

# Speakeasy with Denene: Black

Denene Millner: Welcome to Speakeasy with Denene, a podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting. I'm your host, Denene Millner. Each episode of Speakeasy trains a spotlight on a single word, and then deep-dives into the many ways it shows up in the African American community. On this episode, the word is black.

[00:00:30]

Denene Millner: Today, I'm giving you a glimpse into two generations of blackness. I'm in conversation with my daughters about how I poured blackness into them, and how they're pouring it right back out into the world. I'm also sitting down with author Damon Young to learn why what doesn't kill you makes you blacker. And I'm introducing you to a spoken word artist whose writings bring the African American experience to life with a war that's undeniable.

[00:01:00]

Denene Millner: What you're hearing is a song Umi Says by Mos Def.

Mos Def: I don't wanna write this down. I wanna tell you how I feel right now. I don't wanna take no time to write this down. I wanna tell you how I feel right now. Hey, tomorrow may never come-

Denene Millner: As a parent, this song has been a powerful anthem.

[00:01:30]

Mos Def: For you Umi. Life is not promised. Tomorrow may never show up-

Denene Millner: On our last episode, I told you how having children opened my eyes about my own beauty as a black woman. It first happened in 1999 when I had my daughter, Mari, and again in 2002 when I gave birth to her sister, Lila. They grew up surrounded by all things black. For example, when they were younger, we'd sing and dance to Umi Says.

Mos Def: Hey, hey. I want black people to be free, to be free, to be free. Want my people to be free, to be free, to be free. Want black people to be free, to be free-

[00:02:00]

Denene Millner: From the womb, I poured blackness into my daughters. I hung pictures of brown people on the walls so they could see themselves, I rocked them to sleep to the sounds of Stevie Wonder, Lauryn Hill, and Earth Wind & Fire so they could feel black rhythm and soul down in their bones. I filled their libraries with black books by black masters like Nikki Giovanni and Jason Reynolds so they would know that the stories of black people matter. And every single day, I told them how pretty they are, how lovely their chocolate skin is, how pretty is their natural, curly, kinky hair, how strong their thick legs and hips and black girl booties are, and I insisted

[00:02:30]

they love themselves, truly love themselves, exactly how God made them. Black and beautiful.

Mos Def: Black people. Black people. Black people. Black people. Black people. Black people.

[00:03:00]

Denene Millner: As a parent, it was so important to show my babies who they were since I didn't get that growing up. My mom and dad didn't focus on blackness. It just was what it was. My girls needed to see the world through a deeper lens.

Lila: Hi, my name is Lila Chiles. I am 16 years old, and I am a student at Grady High School.

Mari: Hi, my name is Mari Chiles. I'm 19 years old, and I'm a student at Yale University.

[00:03:30]

Denene Millner: I tried my best to raise Lila and Mari to see their own blackness inside and out, but my lessons didn't translate the way I thought. Let's hear first from Mari, who talked to me from a studio on Yale University's campus. Roughly 7% of the university students identify as black or African American. This year, the student body elected its first black president in its nearly 320 year history. Let that sink in. Mari says going to Yale lit a spark inside of her.

[00:04:00]

Mari: Like a door has been opened since I've been in college. I really started to realize, like, the depth of blackness, and, like, all the ways that blackness can be different in an of itself. Like, I feel like, basically, every day that I'm here, I'm proving somebody wrong, and that just makes me wanna go harder, and it makes me wanna, you know, succeed and achieve as much as I possibly can, because that's all I wanna do is prove people wrong, and, you know, show them that black girls are magic. Period.

[00:04:30]

Denene Millner: Black girls are magic. Periodt.

Mari: Periodt.

[00:05:00]

Denene Millner: With a T at the end, 'cause that is very, very, very black. That's my baby. Mari came to this realization by meeting so many different kinds of black people. Those from the African continent, others who grew up in the hood, and others raised in predominantly white spaces.

Mari: All of these black people were melted together in this one space, and, like, realizing, like, the vast differences between all of us that I never realized, but also, like, the links and all of the connections between us was, like, extremely, extremely profound to me, and I realized how deep blackness really is.

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Denene Millner: Hearing my baby say this blows my mind. I been pouring blackness into this girl since she was in the womb. How in the world could she just now be having this revelation?

Mari: [00:06:00] Your parents and your families, like, teaching and words can only go, like, so far, 'cause as soon as you get out into, like, the real world and you experience things when they're not there, the world will tell you something completely different, and so you kinda have to figure it out on your own.

