

We Need To Talk

A global, student-run newspaper



We would like to remind everyone that there is no place for any form of identity discrimination including anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, or anti-BLM rhetoric at We Need To Talk or any other forum. This newspaper is dedicated to lifting the voices of marginalized groups, not suppressing them. Although everyone has their own beliefs, those beliefs should never come at the expense of others.

Thank you so much for all your support,
We Need To Talk team

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Current Events

edited by Barsha
Parajuli

GameStop's Sudden Surge in Stock Price

by Deetya Adhikari

In an increasingly online world, the role of GameStop was steadily diminishing. People do not feel the need to visit physical stores to purchase video games, instead utilizing online platforms to buy them. Furthermore, with the on-going pandemic, people have avoided going out as much as they once did. However, with the intervention of a thread on a prolific social media platform called Reddit, the tables seem to have turned more rapidly for GameStop than any could have imagined. A subreddit, r/wallStreetBets, was what changed matters for GameStop. Perusers of this subreddit often attempted to beat out short-sellers by attempting to predict which stocks the short-sellers were after, since they did not like how short-sellers exploited the market and financial system to make profit. Short-sellers are investors who essentially pay to borrow stock for a predetermined period and sell it back to the companies later hoping to make a margin profit. Although, if the price of the stock increases when it is time to sell back the stock, short-sellers lose money. Similarly,

there are hedge funds, which are groups of wealthy investors that use risky tactics, such as investing with borrowed money. Short-sellers and hedge funds benefit from the value of the asset falling, rather than rising, meaning that they try to look for companies that are declining to make a profit. In less words, these people make a gamble on whether a company's stocks will crash or not.



Courtesy of Arstechnica

Some retail investors on Reddit noticed that more investors were beginning to short \$GME (GameStop stock), and so they urged others to invest in \$GME, in that once it was time for short-sellers and hedge funds to sell

back the stocks, the price of the stock will have risen so much that these investors would lose a significant amount of money. As a result of this, short-sellers and hedge funds are rapidly trying to buy \$GME, so that their net loss is not as great. Subsequently, the stock price continues to rise, adding upward pressure on the stock. On Wall Street, this is what is known as a short-squeeze.



Courtesy of Slashgear

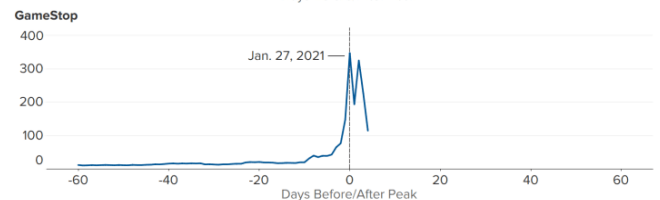
There is a remarkable short-squeeze taking place, and that is why GameStop stock has been so volatile lately. One year ago, it was valued at \$4 a share, and in late January the price skyrocketed to almost \$350 a share. This type of growth is astonishing, so much so, that it will undoubtedly have an impact on the free market. At least, a number of stock trading apps thought so. Robinhood, a commission-free trading app, restricted trading in \$GME and other copiously shorted stocks because of their growth. This means that it blocked day-traders from opening new positions and purchasing those stocks, instead favoring the rich short-sellers and hedge funds. This may have been a major factor involved in the short-squeezes, as only the short-sellers and hedge funds were able to trade.

The exponential growth of GameStop stock may seem like an anomaly, but is not unprecedented. In fact, in 2008, hedge funds

were very focused on Volkswagen stock, which led to a squeeze. The price of the stock increased exponentially, doubling in value by the end of the month. However, in the next few months, the stock slowly started drifting back towards its original value before the squeeze. This seems to be the trend that most heavily shorted companies follow: rapidly enter a short-squeeze, then gradually fall back to the original stock price.

How another short squeeze played out

In the fall of 2008, shares of Volkswagen more than quadrupled in a matter of two days. The stock dropped 58% in four days after its peak. Chart shows share price for 60 days before and after the stock's peak.



SOURCE: FactSet. Data as of 9:45 a.m. on Feb. 2, 2021. Share price is in local currency (Euros for VOW, USD for GME).

