

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person in a white dress walking away from the camera down a hallway. The image is heavily stylized with a bright yellow and orange color palette. A large, semi-transparent sunburst graphic, composed of numerous thin, radiating lines, is centered over the image. The text is overlaid on this graphic.

WRITING BOSTON'S FUTURE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF BRILLIANCE,
BUILDING AND
BOSTON

Table of Contents

Introduction

Daring to Speak **4**

by Abigail A.

Progress Through Perspective **6**

by Bamlak B.

**Reshaping Familiarity: Defamiliarization and the Transformative
Power of the Writing Boston's Future Project** **7**

by Neil Gallagher

The Missing Piece **9**

by Alana L.

Undercover Brilliance **11**

by Dr. Denise Patmon

The Transcendent Black Voice **13**

by Luke Patmon

Like a Dew: On my Way to School **16**

by Christian Walkes

Introduction

WELCOME! I hope that you enjoy reading this initial collection of selected voices of folks associated with the NEH sponsored Writing Boston's Future initiative, a partnership project between the Boston Writing Project at UMASS Boston and the Museum of African American History - Boston and Nantucket. We continue to live in a post-pandemic uncertain era. I have read many articles about how young people do not like to write, and how they continue to struggle with literacy during these trying times. I am very pleased to offer a counter argument, and I am so impressed with the writing that students and educators produced this year.

This initial version of our reflections is based on all our imaginations about the impact this project has had on our meaning-making about Black history in Boston as it helps us envision Writing Boston's Future and keeps us stable in the here and now. Some reflections are connected to individual artifacts that were exhibited at our colloquium, March 2023. Other reflections embody personal growth and development. All in all, these pieces are a result of the fact that we worked together, taught one another, learned together, and dared to dream together to honor those who fought before us for equality. We took this space and time to hope for a better place to live and learn. I am amazed by the incredible growth we all experienced as a direct result of the Writing Boston's Future project. I am so proud of each person's presentation herein and truly grateful for each and every submission. Look out for the next anthology, to come soon. Now, savor this volume!

With Appreciation,
Dr. Denise Patmon
October 2023



Daring to Speak

How I define public speaking as a form of communication that is spoken to a live audience. It means you're able to use your voice to allow people to open their minds and inspire them on whatever you're presenting. Public speaking is especially difficult when your not used to talking to a large amount of people at once. Things like that constructs nervousness and anxiety. Although public speaking doesn't always excite me, it's essential I show improvement with that skill. People that look like me, Black women, throughout many years have been unheard and misunderstood. Using my verbal voice to express myself allows me to shut down these complications and communicate my excellence and brilliant point of view. Thanks to this program I've definitely showed improvement from not ever willingly wanting to publicly speak to being voluntarily wanting to give speeches and host events by the end of the school year. I think what helped the most and allowed me to experience my "click" moment was the community colloquium. After the colloquium, Speaking to those unfamiliar people over and over again feeling judged and criticized at first, then realizing I was actually being viewed as intelligent and inventive. From that point on, I believe my confidence in terms of public speaking developed majorly and gave me a sense of skill in control. This program impacted me positively and helped me become the best version of me .

Abigail A.



Progress Through Perspective

Before the summer of 2022 I didn't know that Boston had such rich African American history. I drove past murals and walked through joy street without thinking anything of it. But when we took a walk around as a group and went through the alleyways, I looked at joy street in a whole new light. Reading and hearing about the trials of african americans was nothing compared to standing where the oppressed stood. One year after last year's project I am a better speaker, writer, student, and thinker. This project not only expanded my knowledge but it also expanded my want to learn more and also teach more.