Denene Millner: There are days I close my eyes and picture Mari strutting around Yale's predominantly white campus.

Mari: I'll walk around campus with, like, my African, um, dance, um, costume on and stuff and look at the way people, like, "What?"

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Mari: Like, "Yes, this is what I'm wearing."

Denene Millner: That's my baby. (laughs)

[00:06:30]

Mari: "Yes, it's bright. Yes, it's colorful. Yes, it has a lot of patterns. Yes, this is what I'm wearing."

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Mari: "Is there a problem?"

Lila: I like what she was talking about when she said she was walking around campus embracing her blackness, and, like, showing it off and stuff like that. Like, I wanna be able to do that wherever I end up.

[00:07:00]

Denene Millner: That's my other daughter, Lila. She's still in high school in Atlanta. Growing up, Lila's blackness was something that was, uh, let's just say in question.

Lila: Um, so I used be, like, a die-hard Taylor Swift fan when I was in middle school.

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Lila: Um, you don't really see many black girls in that environment, sort of fan base. It's mainly white girls.

Denene Millner: Yup. You heard that right. Taylor Swift.

[00:07:30]

Taylor Swift: I stay out too late. Got nothing in my brain. That's what people say, mm-hmm. That's what people say, mm-hmm. I go on too many-

Denene Millner: Whoa, whoa, whoa. My baby is glued to Taylor Swift? This is coming from someone who grew up with me leaving Stevie Wonder lyrics in her lunchbox. Lila says expressing blackness at school was never easy.

Lila: [00:08:00] It was just, like, a weird period, because all the things I had seen, heard, listened to, like, at home I couldn't relate to the white kids, that- to my friends at school-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Lila: So, it was, like, kinda awkward.

Denene Millner: But all that started to change in 8th grade when Lila took a race, class and gender course. She says her teacher helped her look at race under a microscope.

Lila: That was, like, a big, big change, because he kinda talked to us about race a lot, and, like, what it means, and, like, the differences and similarities, and how you, like, interact with people-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:08:30]

Lila: And that's when I started, um, transferred ov-... I don't know, but I definitely was hanging out with the black kids in 8th grade. Like, I kinda moved my friend group. Like, I was still friends with the white kids, but, like, my closer friends were all black. And I think it was just a matter of relating to them more.

Denene Millner: In just a short time, Lila wants to go to college for dentistry. She dropped this bombshell about where she wants to study.

[00:09:00]

Lila: I had actually been thinking, like, I really kinda really wanna go to Howard. So (laughs)-

Denene Millner: Whoa, news.

Lila: Yeah.

Denene Millner: This is news. Oh, what? You wanna go to Howard?

Lila: Yeah.

Denene Millner: Word.

Lila: And especially 'cause they have, um, Howard school of dentistry-

Denene Millner: That's right.

Lila: That graduates, like, the most black dentist in the country.

Denene Millner: That's right. Let me tell you something. This was an eye-opening conversation for me as their mom. You can pour everything you have into your kids, but my god, it's something to know that they had to live in the world to truly understand blackness on their own terms. My thanks to Lila and my other baby, Mari, for telling me about how they've embraced their blackness. Makes me wanna dance with them all over again to Mos Def's Umi Says.

[00:09:30]

Mos Def: Umi says shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see. My Abi says shine your light on the world. Shine your light for the world to see.

[00:10:00]

Denene Millner: To hear my girls grow even stronger because of their blackness makes me proud, but I still worry about all the challenges facing them in our divided society. Journalist Damon Young says living while black is an extreme sport. He's co-founder and editor and chief of the website Very Smart Brothas, and his latest book is called What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker. Here he is reading an excerpt.

Damon Young: To be black in America is to exist in a ceaseless state of absurdity; a perpetual surrealism that twists and contorts and transmutes equilibrium and homeostasis the way an extended stay in space alters human DNA. Of course, there are other places that America takes us, and other places we're drawn to ourselves. It is perfectly sane, for instance, to be black and to allow outrage to conquer you.

[00:10:30]

Denene Millner: Damon Young reading a section of his book, What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker. He tells me that wasn't the original title.