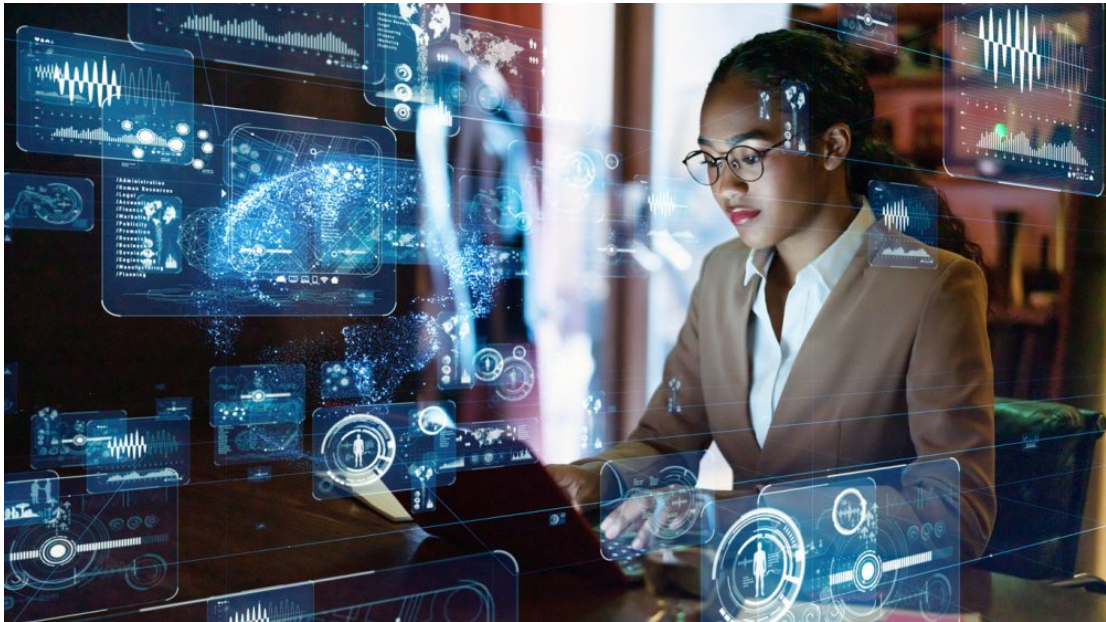


Courtesy of CNBC

GameStop is no different from these companies. It has been a few weeks since \$GME skyrocketed, and already, the price has fallen from its summit at \$350 to approximately \$50. Still, this is much higher than its previous price. In the next month or two, the price will likely decrease, leaving GameStop where it started: struggling. GameStop is renowned for being a brick-and-mortar electronic gaming retailer in a society led by the internet, and was floundering before the intervention of Redditors. This upsurge definitely will prolong the existence of GameStop, but will not go so far as to prevent it from ultimately filing for bankruptcy or the liquidation of its assets.

Big Data, Big Deception - Intersections Between the Obfuscation of Black Tech Talent and Data Infringement

by Shrinidi Thiruvengadam



Courtesy of iStock/metamorworks

In recent times, it appears that one tech leader after the other has headlined the news at a fairly consistent rhythm - one event may bring news of a day-long congressional testimony, while another event may bring news of a net worth that appears to meet no bounds. Coverage over the diversity of big tech talent, however, pales in comparison, despite the clear repercussions of a monolithic tech coalition.

Timnit Gebru, a Black female AI ethics researcher, recently announced that she was “abruptly fired from Google for sending an email criticizing the company’s treatment of minority employees”, according to The Washington Post. Gebru’s influential position as the co-leader of Google’s Ethical Artificial Intelligence Team was imperative to ensuring that diverse perspectives had a place at a tech conglomerate such as Google, having spearheaded research that helped maximize

the company’s status “as a leader in assessing the technology’s fairness and risks.” It is emphatically clear that Gebru’s firing is just another addition to the nefarious pattern of Google silencing workplace diversity advocates who dare to challenge the company’s shoddy record.

Gebru’s story is not nascent to the conversation about diversity in the tech industry. A former diversity recruiter at Google named April Curley was also fired for a similar charge, stating that her vocalizations about racial justice ultimately led to her being fired from the company. The discrimination far preceded her dismissal from the company: she was reportedly told by her white skip-level manager that her Baltimore-accented speech was a “disability that [she] should disclose when meeting with folks internally.” Additionally, she was denied promotions and leadership opportunities,

received compensation cuts, and was placed on performance improvement plans. Adding to Gebru's sentiments of the company's extensive accounts of anti-Black rhetoric and actions, Curley spoke on her first-hand experience working as a diversity recruiter in which Google executed tactics to "keep black and brown students out of the pipeline," as she focused on increasing the number of hires from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Moreover, she attested that candidates from these schools were given degrading feedback and then rejected at the hiring committee stage, mentioning that her advocacy for minority students resulted in "active abuse and retaliation from several managers who harassed [her] - and many other black women."