In May 2023 my school took a tour of the African American meeting house, but it was very different from when I was here last summer. Now I realized that I had to go out of my way to learn the history of the city I was born in. Most of the kids with me had been in Boston their whole lives but still didn't know the significance of where they were, just like I was a year earlier. This project taught me alot but one of the most important things is perspective. I realized this in March at the community colloquium when someone that I had never seen before came up to me and told me what they thought my painting meant. I am the painter of my painting so I have a specific view of what it means and what it symbolizes, but when other people tell me what they interpreted it as, it surprised me to say the least. It not only showed me the impact my work had on others, but how everyone here has the freedom of interpretation and expression.

This is one of the only places where a teacher or a peer is not above you, instead everyone is learning and listening to each other's ideas. The hierarchy of student/teacher or smart/dumb was shot down and you can express your ideas however you want. This interaction also showed me the freedom we have that students in classrooms don't. When researching and doing a project in school you have a rubric you need to follow and things that you have to put in your presentation to meet the teachers criteria. But here when you said research African American history in Boston and present an artifact of your choice, it opened up new territory.



Territory that my peers at school have not yet explored. But the hope of new kids getting the same opportunity that I got through this program and getting to see my artifact is encouraging. Especially if this project continues in other parts of America as well because then kids that don't know about the black history of their city will get to learn it and express themselves as I did.

When doing this project I didn't know that it would have a national impact on anyone, I just thought that it was a writing program based on African-American history. But now that I've completed this project, I have realized how much I have uncovered about African-American history in Boston and how so many people around America could benefit from this work like I did.

Bamlak B.



Reshaping Familiarity: Defamiliarization and the Transformative Power of the Writing Boston's Future Project

In the realm of the Writing Boston's Future project, multiple components resonate with the familiar experiences of the participants as students, educators, writers, scholars, and artists. From the inception of the workshop series to responding to writing prompts, engaging in discussions, exploring the museum, listening to talks, conducting research, presenting findings, sharing feedback, and culminating in the public showcase, these facets are not novel to us. It is within this context of familiarity that the profound impact of the project's uniqueness and potency becomes evident, characterized by its defamiliarization.

Defamiliarization, a concept known as "estrangement" or "ostranenie" in Russian literary theory (Shklovsky 1917), involves the artistic technique of presenting the commonplace or known in an unfamiliar or unconventional manner. This approach aims to challenge habitual patterns of perception and thought, shedding light on inherent complexities and fostering a deeper understanding. Consider, for instance, Pablo Neruda's *Odas elementales*, where defamiliarization transforms everyday objects into sources of contemplation, disrupting conventional viewpoints and prompting profound introspection.

In a similar manner, the artifacts we created for the exhibition in many instances harnessed defamiliarization to enhance their aesthetic impact. By introducing elements of surprise, intrigue, or discomfort, these pieces encouraged reflective engagement for both our group and the wider public. Interestingly, defamiliarization also transcended its traditional realm within creative expression and extended to reshaping historical presuppositions about Boston. Many of us were compelled to reconsider what we assumed was familiar history, leading to active cognitive engagement in interpreting and deriving meaning from the past.

Another intriguing way defamiliarization extended beyond artistic techniques is how it permeated the organizational and interpersonal dynamics of our educational workshops. A telling moment emerged when teachers entered the



Writing Boston's Future project a week later than students, discovering that the familiar power dynamics of our school-year learning environments had dissolved. Students had claimed the educational space, and a sense of peer collaboration prevailed. This unanticipated shift prompted us to navigate our roles from different perspectives, fostering heightened awareness and reflection.

Furthermore, the defamiliarization inherent in the project resonates as a form of social commentary. It encourages us to critically assess societal norms, assumptions, and conventions associated with education, history, and praxis. What is particularly intriguing is how defamiliarization, despite its propensity for disruption, paradoxically led to a sense of belonging and comfort. During a post-project debrief, when asked why we returned, the recurring sentiment was that of feeling at home within the project's space.

The Writing Boston's Future project is a testament to the transformative power of defamiliarization. It challenges us to perceive the familiar anew, contemplate the complexities beneath the surface, and reassess the constructs we have come to accept. From the innovative use of artifacts to reshaping historical narratives and redefining interpersonal dynamics, the project's defamiliarization invites us to dwell in a space where the unfamiliar becomes a source of enlightenment and empowerment.