[00:11:00]

Damon Young: So, the original title was Nigga Neurosis. I, I include that term in the book, and that term kinda encapsulates the state of being where you are. You experience a thing, and you question whether the thing happened because you were black, and this could be a good thing or a bad thing. Like, did I get this, um, scholarship because I'm black? Did I not get this scholarship because I'm black? Um, and, and again, it's not necessarily a thing that, you know, where you look at your blackness as, you know, "Aw, I wish I wasn't black," and, but it's this more of just, like, "Uh, I wonder how my race impacted this, this thing that happened to me."

[00:11:30]

Denene Millner: Damon Young tells me it's hard to see the lengths some black people go to try overcome racism rather than staring at it head on. Just a note, this a part of the conversation where you might hear some explicit language.

Damon Young: I made fun of people who, um, have succumbed to respectability-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Damon Young: [00:12:00] And who believe that, you know, if I alter my behavior in this way, or if I just wear different deodorant, or if I listen to different music, or if I part my hair a certain way, or I, where I, I shop at a certain store then this is all it's gonna take-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: For, for, um, for racism to end and for white people to finally accept us.

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: And, but, you know, there's no point in even trying to assimilate in that, in that manner because it's not gonna happen.

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: [00:12:30] And so, why not just embrace it? Why not just, you know, just dive completely into it, and, and also to, submission to blackness, I think it expands your humanity.

Denene Millner: Right. Absolutely. Unless-

Damon Young: You know.

Denene Millner: [00:13:00] Uh, you know, like, there's a line that you have in your book that was something to the effect of allowing anger to be the only response to the absurdity of our condition would be suicide. Um, and, you know, like, I just thought that that was just a beautiful concept, that what you just described as blackness is the way that I've grown to, to care for, care for it and love it and embrace it, and how I pour it into my daughters, you know, that blackness is not just the negative aspect of fighting white supremacy or fighting racism. It is, it is, you know, a spades games at the, at the barbecue.

Damon Young: Yeah.

Denene Millner: It is, it is listening to DeAngelo while you're, you know, cooking your, your fried fish for dinner-

Damon Young: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:13:30]

Denene Millner: On a Friday night, because that's what you do on Friday nights. It's so many beautiful things that I wouldn't trade for a solid, single to- single thing in the world, um, and, you know, like, being, it, it doesn't allow for a constant state of anger.

Damon Young: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Denene Millner: Because there's so many beautiful things about it.

Damon Young: There's so many, and, and again, in, you know, with that said, there are people who are in that constant state of anger, and I get it. Like, and, and that's, it's a natural way to be.  
[00:14:00]

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: It, it is. It, it, it definitely is. There are people who are in a perpetual state of outrage, and I g- I understand that that's just, I, I, I can't live that way-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: But I understand when black people, when that's, when, when that's a black person's reaction to that.

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: I, I, I get it, even though that's not for me, but I get it.

[00:14:30]

Denene Millner: So each chapter is an essay that, um, sort of gives your personal perspective on things that make you black. There's a nigger fight story, there's the extreme, but not irrational, fear when cops come, um, you know, when you see them in the rear view mirror, there's the one white friend we think is down until they remind us that really they're not, there's money problems, there's a loved one stolen by racism in the healthcare system, there's confusion over whether to be the stereotype or fight the stereotype, um, and hope for our children even if, you know, we're at a loss for how to parent them through the white supremacy's effect on blackness. So, there's so many beautiful sort of mediations, um, and funny as hell meditations on what it means to be black.  
[00:15:00]

Denene Millner: Tell me about the nigga fight story. (laughs)

Damon Young: (laughs)

Denene Millner: 'Cause we all have one. (laughs)

[00:15:30]

Damon Young: O- well, I, I, I don't. I don't have one yet. I, I haven't ha- I haven't had one. So, um, when I first agreed to do this, that nigger fight story was like, you know, a- this I need, that has to be chapter one, page one, and, and I feel like the entire book kinda builds off of that story. And so-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: It takes place in I think 1984 or 1985. My mom and my grandmother at this, are at this deli in this neighborhood in Pittsburgh, and there's some sort of disagreement  
[00:16:00]

about, about the price of something, or something, and the white boy behind the register ends up calling my mom and my grandmother black nigger bitches.

Denene Millner: That's is just-

Damon Young: Yeah. (laughs)

Denene Millner: Really-

Damon Young: Like wow, you just-

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Damon Young: Pulled out a- all the big guns. Yeah, yeah basically.

Denene Millner: We having this conversation over olives, right? (laughs)

Damon Young: I'm a black nigger bitch over ice cream? Like, really? Um-

Denene Millner: Right. Right.

