

A Symphonic Affirmation

Oh, to be young, gifted, and Black. Those words alone bring warmth to my body and produce an unwarranted smile. I was in high school when I heard this for the first time, and I almost could not fathom the boldness embedded in it or the love from which it derived. My discovery came about through a viewing of “What Happened, Miss Simone?” and I became hypnotized by the glissando of the piano that climaxed with the monosyllables: “YOUNG, GIFTED. AND BLACK.” In a comfortable slouch, I straightened my depressed posture and allowed these words to penetrate my soul without permission. Nina’s songs permanently moved me this way, but it felt unfamiliar.

As the song is dedicated to her friend Lorraine Hansberry, it is also an informal dedication to me. It affirms something that remains at my core as a freedom fighter, a Black woman, and a human being. When Miss Simone says, *You are young, gifted, and Black*, I invoke a traditional “call and response” with “Yes, I am.” I engulf myself in self-love led by a powerful ancestor as if Miss Simone is speaking from a spiritual pulpit.

To be young is to hold on to a piece of our humanity that can never be lost, as we were all once children. As I recently approached the quarter mark, I still revel in my youth in the best and worst ways. Sometimes, it is okay to be transported back to childhood cartoons and laugh at my adolescence. However, I am reminded, more often, that youth cannot be untainted within American society. As a Black child, a racial slur in kindergarten prompted the race talk that was the atomic bomb of my innocence. The slur was a catalyst for a spark that ignited my passion for liberation and made me write my first essay on Malcolm X when I was eight years old. That spark moved me as a young person into spaces that I did not think I was qualified for and made me unafraid of the opposition. But it also humbled me to question the timing of this phase because we all have to grow up one day. So, as I dwell on being young, I face this mental midsection of remembering why I started fighting for liberation. However, in my growth, I understand that the day is coming when my youthful spirit must be repressed to enter the next phase.

To be gifted is to express your place in this lifetime with the spiritual offerings that God has bestowed on us. One mantra I have internalized from Proverbs 18:16 is that your gifts will make room for you. Every human being that enters this Earth has an assignment and a gift that must be used at their discretion. It is essential to understand that gifts are used for good or evil, as one can have the ability of unity or division. I try not to confine myself to just one talent but instead embrace each one and allow them to work harmoniously. One must step into each gift and enable it to bloom or decay when necessary, but it remains eternal.

To be Black, there are not enough words to emphasize the intensity. I love being Black, and that love is the purest I have ever known. When I was in preschool, I told my mother that I wished I was white because I thought they were better. She was not mad but approached it with understanding and a firm reassurance that being Black was unique, not better, but memorable. To me, I take every piece of disenfranchisement against Black bodies; I don't even like that the “b” in Black is sometimes lowercase. Whenever you speak to me or about my people, that “b” has to stand tall with that uppercase, not because of me but for my ancestors, my present community, and the generations unseen. What I would give to be alive is to hear Stokely Carmichael say “Black Power” for the first time or to see the ORIGINAL wave of the Afro in Black communities. As a history nerd, of course, I learned the structure of Blackness was built as a negative derivative of whiteness. It was meant to serve the opposite of goodness and instead was a foundational element of constructing white supremacy. All of this is true, but being Black is a constant reiteration of resistance, community, and creation. Every victory has been won because of the fight from a previous generation, and future victories will be won because of the work we are doing now.

To be a Black woman is also a complex touch to the picture. As I’m growing older, I am learning more about the transition from a Black girl to a Black woman. I can articulate myself as a Black woman, not because of new words, but with new eyes. I can finally appreciate the stories of “Waiting to Exhale” or relate more to Black female comedians. Most importantly, I value the significance of being sensed. There is extraordinary worth in being seen and heard, whether to the world, by each other, or myself. It is power knowing something that only other Black women know, in its uplifting joy and degrading sadness. It is a moment to give glory and honor to God for making me this way.

Even though *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* is only about three minutes, there is no second where it lacks beauty. It is a symphonic affirmation, a harmonious declaration that we should all cherish. As I leave you the lyric, “*There’s a world waiting for you,*” we must uphold that as we each embark on our specific journeys, harness our multitude of gifts with our youthful spirits at heart, our community, and love for ourselves as human beings must not be compromised.