortality.

To this day he insists  
James Brown rose from the ashes of his cigar.

(This was your city once but you don't live here anymore)

I do not know what they will build in place of the Dominican Catholic  
Church

On the corner of Avenue B. Its yellow ruins will one day give roots to  
condos

I am sure. This is the end. The other day I saw a small kid walking in the  
middle of the street alone. People on their cell phones took no notice of  
his refusal  
to step off the dotted line.

(Only upon leaving New York could I begin to understand. Having visions  
on Midwest porches, different porches but seemingly the same street,  
identical tea cup houses with weathervanes and chimneys and frost  
creeping up on screen doors like a bandit in the dark. I remember

his philosophy on life, he claims to have forgotten. And perhaps that means it is not his any longer but someone else's.)

"My philosophy on living is to see everything as honestly as you can.  
The way to see is to look

first for the sadness in something,  
that's where you'll find the heart,

and then to find the humor,  
because that's the life force."

(Two men in love drive the wrong way up one-way avenues for the sake  
of carving something geometrically perfect in the earth. In the backseat I  
am far flung stars, in the backseat I am)

always lost in other people's stories

which speak my own pulse to me louder than the city can,  
Louder than a beloved face beckoning or overcome with private  
madness,  
Louder, the car stereo that rivals car horns like trumpet's  
Sound, all around lives rub, unravel only to tie one person's  
loose ends to another's.

You can talk of the things we must do for our self

but think of it,  
an old friend of my mother's  
who, on the day he met Nelson Mandela,  
called long distance to say

"My dear I have finally seen  
Real tangible peace  
in that man's face. Gives me hope enough  
that I can finally die happy."

And later that day he did.

# MAMMY

I know her, I once was her, and I am sick of her.

I am ready to let her die, let her rot, let her burn in hell  
With her big belly full of lies and laughter;  
She lives off of white children's tears  
As her broken hands caress their pale cheeks  
Lap full of blonde-hair blue-eyed bundles of joy.  
Her hands are gray and swollen  
From beating her own children,  
Breaking their backs, making them learn to bend , to bow  
to hate their blackness the way their mama hates it.

I know her, I once was her, and I hate her.

She hums a song to herself about freedom  
Deep, throaty, from the depths of her bowels  
While she crawls on her knees with a rag full of bleach  
Trying to rid the white tiles of dirt,  
Trying to rid her brown skin of dirt.  
She prays for blue eyes and bright skin but instead  
Gets chaffed knees and burning hands.  
The bleach stings her eyes, and now she cries a bit,  
Still humming, as if she were happy,  
As if she still has a drop of dignity left.

I know her, I once was her, she is my mother.

For years, my mother would scrub my face and hands clean  
Till my own brown skin would shine red  
And she would pinch my nose at the bridge  
And make me practice prancing the room  
Back high, head straight, belly sucked in tight-  
Make sure to pronounce your arrrs  
And mind your peas and cues.  
Black was a mindset that I had to destroy  
Through a stern white education.

I know her, I once was her, and I still am her.

I am starting to come to terms with the fact that  
I will always be her. She is my other self.  
She comes out in small ways,  
The big hands, dirty feet,  
Broken back, cracked smile.  
She is so sad and so tired.  
Please, lay her down to rest.  
Let her die.  
There is nothing left of her to use,  
Her body is an empty shell,  
A hardened husk with hollowed space.