Damon Young: [00:16:30] And so my dad was also in the neighborhood. He was up the street at, at, uh, Giant Eagle, uh, supermarket. My mo- my mom and my grandmother go. They leave, they go get him. They come back in the store, and to understand this story, you also have to understand my parents. My parents are like the tea drinking-ess, Pat Metheny, Steely Dan, NPR-

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Damon Young: Like, my grandmother was an organist. She's like white gloves on Sunday, like, this, this is-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: This is these people.

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: Okay. And so-

Denene Millner: Right. Right. Right.

[00:17:00]

Damon Young: My dad approaches the guy, the, the boy behind the register who was probably like 18, 19 years old, and it's like, you know, "My wife and, uh, my mother-in-law said that you said this thing to them. I'm gonna give you an opportunity to apologize, and if not, I'm gonna come back there and kick your fucking ass with this 2x4." Yeah.



Denene Millner: With this bat. Right? Right?

Damon Young: And he, and [crosstalk 00:17:22]. Yeah, he had like a bat, or a 2x4, or something with him.

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:17:30]

Damon Young: And so, the white boy doesn't apologize. Then my dad starts counting, and you know that when a black parent starts counting, (laughs) that you need to brace yourself-

Denene Millner: Whatever you-

Damon Young: Because-

Denene Millner: Whatever you- right.

Damon Young: Yeah.

Denene Millner: Whatever you was doing, you better cut it out before it's in.

Damon Young: 'Cause fer- yeah [Ferge 00:17:41] was about to start moving. (laughs) Okay.

Denene Millner: Right. (laughs)

Damon Young: And then, uh-

Denene Millner: Absolutely.

Damon Young: He gets to 10. He swings it at him. He, like, I c- I, maybe, like, hits his arm or doesn't really get him completely, and the white boy gets, like, this, gets like this, um, almost like a machete and swings it at my dad. An so, they're, like, swinging these swords and bats at each other, and in the background, my mom and my, and my grandmother are, like, breaking olive jars, and throwing salami-

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Denene Millner: (laughs)

Damon Young: And smashing ice cream on the walls. You know, and just, and again, you have to remember who, this is, like, this is, you know-

Denene Millner: Right.

[00:18:30]

Damon Young: Bank teller mom, organist grandmother, Sunday morning church clothes and they're, and they're basically, it's like, that's like the last 15 minutes to do the right thing.

Denene Millner: R- (laughs)

Damon Young: So, they get arrested. Um, they broke windows. Basically ruined the store.

Denene Millner: Right. Right.

Damon Young: And they, um, they, they're questioned by, like, a black sergeant or lieutenant some, some black woman with some sort of authority who takes a look at them and is like, "You know what? Yeah. I'm gonna let y'all niggas go. (laughs) Okay?"  
[00:19:00]

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Damon Young: "So sneak outta here. I'ma just say y'all were racially intimidated 'cause y- y- you are not supposed to be here. So I'm, I'll, I'll make-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: Up something, and y'all just leave." And so-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: This happened when-

Denene Millner: And can I, and can I just tell you that when your mom says, "Are you sure?" And then the lady responds, "If you don't get on out of here," I, like, heard her say it.  
[00:19:30]

Damon Young: (laughs)

Denene Millner: "If you don't get on outta here before these people figure out I'ma let you go," (laughs).

Damon Young: (laughs) And so, you know, this happened. I'm like five or six years old-

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: And I hear this story, and my parents tell this story at, at parties, at cookouts, at family reunions, at, you know, whenever, 'cause it's, it's a great story. And so, I wanted one of my own that I could share when it was nigger fight story sharing time. And, um, I never end up getting one. And, and, and the chapter concludes with me actually being called a nigger. And by this time, I'm like six- I'm 16 or 17 years old. I'm waiting for a bus by myself. I'm gonna go hoop somewhere, and this, uh, pickup truck speeds by, and the person in the passenger seat screams, (laughs)  
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[00:20:30] "Nigger," at me, and the car just keeps speeding by. And I'm, like, standing there at the bus stop, and I'm like, I, I kinda look around like, "Oh, I, I guess he is talking to me. I'm the only, I'm the only nigga here. So I guess he was, that was for me."

Denene Millner: (laughs)

Damon Young: And it's like a part of me wanted to scream, like, "Yo, turn around. You know, I- this is it. You called me it, now I need a chance-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: To fight you," so that now we finally have, I can finally have the story, but he just kept on going. And just-

Denene Millner: Right.

