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## Text & Community Narrative

Let's talk about power. Coming into high school isn't easy. It's a new experience where you don't know what to expect. All the new people, places, and opportunities are seen everywhere! The first training wheel to maturity comes off, and you begin making your own decisions. I mean, that's what life is about; the options presented in front of you and the choices you make with them. Back in my high school days, we were consumed by TikTok, Drake drama, and Shien. But the high school experience isn't all I've come about.

Finding yourself is just as hard as high school, if not harder. Through all the ups and downs, everyone's identity is different. It can either make you stand out or feel powerless. For me, I'm Black and Queer. You can see my skin color, and I make it known that I love everybody! However, it isn't that easy. Given the way America works, I shouldn't be standing out. Both pieces of my identity are things that you "stay silent" about. One is a lot, but 2 is too much for people to handle. "Don't be too much, don't be too loud, don't stand like that, don't talk like that". I couldn't choose between who I wanted to be, and who they wanted me to be. It wasn't until I could interpret my identity through art that I became comfortable with myself. More specifically, through dance.

Whether Ballet or Hip-Hop, dance tells the stories of life. The emotions displayed, the passion prevalent and the storytelling aspect pulls everything together. Dancers have the unique ability to showcase their physical and emotional prowess. To perform with such grace is what allows individuals to be free and powerful in the picture they paint. You can never be "too loud"

or “too much” as a dancer, because the standard for growth is ever-growing. But for me, my outlet didn’t come from modern or contemporary dance. My catalyst for freedom was Vogue.

Vogue is personal to me. It allowed me to truly live unapologetically, and it changed my life around. Voguing allows you to do whatever you’ve dreamed of and become whoever you want to be. In your category, you can be whatever you want. From categories like Superhero Realness, Sunday’s Best, or just standard Performance, the possibilities are endless. While vogue started within Ballroom culture, I found vogue more power within my own space. There was no judgment or ridicule, just me whimsically becoming me. Before I was comfortable in my identity, I was drowned out by everything surrounding me. The pushes of silence, societal norms, and my insecurities kept me trapped in a box. With debating and vogue, I broke that box.

I took my voguing skills to the debate community. I’ve always been engaged with debate since I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, so it was a second home to me. Naturally, it is whacky to even think I can perform in debate, but that was the point. Groundbreaking events don’t happen without force. The first time I did it, there was a shift in the atmosphere. There had been performance teams before, but the magnitude of which my partner and I performed was unheard of. This performance was to be later called the Vogue of Death.

As the creator of the Vogue of Death, I helped reshape what we know about the BlackQueer experience. The Vogue of Death is a play on words, to creative life in a culture deemed to be dead. We are not aggressive and uncontrollable beasts, or distasteful people with no manners. I took control of the narrative while providing solutions to change the understanding of what it means to be Black and Queer. The Vogue of Death is more than just a cultural dance, it’s an important notion that connects our experience without overstepping boundaries. More than that, it is a call to action. It’s a wakeup call to push back and create our own path, rather

than let someone create it so we can slightly modify it down the road. If it's my story, I want my voice to be the one to tell it.

More than that, I challenge everyone to find their voice and purpose. It may sound hard, but there is an alignment that will happen. Ask yourself what keeps you motivated, and what are you most passionate about! These are the questions I asked myself throughout my journey of exploration, and it guided me to understanding. Once you figure that out, navigation becomes that much easier. Your purpose guides your decision-making, lifestyle, and nearly everything in your life. The only tricky part of this is maintaining discipline. You cannot allow yourselves to be easily swayed or become overconsumed. There are boundaries set in place against freedom, but it's your job to break them.

Within the debate space specifically, there is a push against this. From the aggressive handshake culture, and the norms of hyper-formal dress style, to the literal denouncement of our character, this realm was not structured for us. Our counterparts have the freedom to develop whatever debate case they want, while BlackQueer debaters struggle against being deemed unfair or too radical. There is power in our voices, and we deserve to use our voice in whichever way we want. The fight against those who silence my voice won't end until a change occurs.

Nonetheless, bringing vogue to my debate community changed my life. As it relates to debate culture, voguing helps to challenge what we think is normal and create comfortable spaces for everyone. While they may call us savage beasts or think less of us, they are just scared to accept the truth that we are more. We are more than their worst nightmare, and we're here to stay. Every moment in which I vogue in the debate space, every time we stand up and call out the system, or every time we are just true to ourselves amongst our oppressors, is a game-changing moment. They cannot deny the changes we have made towards equality, and we are

free from their judgment. The chains are gone, our power is bursting, and our minds are flowing. Following in the footsteps of my ancestors, we will continue to fight until our voices are heard. Much like Martin Luther King, we all have a dream, and we won't be silenced.

The Vogue of Death may have started within the debate community, but this isn't the end of it. Addressing concerns for my community will always be my agenda. Those before me crafted me for this, and I won't reject my destiny. Much like my ancestors, I'm attempting to break those glass ceilings while still holding poise and integrity.

As you all navigate through high school and life, remember your voice is your power. Be intentional with your impact on this world and allow that power to flow through every aspect of your life! We cannot be denied by those who don't try to understand us, and we embrace every part of our identity and flourish through their bliss.