# UNTITLED

father  
your stone hands  
bones of scrap metal  
lifelines cracked into  
the dust and ash  
of earth  
the ach of age  
from building beating loving  
without your eyes

they will always dream  
big of a home from your heart out  
you live inside them  
i have searched  
for that door for years  
the carpenter's daughter

my childhood:  
carpet samples, floor tiles  
your saw-dusted workbench  
dulling tool blades rust from use  
the plaid work shirts i wore  
to fit inside your chest and arms  
press to your hard pounding heart

we've both worked and searched



for home  
inside a room is built  
with the ways I tried to forget  
loving you

how do hands hold  
hurt take-apart build  
forget to bend and  
stretch their love  
in unison?

they don't

# LETTER TO My PARENTS

First to my mom:

You are my rock. You are the most amazing and wonderful person I have ever met. You are a single parent, making it by on food stamps and false promises. You have always been there. No matter what – through rebellion, through lies, through tough time...when ma passed, our family fell apart. We only had each other. Clarissa understood as much as she could but she was still so young. We went through our roughest times and still you loved me. I'm a mama's boy thru and thru. Since I've been gone, I have developed such an appreciation for who you are. I have never realized how similar we are. I swore that we had nothing in common, but I have made the same mistakes, chose the same decisions, and lived a similar life that you have. I never need validation from you because you always know how to tell me what needs to be said no matter how I feel about it. If I mess up, you let me know. But you also let me know that life gets better and things happen for a reason and to never give up hope. You are my inspiration. You are my constant reminder that things can be better. Mom, I love you.

To David:

You have been in my life more than I can even imagine. I spent so much of my childhood trying to get you to like me, trying to make you a part of my life, knowing that you did not fit within my 1000 piece puzzle. Your shape is way too awkward. You told me you loved me when I got to college. You always had excuses. You never told me the truth. And as much as I hate you, I look in the mirror and I see you. Your nose, your eyes, your swagger...that is all in me. You gave me what I look like.

I am flirtatious and energetic and people like me because of how I hold myself. I do have my own swag and I carry myself in a certain way. But you cheated. You lied. You manipulated. I have made the very same mistakes that you have...every single one. I possess every quality you have and I don't like who I am. I hate that I made the same mistakes you have and I'm sorry for being your mistake. And now that I don't talk to you anymore, I feel confident in saying that I will never be like you...ever again. You do not own any part of me. I cannot subject myself to your errors. I want to be a man, the only way I know how.

You both have been influential in my progress as a man. I am going to be a better man for the one I end up loving. I am never going to treat her wrong ever again. I am not going to lie. Not gonna cheat. Not gonna manipulate. Dear parents, I am not going to continue living in your mistakes. Dear self, I am going to make you better...and things will work themselves out.

## **SPEECH GIVEN TO INTRODUCE THE FACULTY PANEL (“THE MYTH OF MULTICULTURALISM”) FOR ACTION/AWARENESS WEEK 2008**

As a student of color, I believe that Hampshire is a racist institution, but that statement alone is not enough. In order to understand what that really means, we need to critically look at racism. To me, racism does not only manifest in overt ways. Of course overt racism is really painful to experience and witness, but I think Hampshire’s problem is one of colorblind racism, which manifests in those moments when people don’t acknowledge race because they think if you acknowledge race that means you’re racist.

Colorblind racists believe that we’re all a part of the human race, and that we all need to look beyond skin tone, hair, eye shape, etc. I’ve had many discussions with folks at Hampshire that think that my experiences of racism are my own problem, or that I’m too sensitive, or that racism would go away if I would just lighten up my attitude.

As a person of color at a colorblind institution, I get angry—not just angry, but outraged. Because we’re at a place where people pretend that race doesn’t exist, I am silenced in my anger and don’t feel like there is a place to release it besides among my equally outraged friends of color. In putting together a resource for white allies, I found a striking quote from Paul Kivel’s *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work For Racial Justice* that explains anger and why it’s important for people of color to let it out and white folks to really listen:

“When people of color are angry, it is a legitimate anger. It is not their oversensitivity but our lack of sensitivity that causes this communication gap. They are vulnerable to the abuse of racism every day. They are experts on it. White society, and most of us individually, rarely notice racism.

It is the anger and actions of people of color that call our attention to the injustice of racism. Sometimes that anger comes from an individual person of color who is talking to us. At other times it is the rage of an entire community protesting, bringing legal action, or burning down buildings. Such anger and action is almost always a last resort, a desperate attempt to get our attention when all else fails.