Courtesy of GETTY IMAGES/iStock

While the issue of representation is not confined to just the tech field, the interrogation of equity in the data sector speaks to an additional struggle - the suppression and subsequent marginalization of racial minorities, particularly Black communities, using big data. The construction of algorithms is a relatively unknown process to non-tech workers, although their ubiquitous presence certainly necessitates a broader understanding of the

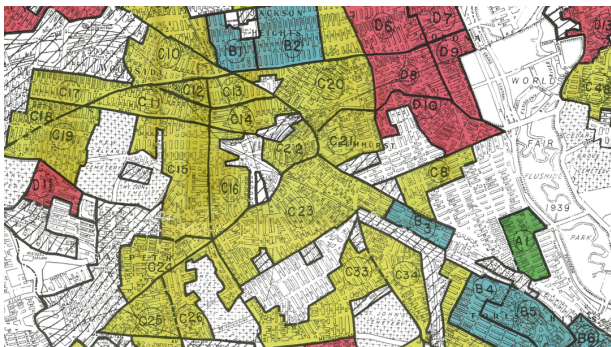
algorithm's functionality. It is critical to comprehend why the pervasiveness of demographic hierarchies in this industry catalyzes how these technologies are distributed to the general public because they create social implications reaching far past the limits of our smart devices.

A profile of Yeshimabeit Milner in Forbes Magazine illuminates the process of datafication, one that Milner describes as technology influencing "our lives in ways we had no control over." According to Milner, datafication can manifest itself into several different facets of our life that range from whether your Equifax and FICO credit scores indicate if you qualify for housing to the newsfeed that you receive on your Facebook. Milner found importance in utilizing such technology to analyze restrictive systemic structures, with the advent of Milner's organization Data for Black Lives coming as a reaction to the trajectory of the tech sector (which has notably excluded Black and Latinx workers from ascending to higher positions).

Milner describes her conversations with data scientists as being very "concerned about the direction the country was headed, and really concerned that their literal everyday jobs were being weaponized against vulnerable communities, in-particular Black and brown communities." Her organization, which spans academics, tech talent, and everyday people arose organically to provide a place for those who felt that the tech industry was not forging a path for them. The very tenets of Data for Black Lives ultimately embrace concepts of movement and community building with the strategic processes of the tech sector to instigate positive, inclusive change in the industry.

What areas have become the most notorious for rampant discrimination? According to Data for Progress, one of the most prominent avenues for data weaponization has been in policing, where lack of transparency and accountability is robust. Ensuring that data from cases where clear misconduct has occurred is made public, from areas such as arrests, prosecution, law enforcement discipline, and incarceration is imperative. Nearly 66% of people surveyed about their opinion on public disclosure of misconduct either “support” or “somewhat support” public disclosure of investigations that “uncover evidence of wrongdoing.”

A Stanford Business article further corroborated discriminatory practices within credit-market algorithms, citing that, historically, “minorities have disproportionately been denied loans, mortgages, and credit cards, or charged higher rates than other customers.” Reporting on the findings of Stanford Professor Jann Speiss and Harvard University Doctoral Student Talia Gillis, the article states that Speiss found current credit-market algorithms to be “too focused on the role of humans in the process,” contemplating whether equation characteristics within algorithms (such as race and gender) were truly functioning under anti-discriminatory regulations.



Courtesy of PBS

In theory, protecting homeowners from being considered strictly by these variables in the eyes of lenders is favorable, but Speiss posits that this framework holds ample prejudice as it fails to factor in the abundant history of certain demographics not having basic access to credit, undermining whether their credit score is “creditworthy” or not.

Perhaps one of the most egregious instances of big data being utilized to target Black communities was during the 2016 Presidential election in which the Trump campaign targeted the historically disenfranchised area of Miami-Dade County’s Interstate 95 corridor. According to an article by the Miami Herald, the Trump campaign employed a “computer algorithm that analyzed huge sums of potential voters’ personal data – things they’d said and done on Facebook, credit card purchases, charities they supported, and even personality traits (...).” Labelling this strategy as “deterrence”, the campaign utilized methods such as advertisements, disinformation, and misleading information to convince likely voters to not show up to the polls, with more than half of Black voters living in Miami-Dade being identified as selected for deterrence, reportedly at “almost twice the rate of deterrence for non-Black voters”. While most political campaigns, regardless of party, are contingent on big data to run advertisements, internal data from Cambridge Analytica suggests that the data from the Trump campaign was ultimately maneuvered to suppress voters, ergo a digital platform for disenfranchisement.

Extending to an effort known as “Project Alamo,” the Trump campaign worked closely with Cambridge Analytica, compiling voter

data gathered by the RNC, personal information purchased from commercial providers, and political donor lists to sequence advertisements. The issue here is that some of these advertisements were purposefully constructed to contain falsehoods, such as a misinterpretation from First Lady Michelle Obama, with a pro-Trump super PAC writing that the ad was “very effective in persuading women in our principal audience not to vote for Hillary Clinton.” Shockingly, officials on both the Trump Campaign and Cambridge Analytica teams have admitted to this leverage of power, with Trump’s campaign chief data scientist Matthew Oczkowski describing deterrence voters as “folks that we hope don’t show up to vote.”