Neil Gallagher



The Missing Piece

According to Oxford Dictionaries, history is “the study of past events, particularly in human affairs”, “the past considered as a whole”, “the whole series of past events connected with someone or something”. What’s so significant to this definition is the aspect of viewing history as a whole. The idea that no two stories are more important than the other, the idea of different puzzle pieces put together to tell the same story. We as learners, are still yet to find the missing pieces to our historical puzzle which is American History. Because we struggle to define “American History”, or what constitutes American History. There are so many prominent American figures that have attempted to exclude aspects of our history and tried to piece the puzzle together without the missing parts. The Museum of African American History directly counteracts these efforts. It teaches us of the unknown stories that would’ve been suppressed. We can find the missing puzzle pieces in the museum. The students in this program have been given access to more information than we could ever dream of. We not only are empowered by being able to access our history but we are also allowed to share our knowledge with others. History is a puzzle, a captivating enigma waiting to be unraveled. Just like a puzzle, history presents us with scattered fragments that we must piece together to reveal the bigger picture. Each historical event, person, and era is like a puzzle piece, holding valuable information. As we delve into the past, we gather these pieces, connecting them meticulously to form a coherent narrative. Just as a puzzle challenges our problem-solving skills, history demands our analytical thinking. We must examine various sources, evaluate their credibility, and interpret the evidence to construct an accurate representation of the past. Like putting together puzzle pieces, we must consider context, perspectives, and biases to understand the complete picture. Like a puzzle, it often conceals hidden secrets and unexpected twists. It invites us to delve deeper, uncovering untold stories and shedding light on forgotten voices. With each discovery, the puzzle becomes more complex, urging us to question our assumptions and revise our understanding. History's puzzles are not



static; they evolve as new information emerges. Just as puzzle pieces can be rearranged, our understanding of history constantly evolves with fresh insights and reinterpretations. As we unlock new pieces, the puzzle transforms, challenging us to adapt our understanding and embrace the dynamic nature of the past. History is undeniably a puzzle, enticing us with its fragmented pieces, hidden secrets, and evolving nature. As we engage in the pursuit of historical knowledge, we embark on an exhilarating journey of discovery, piecing together the puzzle to unravel the captivating story of our collective past. This program has taught me about history and what it means to be a writer, a historian, a student, and a teacher. I've learned that my history matters and that I am capable of making history right here in Boston.

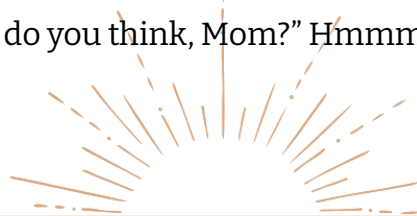
Alana L.



Undercover Brilliance

The first time that I fell in love with Black Boston, I was a sophomore at BU where I decided to conduct a research project on teaching Black children in public schools. My Boston grandfather recommended that I take a deep dive into and learn about the Abiel Smith School on Beacon Hill. I remember taking the green line from campus to Park Street, ascending the Boston Commons toward the State House and then the descent down Joy Street to Smith Court where the Smith School proudly stands. The Smith School – the first public school expressly for African American students - opened in 1835. Taxes from the citizens in the city of Boston were used to provide education to Black people when there was nowhere else in our country doing so. While racism, inequality and discrimination were alive and well in Boston, the value of an education and creating a school was formidable. The vision and courage to develop and to attend this school are true markers of Boston being the intellectual center of our country. Uncovering Black brilliance was a clarion call locally and across the continent. So began my discovery and adoration of the giants who desperately fought for Black education and intellectual thought. Why then does this history remain hidden? Why does it remain opaque and underground?