[00:21:00]

Damon Young: You know, just looking back on that, you know, just the absurdity-

Denene Millner: Yeah.

Damon Young: Of wanting to be called that word-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: Just so I could have some, some sort of right-of-passage, and, and also-

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: The absurdity of assigning any sort of weight to what a white person did or didn't do when defining my own racial identity.

Denene Millner: You wrote so beautifully and eloquently about what it means to be a father, but what it means to be a father of a black child-

[00:21:30]

Damon Young: Hmm.

Denene Millner: A black daughter, um, and prepare her. What does it mean to prepare her, or what does it mean to feel like you're preparing her for what she'll be facing? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Damon Young: I've always been a person who's been very, you know, very thoughtful and very, I don't know, very immune, I guess, to, like, peer pressure. Like, that's just been my thing where I, I kinda just, uh, I kinda just do my own thing, march to the beat of my own drum, or whatever, very independent, but that independence, a part of that independence is, is due to the fact that, um, I also sometimes overthink.

[00:22:00]

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: And I sometimes, maybe I'm not as assertive as I need to be.

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: And that overthinking and that stressing over what to do sometimes paralyzes me, and that has even led to me having acid reflux.

Denene Millner: Hmm.

[00:22:30]

Damon Young: And so, that good part of me and that bad part of me come from the same thing, come from the same place, and so the chapter is me trying to figure out how to pass on that good stuff to my daughter.

Denene Millner: Right.

Damon Young: And, while also realizing that, you know, she, she's a little black girl.

Denene Millner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Damon Young: And all the racism that I've dealt with is gonna be compounded, because she'll have to deal with sexism, too.

Denene Millner: Right.

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Damon Young: And just trying to figure out how I could teach her to be whatever she wants to be in the same America that I believe killed her grandmother.

Denene Millner: Yeah. Yeah.

Damon Young: In the same America that's been around for, you know, hundreds of years, and, and will do everything it can to prevent her from being and doing what I said she could be and do, even though I don't know how it's possible for her to be whatever she can be while America is everything that it is, I do believe that it's possible. I don't know how it happens, but I believe that it will happen, and that's, that's, that's the message that I wanna give her.

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Denene Millner: And that's also the message I want to give to my two daughters, Mari and Lila. After all, what doesn't kill you makes you blacker.

[00:24:00]

Denene Millner: Our thanks to Damon Young. Before we said, "Goodbye," we did a few rapid-fire rounds of a game I like to call, uh, things that are inherently black as hell. Uh, spades games.

Damon Young: Grits.

Denene Millner: Oh. That is black as hell.

Denene Millner: Uh, all 846 members of the Wu-Tang Clan.

Damon Young: Um, Beyonce calling herself creole.

Denene Millner: That's black as hell.

[00:24:30]

Denene Millner: This is Speakeasy with Denene, a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting. Now, let's hear from a poet whose work embodies what it means to be black. Theresa Michelle Wilson goes by Theresa tha S.O.N.G.B.I.R.D.. She lives in Atlanta, but was raised in a Chicago land area in a predominantly Jewish upper-middle class community. Both of her parents are from Mississippi, and they raised their daughter to appreciate her blackness. All of this played a role in how Theresa expresses her own blackness through poetry, especially in the poem You So Black.

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Denene Millner: It became a viral sensation on social media after she performed it at the 2019 Trumpet Awards. When I first heard it, Theresa's words lifted me up in the way other poems haven't. She stopped by our studio to recite it.

[00:25:30]

Theresa: You so black. Oh, you so black when you smile the stars come out. You so black when you born the god come out black as night. Black as dirt. Black as a boot. Black as a hearse. Black to the earth. Black at last and black at first. Black at birth. Black unrehearsed. Black uninvested. Black uninvited. Black ill-requested. Black interested. Black entertained. Black in something special, baby. Black just the same. Black like your mommas and your daddies. Black like you want me, and black like you could never have me. Black and inconvenient. Black with the burden of proof. Black until proven innocent. Black with the built-in truth. Black and blue. Black and substance abuse. Black with lead in my water. Black with hands up, don't shoot. Black and pipeline to prison. Black single mothers with children.