It is tremendously draining, costly, and personally devastating for people of color to have to rage about racism. They often end up losing their friends, their livelihoods, even their lives. Rather than attacking them for their anger, we need to ask ourselves how many layers of complacency, ignorance, collusion, privilege, and misinformation have we put into place for it to take so much outrage to get our attention?”

I want all of us to really think about this next time we experience or witness the externalized anger of people of color, and if that anger isn't there, we must ask if it's being replaced by silence. I know that I sometimes internalize and silence a lot of anger in order to keep the white folks around me comfortable. My silence is just as exhausting as my anger, and I'm tired of both. I hope that this panel can open up discussion for us to think critically about how racism is silenced by multicultural rhetoric and the band-aid of diversity.

## APRIL DOWN SOUTH

once she'd had enough, my grandmother sank her brown body  
down  
into the black water by the bayou:  
in a rundown white town where wasn't no one gonna give her a  
hand  
she finally died by her own.

I ache to know the crow's feet  
that would've traced her eyes by now—dark and bitter as coal,  
set in a face carved out of trailer parks and dust  
just north of the border.  
she always had that haunted half-feral look of one who  
done dark things to survive.  
they say she could've seduced the devil himself,  
that she stole, lied, cursed 'em all to hell,  
made my mama cut our mother tongue  
from her mouth.

I reckon the silent rage still in her bones is  
what pushes those red flowers up  
from her grave in the first hot weeks of every summer.

most days, this last testament just blooms unnoticed.  
today it is waving vainly in the breeze, fading in the sun and rain,  
to be forgotten and buried  
between the weeds.

## UNTITLED

I can't stop moving, so I slip from under her arm and go to the porch to pace. My hands are shaking, and I keep smoking, thinking of all the excuses that sounded so good 14-hours ago. The stars are high in the sky, ready for dawn and I should be in bed with her.

But I'm not.

I think about two years with her and I think about this song that we bonded over at a concert.

But my heart isn't in this.

I'm supposed to be a seasoned fighter.

It feels like my first hit.

(And it hurts like...)

I didn't see this coming anyway.

(Yeah, it hurts like hell)

I want to tell her so many lies, but the truth keeps coming up and that drunk that felt so good, that kept us close is burning away. It's slipping away and so is my resolve. I want to think that I'm no coward, but I am and I'm set to run. They say you have to fight for love, that happiness doesn't come easy, but in the back of my head I hear a girl screaming for hope, for a future and it sounds just like this song I once knew...

How'd it go...

When we can't begin

Unless it's with an argument

We're losing out on

Love for the sake of it

And I want to tell her that I can't fight anymore. I know I've been out here too long 'cause I can hear her shuffling behind the door.  
How many rounds can I go?  
And how can I soften the blows?

She used to fit so nice into the crook of my arm and I fit real good against the curve of her body at crowded shows. I remember dreaming of her and fighting to hide the smile that crept across my lips when I saw her lying next to me. She didn't have to open her eyes for me to know they were the most beautiful brown I'd ever seen, glowing like a forest set ablaze.

Oh baby, when you close your eyes  
You're so terrified, so terrified  
So am I.

I'm scared of her, of me, of us. It seems so obvious, but it's more. I suppose. It's starting to get foggy and I'm happy to hide in it, to smoke another cigarette and hope that it hides the fear in my eyes. I know she wants to come out, to know that I'm not pacing and thinking of her, or here.

Instead I think about the club, about her, about the way I saw her through a crowd and knew she had to go home with me. Two months later I was holding her hand in public, smiling at the jealousy of the boys who walked past us. Three months later we were living together, first until I found my own place, then because it didn't make sense for us to live apart as so much of our lives were already tangled up in each other. And it was so easy, so easy to be lost in that, to be lost in her.

You're brilliant, but...

You're amazing, what...

