

Black Futures in BLACK U-NET

by

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This is an edited essay version of a speech that I wrote and presented at the closing presentations for a six-week workshop titled “The Studio for the Future of Arts & Culture” at Arizona State University’s Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts in Tempe. This course was a collaboration between ASU’s Herberger Institute, Bennington College (where I am enrolled), and the Center for Cultural Innovation on emboldening young voices to shape the future of the arts sector. This speech is being shared publicly to express my ideas about the direction of black futures in the arts and beyond. Please read this out loud.

I’d like to preface this presentation with some comments. If this class, this conference, this round of presentations had come ten years earlier, you might have been talking about my future as an inner city youth fascinated by music and culture. It’s not often that someone like me gets a platform like this, and I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that I have privileges. I have a privilege as a light-skinned Black woman, and I have the privilege of access to higher education. I don’t know why I ended up here and someone else from my background didn’t. I don’t know why my life took this course. Ten years ago, if you’d have told me I’d be in America on a near-full ride discussing the adversities of my people and the future I’m envisioning for us, I wouldn’t have considered it possible. My work ethic and attitude at the time did not read “scholar” nor “speaker.” I feel incredibly lucky, but I also feel incredibly guilty. I rose from an ugly system. I know first hand how an ugly system can fail a child in more ways than one. I will not stand here on this platform and speak without addressing the issues my People face. When I’m afforded these chances to speak in front of 40, 100, 200 people or more—specifically non-Black people—I feel I have a duty to speak on these issues. I use my softish hair, my

freckled face, my light skin, and my British accent as a door breacher. In the words of Amiri Baraka: “Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up!”

When we’re discussing the future of arts & culture, I’ve noticed we often don’t go deep enough. It’s deeper than addressing funding issues. It’s deeper than ensuring art is in every public school. To ensure that all people are able to access art, in whichever way you define it, and culture, in whichever way you define it, hard stuff has to be talked about and resolved, such as systemic racism, oppression, the state of inner city public schools versus suburban public schools. The fact that the likelihood you’ll attend a clean, safe, good school rises only if you’re especially talented or intelligent. Every child deserves access to a clean, safe, good school with a diverse curriculum that includes core subjects as well as artistic and cultural education. This is bigger than “taste.” Art can save the life of a young Black man or woman. I preface this presentation with these comments because some of what I am going to say may seem tangential, but it’s essential to what I see as the future of arts and culture. Besides, who will they steal from if Black artists are unable to create? The future of arts & culture lies in a strong Black community, because art can save the life of a young Black man or woman.

The Black community has a history of politicizing our art. The Black Arts Movement of 1965 began as a Black American literary offspring of the Civil Rights Movement, and though short-lived, it made significant impact on the People. When you leave this gallery, listen to “Resolution” by John Coltrane. There are no words, but believe me, that’s politically charged art.

The Black music industry tends to follow the same pattern of politically charged music through especially trying times. Contrary to popular mainstream belief, “conscious” Black music is not a trend, and that’s why we thank God for hip-hop. Following long-

standing tradition, today's Black music is politically charged, especially during these contentious times. Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* (2015) sparked conversation about police brutality, systemic racism, colourism, and depression in the Black community. Solange's *A Seat at the Table* (2016) is from top to bottom, an album about Black womanhood. Her work touched Black women specifically in ways that non-Black listeners will never and can never understand or empathise with. This is bigger than your "taste." Art can save the life of a young Black man or woman. Some things that "don't touch you" are for us.

Black artistic expression is necessary for saving our lives, yet many Black artists fear alienating or offending the white people we rely on for funding and support. That's a problem, because Black audiences often become alienated in the process. Through safeguarding white funders, Black artists can inadvertently lead the Black audience to believe it "doesn't like art." No representation.