In lieu of these violations, several organizations have committed to prioritizing transparency and diversity in data in order to restrain big data companies from disproportionately wielding control over Black communities. Milner’s Data for Black Lives consists of a bevy of activists, organizers, and mathematicians that work to exercise crucial tech tools such as statistical modeling, data utilization, and crowd-sourcing for assembling progressive moments that promote civic engagement and dismantle bias. Identifying that some of the most exclusionary racial regulations have stemmed from the manipulation of tech such as redlining, predictive policing, risk-based sentencing, and predatory lending, Data for Black Lives works to host conferences and events to share research and take action to initiate equitable data-driven programs.

However, many of these activist groups, such as an organization created by Gebru called Black in AI, face sharp criticism from moguls

and titans in the industry who are resistant to such change. Her criticism of large language models was not received favorably by Google, as the company may one day “seek to capitalize on such systems in consumer-facing products that could generate convincing passages of text that are difficult to distinguish from human writing.”



Courtesy of Regis Mutual Management

If we are to truly incite change and stymie the corruption of unethical data collection, then we must safeguard the platforms of diverse (primarily Black) voices within the industry.

Black History Month

by Deeksha Chitale



Carter G. Woodson

Each year, a number of countries dedicate a month to the recognition and celebration of the contribution made to our society by the African diaspora. Black History Month is observed and celebrated in the month of February in the United States and Canada.

Initially, Black History Month was a means of educating young people about the contribution of Blacks and African-Americans in every field - such as science, sports, and literature. Such accounts had been largely forgotten and were a neglected part of the national narrative. Even now, Black History Month endeavours to showcase Black achievement and recognise the immense contribution made by Black Americans, while also aiming to combat systemic racism.

Origins

Noted historian Carter G. Woodson compiled

the overlooked achievements of African Americans in 1916 in the *Journal of Negro History*. Woodson believed it was essential for young African Americans to understand and be proud of their heritage. He reached out to his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, to promote his findings to a larger audience. His fraternity responded by creating “Negro Achievement Week.” Two years later, the second week of February was officially declared “Negro History Week” by Woodson and other prominent African Americans through a press release.

February was chosen by Woodson for the week-long observance as it coincided with the birth months of both former US President Abraham Lincoln and social reformer Frederick Douglass, who were instrumental in combating institutional racism. By the end of the 1960s, Negro History Week had come to be celebrated by

mayors across the country, partly because of the civil rights movement and a growing sense of Black identity. Eventually, the event evolved into Black History Month. However, it was not until 1976 that Black History Month became officially recognised by the government. President Gerald Ford called upon the public to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.”

**2021 Theme- The Black Family:
Representation, Identity, and Diversity**

Since 1976, every American president has officially designated February as Black History Month and endorsed a specific theme. The current President, Joe Biden, officially proclaimed February 2021 as National Black History Month in a statement released by the White House. He called upon public officials, educators, librarians, and all the people of the United States to observe the month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), organized the Virtual Black History Month Festival all through February 2021. The Festival featured music from the Black Experience performed by choirs from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., among many other events.

The Department of Energy released an article honouring the African Americans who made a significant contribution to the fields of energy and science, including Dr. Lonnie Johnson, Brooke Russell, and Former Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary.



Hazel O'Leary
Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Several other colleges, universities and business organizations have also commemorated the month through virtual events, offering Black history themed lectures, plays, educational videos, and quizzes.

In conclusion, Black History Month is a reminder to all of us to continue Carter G. Woodson's resolution – to honor the contributions of African Americans to the world, to overcome a legacy of oppression and racism, and to further racial harmony among us all.

Human Rights and Social Justice

by Ishika Jain



Courtesy of iStock/metamorworks

“ Human rights are not a privilege conferred by the government. They are every human being’s entitlement by virtue of his humanity. “

-- Mother Teresa

Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death. These basic rights are based on shared values like dignity, fairness, equality, respect, and independence. These values are, or rather should be, defined and protected by international law.

Justice is the concept of fairness. Social justice is fairness as it manifests in society. That includes fairness in healthcare, employment, housing, and more.

Discrimination and social justice are not compatible. All human beings should be born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience, and we should act towards one another in a spirit

of humankind.

40 million children below the age of 15 suffer from abuse and neglect. There are approximately 246 million child laborers worldwide. Roughly about 27 million people are currently enslaved in the human trafficking trade around the world.

Protestors of repressive governments across the globe have been killed, beaten, and arrested by police in the streets for voicing their opinions on reforms.