But still I wonder if I want to be here with her. But then I look at my hands, see them shaking and wonder if it's the cold in the air or its me. I turn around and the light behind the door's off, and I know she's in bed, pretending to be asleep. She's waiting for me to come back, to fit back in with her, to let her find her shape against mine. And I think about that last song at the show we met at:

Lay down all those instruments of navigation  
Cause we're already lost,



And maybe we  
Will fall apart at the seams  
Am I through with you?  
Have you had enough of me?

But I can't shake her, if I could I would've, I know it. For better or worse this girl is mine and I'm hers and I can't get past that. So I flick my cigarette and I go back into the bed and she moves to put her arm across me. I smile 'cause I know I can do this. I can't not. I kiss the top of her head and close my eyes, and in my head a girl is singing,  
It's like a bottle to the head.  
I'm seeing stars, I'm seeing red.  
I'd taste your mouth in anyone's kiss.  
Where do you end and I begin?  
It's like a bottle to the head.  
Peg the needle in the red!  
I'd taste your mouth in any kiss.  
Where do you end and I begin?

\*All italicized sections are quotes from Rainer Maria or Garrison Starr

# THE EYES

Her eyes are big, brown, and beautiful  
Round like the sun and piercing like a sword  
The look in her eyes can tell you everything you need to know  
Whether she's tired, hungry, happy, sleepy, confused, or nothing  
The one time her eyes told me nothing  
She was so hurt, so shocked, so sad, so betrayed that her eyes didn't  
know how to be  
Her eyes filled with stinging water  
Water that flows from the ocean of her heart  
Streaming down her face, I cannot look her in the eyes  
Once the eyes that showed so much love and affection,  
now show anger and pain  
and they will never look at me the same again  
However, maybe it's my eyes that deceive me  
because there are moments when our eyes meet  
and they understand that thru this jungle of sadness, there is love.  
Love that was built, love that was tested, love that has prevailed  
Love that will never be the same  
Your eyes hold so much weight that your bags have extra compart-  
ments  
The sleep patterns they once had have become rare  
They only close to blink or to keep reality from sinking in  
You see, your eyes are the windows to your most private parts  
Once those shades come down, my eyes will begin to know that  
love is not what you see; it's what you do  
Your eyes cannot see what's lacking in mine  
because you cannot look in mine the same  
But if all we have are our eyes, then I never want to be unable to see  
them again.

# GEOMETRIC SPACE

Geometric Space

Tragic Monolithic Masculinity

Pornographic Indicators of Nature, of Beauty

Decoct the Spirit

Lost in the Temple of my less familiar

Searching for the somewhat familiar former

In Geometric Space

Geometric Space

Substantiates

Monolithic Masculinity

Reveals Pornographic indicators of nature and beauty

Erratic Eroticism

Decocts Spirits

Start and Bitter

Shoulders Roll over

Fashion sells chains to Disposable people

Who shake crystal tambourines on stage

Who shake the golden embers of our forgotten testimony

And we Deteriorate

Just another lost place

Just another lost place

In Geometric Space

I have lost dead skin  
I am walking over shells of people i once knew  
She sits on top of the clouds  
And masturbates to the beat of her swallowed sorrow  
They rhythmic contractions transcend the void  
and keep pace with the sheer absurdity of what we call life  
But life is not a play  
Familiar with what life is not  
Hers is redeemed by the poignant maroon  
The mark of their ephemeral love

# PHOTON

Light travels faster than sound,  
So I stare at the darkness.  
I wait, patiently, for the first,  
For the most energetic photons to pass the corner.  
I know they will come first  
Because I read it.

They will be wild and untamed,  
Eager to show off and impress.  
These dots, a trillion times smaller than  
A laser, a pin prick, a hairline fracture,  
have traveled unchecked for a thousand million years.  
Each one has survived long enough to  
Light the tunnels and bring men from  
Perdition.

Each pin prick is the absence of  
Absence. It is being in the most  
Excited way. It is what each cell in  
Us craves. Each bit of light is  
Collected and held, remembered in its  
Uniqueness until we pass and become  
Light bending the corner to...