[00:26:00]

[00:26:30]

Theresa: Black entitled the division of being black and broke. Black and poor. Black and bleeding. Black before. Black was needing social media. Black as bland. Back to Africa, and black again. Black as ancestors and panthers. Black as Angela in asada. Black as Betty in Coretta's sons and daughters. Black as pyramids and mathematics. Black as melanized and magic. Black is televised and their need of drastic black advancement. Black enhances. Black with chances. Black with privilege. Black with pride. Black on purpose. On the black hand's side. Black and beautiful, and blessed and highly-favored. Praise the Lord. Black and blessed. Black and so much more. Black and nothing less. Black and educated. Black and dangerous. You know the blacks with the education are the most dangerous.

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[00:27:30]

Theresa: Black is brilliant. Black is strong. Black is resilient. Black is song. Black is infinite like hip hop or space. Black is grace. Black is love. Black makes babies. Black babies grow up. Black is tough. Black is hard to do. Black is me. Black is you. Black is not something we get to choose, but it is something we get to cherish. It's something we get to wear, and we get to rock it with honor. I'm black like my granddaddy and my great-great-great-great-grandmama. Back to the black first farmer of black soil and black seed. Black as you need. Black as you breathe. Black as you bleed. Black

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as you believe. Black as you love. Black is all of the above. Black has always been enough. Black is that lift every voice and sing. Black is letting our freedom ring and resound. Black is adjective, adverb, color, and noun. Black is crown. Black is clean. So to the black is all everlasting. To the black and passing, and to every shade of black in between. Matter of fact, if your pupils are black, so that we can all feel applicable. Baby, you so black. You transcend the physical. Your black is original. You so black. Oh, you so black when you smile the stars come out. You so black when you were born the god come out.

Denene Millner: That's Atlanta-based poet, Theresa tha S.O.N.G.B.I.R.D., reciting her poem You So Black. We asked Theresa to tell us about the inspiration behind it.

Theresa: I wrote You So Black because I felt like in my whole cannon of material that I didn't, I just knew I didn't have a poem that was blanket black. Like, I had poems about black men. I have poems about black women. I have poems about black young men. I just recently wrote a poem about black young women, but I didn't have anything that was just, like, blanket for all of us that I could, you know, do all at once. I wouldn't describe myself as a poet who goes searching for the things that are happening on the news and the media, and then I flip around and write a poem about it, but the climate of the things going on specifically in communities that affect lower economic status folk like folk of color, um, police shootings, the stuff in Flint with the water crisis, uh, just everything, eve- from coast to coast dealing with the jail system and the school system, and how, how closely co-related these two systems seem to be set up and run. We just gonna leave that.

[00:30:30]  
Theresa: All of these things, for me, I wanted to find a way to put them in a poem and bring light to them, but at the end, still leave you with the narrative that kept you empowered. I want you to be fired up for your blackness in this moment, and I think that for me has been the real, the tremendous, uh, where the work lies is not so much in the writing of the poem, but getting a place where when I perform the poem, you viscerally feel that experience, and I listen to what my momma tells me. My momma is always right. I hate to have to say it. She's always right. Even when she's wrong, she's right. And she knew something that I was just not aware of, that my words are meant to move people in a specific direction. I have to write for the benefit of my listeners. I cannot just write selfishly for myself about how I feel in the moment 'cause it's bigger. Like, my feelings are trite compared to the emotions of humanity.

[00:31:30]  
Theresa: Fredrick Douglas, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner. These are the comic books that I read as a child. I was very empowered as a kid. The narrative that my parents and my family gave me about myself always made me walk into a room like, "Ah, black people are the best. Didn't you know?" And I just, when I go out into schools, when I go into any sort of situation, and I see people who look like me who aren't on fire, aren't just lit up with passion for their blackness, I just wanna give that to them.

Denene Millner: That's Atlanta-based poet and spoken word artist, Theresa tha S.O.N.G.B.I.R.D.. Visit us online to hear more of my interview with her and the full version of her poem You So Black. And we want to hear from you. How do you embrace blackness? You can reach us at [speakeasywithdenene.com](http://speakeasywithdenene.com). I'm Denene Millner, and this is Speakeasy with Denene. Keocia Howard and Sean Powers produced the show. Our theme music is by M. Fasol. We heard additional music from Blue Dot Sessions. Speakeasy with Denene is a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting. You can subscribe to us for free at [gpb.org/podcasts](http://gpb.org/podcasts) and anywhere you get your podcasts, and until the next time on Speakeasy, be easy.