Additionally, Human rights are often breached for the incarcerated prisoners. They are not given proper healthcare treatments or their chance at education and career opportunities. Throughout history,

Opinion

edited by Vishakha
Singh

Colorism: Not So Fair After All

by Sameeksha Garg

Imagine yourself as a young girl in India (or even an Indian girl in the US), being warned by your family to limit your time playing with your friends to avoid getting a tan and being slathered in home remedies to “make you fairer and prettier”.

Imagine regularly seeing advertisements on TV about creams aimed at lightening your skin if you're unhappy with it, and being criticized constantly about your skin color by those who glorify having fair skin.



Courtesy of Medisetter

As an Indian myself, while I am on the lighter end of the spectrum, and have supportive parents who have kept me away from products like face bleach, not everyone is that lucky.

India is rife with colorism. People with darker skin, especially women, are routinely discriminated against, in the entertainment industry, mass media, and even in matchmaking, where websites have skin tone filters for women. At work and in school, people are even bullied.

Colorism is so ingrained in Indian society that comments are often made in passing about how “beautiful” and “light-skinned” some women are, automatically associating beauty with lighter skin.

The emphasis on beauty being skin-deep has proven to be extremely harmful, both physically and emotionally.

According to the World Health organization,

skin-lightening formulas in India make up about 50% of the skin care market, and is estimated to be worth around \$450 million USD. While some claim to be natural and use multivitamins like Vitamin B3 to lighten skin, others may contain mercury and bleach, which can damage skin cells.



Courtesy of Rwanda Standards Board

Besides the physically harmful effects of lightening skin, colorism also has a deep impact on people affected by it.

Many feel uncomfortable in their own skin and their skin color can keep them from entering positions that require being in the public eye, like news anchors, actresses, and flight attendants since they've been groomed to believe that being fair is the way to success. Without the confidence in their appearance and the self validation needed, most never dare to give these careers a second look.

Popular Bollywood actresses have lightened their skin to gain greater success and even starred in ads for skin lightening creams.

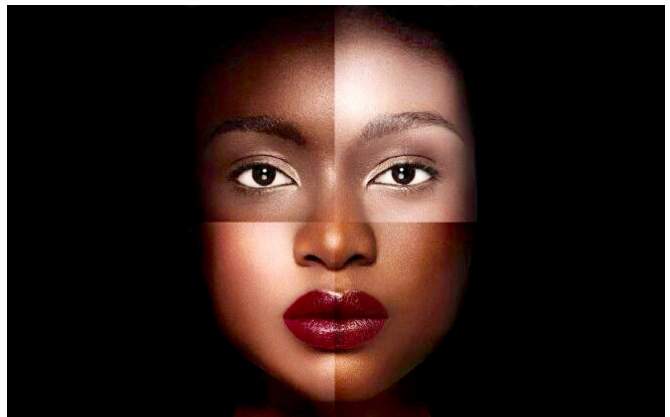
It wasn't until recently, after the death of George Floyd and the intense discussion of race that followed, that we saw steps in the direction of eradicating colorism.

After facing repeated accusations of promoting racism, Unilever, the parent

company of popular skin-lightening brand Fair & Lovely, said it would remove words like "fair", "light", and "white" from Fair & Lovely products.

Another step in the right direction was the removal of skin tone filters from Shaadi.com, a prominent Indian matchmaking site.

However applauded these actions were, I'd argue that in the case of Unilever, a mere change in packaging will not erase decades of hurt caused to women with conventionally "dark" skin. People, women in particular, are constantly told that beauty is skin-deep and are taught to equate it to their self-worth.



Courtesy of NCCJ

It's time for us to reject societal norms and not only acknowledge that all skin colors are beautiful, but also redefine the concept of beauty and see past skin color.

History

edited by Bruktawit
Fisseha

Life and Impact of Marsha P Johnson

by Yedilisaac Degu

For the past 50 years we have been celebrating black history and culture during the month of February. For almost an equal amount of time we've been celebrating LGBTQ+ Pride. Both these months commemorate the liberation of oppressed people throughout history. During the past year, conversations have been taking place about race, queerness and the intersection of both. One of the cultural impacts of the current COVID 19 lockdown is that conversations are being had, and people with multiple marginalized identities are speaking up about their experiences. Though education on these issues is progressing, it isn't progressing fast enough.

Over the summer last year there was an eruption in the Black Lives Matter movement. After the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, protests sparked not only across America but also across the world. Though the chorus of "Black Lives Matter" echoed in multiple nations, it seems Black Trans Lives have not been included. While 2020 was a year in which black voices

had been amplified and the loss of black lives has since ignited a movement calling for change, it had simultaneously been the deadliest year for transgender people on record since the beginning of the tracking of deaths in 2013. Black and Latino members of the transgender community account for almost all of the deaths on record in 2020. Black Lives can never fully matter if Black Trans Lives are not included, for the intersectionality of the struggles and lives of all Black people must be recognized in the fight for Black liberation. Black Transgender people have been fighting against abuse since the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement while also being at the forefront of the Black Liberation Movement. An example of this is the life and story of Marsha P Johnson.