Now, I don't always get visual art, and up until last semester I thought I didn't like it. I grew up in London with the world's best museums in my backyard. I never went. I never thought about them at all. My friends and I weren't exposed to visual art that spoke to us, and we therefore believed it "wasn't our thing." We channeled our energy elsewhere, because we didn't want nor need to see the Mona Lisa. My outlook on visual art changed last semester when I went on a field trip to the Studio Museum in Harlem. I was struck by a collection of paintings by an artist named Jordan Casteel. Casteel installed a series of large-scale painted portraits named "Tenses," which showed various Black men Casteel would see throughout Harlem. It was upon remembering this trip to Harlem that I realised that to those who are largely impervious to visual art, it's the things we can relate to that touch us. Things we can see ourselves, our friends, our partners, our families, and our

children in. Things that reflect our culture(s). Things which call to the Black community. Thing that compel us to look even when we don't understand why.

We need to represent ourselves. We need to build a network for ourselves. A network that will have Black attorneys who do and do not wear suits on our own volition. The network will have Black artists with unprocessed hair and baggy 'fits putting up their work in Black-owned galleries because the Whitney and the TATE aren't good enough. The network will have Black intellectuals who speak at Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, and Cambridge for a high fee, but at Morehouse, Spelman, The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and the like, they'll speak for free. The network will have Black mothers, single or not, with crazy braiding skills and wicked intuition useful for the Black businessmen and women. The network will have Black fathers who hustle tradesmen better than the Ivy League or Oxbridge educated interns who sit on Wall St. and in Canary Wharf. The network will have Black athletes, Black computer scientists, Black engineers, Black hairdressers, Black cab drivers, Black writers, Black businessmen, Black real estate tycoons—you name it, we'll have it. This network will be accessible to Black people across the globe via in-person hubs and an online platform. We will share our knowledge, skills, and resources in exchange for something we need. If a Black artist needs affordable or free studio space to work, the realtors will have their back. If a Black person needs legal aid from a first-class lawyer, we attorneys will have their back. Contribute your art when you're done. Teach a free art class for Black children. If a Black single mother needs a nanny so she can work to support her children, but she can't afford a nanny, we'll have someone. We'll give each other what we need, as and when we need it. We won't need to rely on the white power structure anymore because we'll have our own. We will work together as a global Black unit: Black U-Net.

There is no advancement if we don't combat racist power structures that do not work in our favour. Worldwide racism is hundreds of years strong, and I know you can't change an unwilling person's mind nor force them to hear you out—but we don't need permission from anybody. We have each other. Black skill, resource, and knowledge sharing is the future, and will continue to be the future for ages to come.

The sharing will not be monetized. Some of you may think “How will this stand? People don't do things for free.” Well, nepotism is free. Nepotism has been and continues to be a strong model in the popular corporate world and the many successful businesses within. A bond between Black people strengthening our community is somewhat similar. Anything from arts and law to arts and science will converge when people have common ground to stand on, a strong community to build with, and visible representation in every field, opening doors that would otherwise be closed and locked.

To many, a Black power structure strong enough to match the white may seem too unrealistic. A Black power structure is futurism, and the requirement for such is realism in its most concentrated form. I don't believe that futurism rests only in the future—it rests in the 'now.' What is a problem 'now,' and how can we solve it? That's real, effective radicalism. I will learn your system. I will lead you to believe that I became your system, and I will use that power to build a foundation for my own system. I will upend your system. I will hire Black people. I will educate Black people. Throughout law school, I will work clinics and take on Black clients. I will study corporate and human rights law to serve Black people. I will join Black people, recruit Black people, and build a force.

History is the future. If you want to make art influenced by a culture, go and learn about it extensively. Have a discussion with people of that culture. Are you representing their traditions accurately? Are they comfortable with you using this aspect of their culture

for your art? If you don't want to have these discussions and learn the history, strongly reconsider why you do what you do. Politics is the future. Your apolitical art is small in the face of terror. Awareness is the future. When you move into that cool studio space in Bed-Stuy, learn about the community you're moving into and become a part of it. Ask the people what they want and need. Consciousness is the future.

Black U-Net is the future.