



If I were to tell you the story of my transition from gyrlhood to womanhood, I would have to begin with myself at seventeen. You'd hear about me standing alone in a courtroom: praying to God that I could summon the courage to speak to the white man in the black robe who needed to be convinced that no, there were no adults in my life who could or would take care of me; Yes: leaving Chicago was the only option if I wanted to go to college and one day become a teacher. No: It wouldn't make sense for me to be placed in foster care just two months from what he referred to as "the age of majority".

My story begins there, but that's not where it ends. For the sake of time, I'd continue my story with the two moments that taught me lessons shaping my views on womanhood.

You see, I was a teenager who was yanked from gyrlhood: thrust into a space that was void of

presence and feeling. Far from being an adult, let alone a woman, I had to take care of myself. My feelings were an inconvenience I couldn't afford, so I avoided them altogether. This is the part of my story where the little gyrl inside of me ran for cover; the part of the story where I learned to disconnect.

In my story of becoming, I'd fast-forward to myself at nineteen. I was a single mother carrying a full course load at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI). I would tell you about failed exams and weeks of missed classes; about being ashamed to ask for help because I was a "smart" kid who should have known how to "do" college.

I'd tell you how I sometimes felt inadequate and lonely, which led to that all-too-familiar feeling of... not feeling at all. I was numb.

To separate myself from my disappointment (in myself, in life, in others), I welcomed distractions. I'd been mastering this survival skill since childhood, remember?

Writing became my favorite way to both avoid, process, or overcome challenges. It helped me to escape while being cleverly disguised as productivity. Over time, I learned to use my notebook to work through my problems and explore my identity.

When I wrote, I granted myself permission to feel and to reconnect with the true essence of my spiritual being. The Ancestors began to speak to me through my pen, and those conversations gave me life. The result of one of those conversations was my first spoken word piece, *Sweet Black Precious Jewel* (SBPJ).

This piece was a twist on slavery's dark history, and it offered me a new perspective on why slavery occurred.

To help you understand, I'd spit this sample:

*When you stole me from my country and forced me into your land*

*It wasn't only cause you needed me to lend a helping hand.*

*When you saw me runnin' 'round naked, unashamed and even proud,*

*You were mesmerized by me and stunned that I was so endowed!*

*You saw beauty in the way the sun beat down on my black skin, so you stole me:*

*Scared you never see beauty like mine again!*

*You thought there was some big secret that I'd disclose to you someday*

*On how you could look like me and be stunning in the same way!*

*You took away my language, made me learn the one you spoke*

*But even then, I turned your words around as if they were a joke.*

*You laughed and called me stupid, but you didn't know any better;*

*'Cause behind closed doors, I knew your language right down to the letter*

*You treated me like an animal with no respect or dignity*

*And when I still did not tell you, you tried to beat it out of me!*

*When you finally were convinced that a secret did not exist,*

*You laid out with creams and ointments made by your scientists.*

*Even after all that, you still could not seem to get it*

*You will never have beauty like mine, so you might as well forget it*

*You can call me all the [N words] in the world that you want to,*

*But that doesn't prove you hate me: it just proves that you hate you.*

People were moved to tears when I performed this during Black History Month. This powerful message healed some of my broken parts from childhood. Free from the urge to disappear, I embraced the feeling of being seen and heard.

Writing gave me lyrical courage, and SBPJ was proof that my words mattered. My sense of duty and responsibility to this realization introduced me to Poet T.Y.R.A (Poet T): The poet whose mission was to Teach the Youth the Righteousness of being African. Through spoken word and conversations with the Ancestors, I accepted connection and it guided me to my purpose!

My womanhood is a tale of two contradicting realities. One reality came from numbing my

pain (disconnection), while the other empowered me to use my words to heal myself and others (connection). I honor both as crucial to my womanhood.

My truth about the one single "magical" moment that transported me from gyrlhood to womanhood is this: there wasn't one.

The little gyrl inside of me remains. She's the one who giggles when she notices how her feet "shrink" when they are fully submerged in water. She still watches cartoons (Tom & Jerry), and yes, she eats pancakes for dinner and calls it "brinner". She jumps double dutch from time to time and can still land on each square in a game of hopscotch.

My womanhood did not arrive at the expense of or in replacement for gyrlhood. They exist in tandem, each relying on the other. That little gyrl needs the woman in me whenever it's time to take a stand. And that woman relies on the little gyrl to remind her that Black joy is her birthright.

So, when did I stop being a Black gyrl so that I could become a Black woman? Never!

My gyrlhood has no expiration date and womanhood isn't a destination I suddenly pull up on. For that reason, I have decided to embrace the depth and breadth of my journey, enjoying all the stops and detours along the way.

I am Tyra L. Nelson TS#11 of 52 of *The SoulTown Magazine*. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! ✨



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