Marsha P Johnson was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey to a devoutly religious family. Growing up in a generally conservative Christian society, she was often condemned and reprimanded for being herself. Due to this, she left her hometown as soon as she

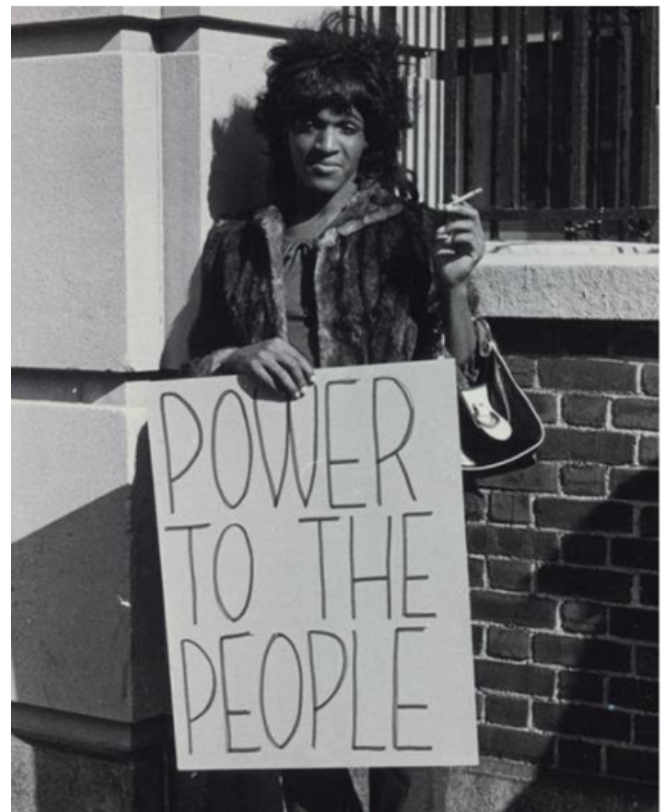
graduated and sought a life in New York where she soon found a community of like-minded people. This was around the time she started her journey to becoming one of the most important figures in LGBTQ+ history and more specifically, the Stonewall Riots.



On June 28, 1969, Marsha was part of the vanguard that resisted police during the Stonewall demonstration. While there are a lot of different accounts of what her role was in the demonstrations, one thing is agreed upon, she was said to have climbed a lamppost and thrown a very heavy object that was in a bag and shattered a police window. Her role in the Stonewall demonstrations has been vital for it is an example of the intersectionality of homophobia and racism.



Soon after the riots, her and her friend Sylvia Rivera founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), an organization that provided housing and support to homeless LGBT youth and sex workers in Manhattan. In addition, she was also one of the founders of the Gay Liberation Front. Throughout the years Marsha fought hard in support of gay prisoners, to raise awareness on the AIDs epidemic, and promote gay civil rights. Her legacy continues to be important in the fight for queer liberation today and it should also be celebrated in the history of inspirational black lives.



Art

edited by Jyotsna
Bisariya

The Birth of Jazz

by Abey Bekalu

Jazz is a broad style of music, characterized by complex harmonies, syncopated rhythms and a heavy emphasis on improvisation. Honestly, any attempt to arrive at a conclusive, all-encompassing definition of Jazz is probably useless. From its beginning at the turn of the 20th century by African American musicians in New Orleans, Jazz has been a perpetually growing and evolving genre, passing through several distinctive phases of development. A definition or description that might apply to the genre at one phase, probably becomes inappropriate when it is applied to another phase in its history.

Jazz has never really been an entirely composed, nor entirely improvised type of music. Despite that though, jazz seems to be instantly recognizable and generally distinguished as an entirely different musical expression. On top of that, there often have been perceptual differences between composers, performers, arrangers and audiences of jazz. But one thing that is clear, and makes it different from other traditional

areas, is that a jazz performer is interpreting his own music, while a performer of another style such as classical music, is interpreting the works of someone else.



Louis Armstrong (1909-1971), one of the most well-known pioneers of Jazz

Dating back to 1860, there had been an African-American slang term, 'jasm', which means 'vim' or 'energy'. On 14th of November, 1916, the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper referred for the first time to 'jas bands'. This spelling suggests that 'jas' could have come from jasm. Or it might also have referred to the jasmine perfume that prostitutes in New Orleans' famed Storyville red light district often wore, since jazz music

had partly developed as it was played in brothels. One the earliest pioneers of jazz, Jelly Roll Morton, first developed his own style playing piano for prostitutes and their clients.



Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe “Jelly Roll Morton” (1890-1941), American jazz composer and pianist who pioneered the use of prearranged, semi orchestrated effects in jazz-band performances.

The prehistory of jazz actually began around the early to mid-1880's, when slave dances took place in an Open Area then known as Congo Square, in New Orleans. Scattered accounts provide details that showed musical instruments similar to those in West Africa, along with the dance itself, that harkens back to one of the most pervasive ritual ceremonies. In the Americas, the dance became known as the ring shout, and its appearance in New Orleans is only one of many documented instances. This tradition persisted well into the twentieth century: John and Alan Lomax recorded a ring shout in Louisiana for the Library of Congress in 1934 and attended others in Texas, Georgia, and the Bahamas. Jazz eventually evolved as a distinct musical style as a host of diverse

vernacular elements came together at different times and in different regions. These included the field hollers of the cotton plantations, the work songs on railroads and rivers, hymns and spirituals, music for brass bands, funeral processions of parades, dance music, the banjo performing traditions, and of course, blues and the ragtime. Blues began to flourish in the late 19th century by itinerant singers, guitarists and pianists and ragtime becoming America's popular entertainment and dance music. By approximately 1915 New Orleans had produced a host of remarkable musicians, mostly cornet and clarinet players, such as the legendary Buddy Bolden (legendary in part because he never recorded), Buddy Petit, Keppard, Johnson, and Beche.

The music that eventually became jazz evolved out of a gradually assimilated mixture of Black and white folk music and popular styles, with roots in both West Africa and Europe. It grew from the African American slaves who were prevented from maintaining their native musical traditions and felt the need to substitute some homegrown form of musical expression. They were relegated to picking up whatever little scraps of music were allowed to them.

Jazz has now grown from its humble beginnings on the streets of New Orleans, popularized by many great musicians such as the aforementioned Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, to one of the most well-known musical styles, expanding to all corners of the world and embraced by different cultures to create more unique and amazing music. It is considered arguably the best contribution of the black community to world music, and is still one of the biggest defining traits of African-american culture.

Spotlight

edited by Rachel
Lewis

Poetry as a Force for Forward Movement

by Rachel Lewis

National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman's spoken word poem at Joe Biden's inauguration was the next step in her journey of lyrical activism



Amanda Gorman speaks about America's potential to heal and strengthen itself while pursuing nationwide social justice and trying to end the COVID-19 pandemic, among other crises, at Joe Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration ceremony. Photo by Patrick Semansky.

“When day comes we ask ourselves / where can we find light in this never-ending shade?” she asked, looking upon the physically distanced crowd in front of the

United States Capitol on Jan.. 20. There were 2,000 people sitting in the chairs arranged on the Capitol's white steps, in addition to 33.8 million people watching her speak from their homes, workplaces, and libraries — anywhere with a screen and a connection. This woman commanded attention not just because she was speaking at the inauguration of a president who had one of the most controversial elections in the nation's history. Nor was it because she was a Black female and the U.S.'s first National Youth Poet Laureate. Amanda Gorman captivated the crowd because of the emotional truth and power of her spoken word poetry.

Amanda Gorman was born on Mar. 7, 1998 in Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. She grew up with her mother, English teacher Joan Wicks, and her two siblings, including twin sister Gabrielle. Wicks encouraged her children, from an early age, to read books

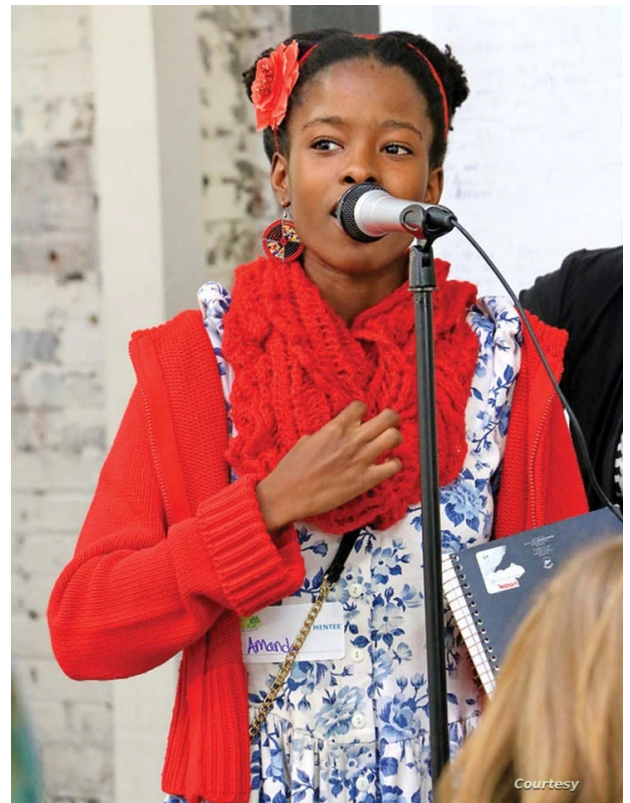
rather than watch television and impressed upon Gorman and her siblings the importance of education. In order to pursue a better education, Gorman took a bus every morning to a private school in a different and higher-income neighborhood than the one her family lived in, which exposed her to the severity of housing segregation as a form of racial discrimination in America. (Today, her poems often feature issues of social justice.) Her first forays into the world of poetry involved writing verses to songs without tunes, although she later began to compose lines with the expectation that she would speak them, not sing them.



Amanda Gorman recites a poem at a WriteGirl event in 2013 at Skylight Books, an independent Los Angeles bookstore.

When Gorman was 14 years old, she became a mentee in WriteGirl's one-on-one mentorship program. WriteGirl is a Los Angeles organization that nurtures the creative writing interests of teenaged female and non-binary students with mentorship and workshops on everything from screenwriting to editing. Gorman came into WriteGirl when she was writing a novel, but eventually transitioned to focus on spoken word poetry once she discovered her voice on stage. However, Gorman has faced a speech impediment since she was a

child, so she had to work hard to be able to pronounce the words she wrote the way others do. For example, Gorman could not say "poetry" with the appropriate R sound when she first began to recite her poems as a teenager. She thus experiences a heightened sense of impostor syndrome when performing spoken word poetry — she worries not only about how the audience may see her, as a young Black woman, but how they may hear her — possibly judging the way she pronounces each ever-so-important verse. When she was little, she was afraid of public speaking, partially because of her speech impediment; now, she has spoken at the highest podium in the land.



Amanda Gorman recites one of her poems at a 2015 WriteGirl workshop. WriteGirl is a nonprofit that pairs aspiring female poets in Los Angeles with adult mentors who help them grow as writers, in addition to hosting workshops on creative writing techniques and topics. Photo by Jackie Rooman.

When Gorman was 16, she founded the nonprofit One Pen One Page, which

publishes an online magazine by teenaged writers and has creative writing programs in Afghanistan and Kenya, as well as the U.S. Because of this and her other social work, Gorman was appointed the first National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017 as a sophomore in college. She has since traveled around the world to spread the power of poetry, speaking in schools about its importance to reading-resistant students and performing her own poems at a United Nations summit and a Boston orchestra's 4th of July celebration. Of course, Gorman has had to balance her speaking engagements with her continued sociology coursework in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. She graduated cum laude from Harvard University in the spring of 2020.

First Lady Dr. Jill Biden was the one to propose that Gorman read a poem at President Joe Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration, as she was already familiar with Gorman's lyrical prowess. The inauguration committee approved this idea, and Amanda Gorman learned over Zoom that she would be the third person to read a poem at a president's inauguration, after Robert Frost and Maya Angelou. In a way, Gorman was prepared — for the past six years, every poem she'd written to be performed in public was composed with the themes of transition and hope in mind, like her works "In This Place: An American Lyric" (2017) and "Earthrise" (2018). The events of Jan. 6 unfolded when Gorman was about halfway through writing her new inauguration poem; they gave her a burst of inspiration and motivation to finish it. Gorman references the election dispute and riot at the Capitol in the final poem with the words "We've seen a force that would shatter our nation / rather than share it. / Would destroy our country if it meant

delaying democracy. / And this effort very nearly succeeded."



Amanda Gorman performs a poem at a Mass Poetry event in 2018. Mass Poetry is a Massachusetts organization that supports diverse poets and aims to make poetry more accessible, including to underprivileged youth and seniors. Photo by Katherine Taylor.

However, as Gorman performed "The Hill We Climb" after Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were sworn in as president and vice president, respectively, she centered themes of healing and progress in addition to tragedy and conflict. Gorman's final words had the same intention as the Biden administration's message of hopeful unity: "For there is always light, / if only we're brave enough to see it. / If only we're brave enough to be it."

Call to Action

Links and resources to learn more about global issues

<https://www.darkisbeautiful.in/>

The Dark is Beautiful campaign was launched by Kavitha Emmanuel in 2009 to combat colorism and the negative effects it has on women affected by it.

<https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/books/g30771264/must-read-books-black-history-month/>

Black History Month books to read

<http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/10-black-history-documentaries-to-watch/>

Black History Month documentaries to watch

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-month>

Learn more about the history of Black History Month

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