On our way to the Museum for the first meeting of our extended NEH grant summer series, I was reminded how attractive Boston is to tourists – especially on a bright sunny day in summer. Admittedly, we were running a tad late since we had to pick up the food for NEH participants and found ourselves behind a quintessential Boston Duck Boat. As Luke, the driver, annoyingly inched up behind the boat, I couldn't help but notice the amazement on the faces of largely white people on the carrier, as the tour guide pointed out historical people and spaces in the Beacon Hill area. I felt the sway of head movements as folks turned their attention from the Public Garden to the Cheers Bar (a National Trust for Historic Preservation site). I queried Luke, "Do you think they cover the Black History of Boston that is so steeped into the buildings, the sidewalks, and the age-old trees in this section of town?" Luke replied sarcastically, "What do you think, Mom?" Hmm...



For me, historically, Boston IS the intellectual capital of Black struggle. Boston symbolized what it meant to be free – by land, by sea, and by imagination – as embodied in the Abiel Smith School. Boston gave the façade of a welcome space for all who sought self-liberation and the pursuit of happiness. Most importantly, it epitomized the place for access to education – a vital goal for Black Americans then and now. The opportunity to learn from and write Boston’s future is an honor and a privilege. All voices are invested in our intellectual climate. Now is our time! We are here to uncover Black cerebral brilliance.

Dr. Denise Patmon



The Transcendent Black Voice

Having seen the continued success of the initial cohort, I have found myself both inspired and hopeful for continued success of this project. Specifically, with the National recognition of the participants artifacts and continued extracurricular efforts to exemplify the voice of African American History. To quantify this impactful work, we can see the illustration of National articles, additional budget funding, and innovative digitization of our work. Unfortunately, we have also experienced the negative outcomes of doing influential and necessary work. For example, certain physical artifacts have gone missing from our museum office, which shows that although we have conducted amazing work highlighting the African American voice in Boston we are still met with conflict as we attempt to push the Black voice forward in society. However, I can also reflect on this unfortunate event, by seeing that because our work has been so influential and impactful it has brought about responses from some who may feel jealous, angry, or misunderstand the purpose of our work. Thus, I would urge each of the participants to continue to produce artifacts that invigorate the Black Voice in this city, as I am a believer that hate only reveals itself in the presence of positivity. For those who do not wish for our work to be displayed and shared with our communities, act in this manner because they fear the power that our work has in shaping a better future for the African American experience both in Boston and nationwide.

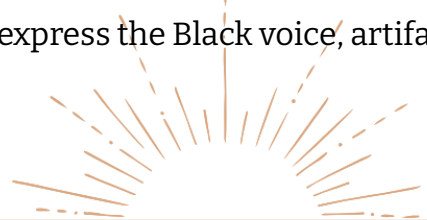
As we continue to explore the many avenues available for us to continue to illuminate the Black voice in Boston, Massachusetts, and the United States as a whole. Specifically, I believe the continued integration of technology will allow for each participant to both quantitatively impact a larger audience and qualitatively continue to create individual unique mediums of expression that symbolize represent the Black voice moving forward. To accomplish this, the use of digital stories, film, and social media platforms are a few integral ways for the Black voice to continue to be amplified within the communities each participant participates in. Furthermore, these mediums of expression will allow for our work to become a



piece of living history. Chronicling our history moving forward through innovative technology will allow for artifacts to be accessible throughout time without the need for the physical artifact to be present. Moreover, this will allow for these artifacts to become living pieces of history, meaning that the works can be updated and edited to reflect the present Black voice at any given time period. Beginning with digital stories, this medium of expression allows for artifacts representative of the Black voice to most easily transform from archaic physical representations into living pieces of history.

Digital stories are representations of physical written narratives, where an author can combine creative imagery and written storytelling. This form of expression will transform historical Black artifacts from being dated pieces of history into current aspects of society. For example, reflecting on the historical impact of Martin Luther King Jr. "I Have A Dream Speech", through digital storytelling this integral aspect of African American history can be illustrated using current cultural contexts. Furthermore, the use of digital storytelling expands the reach of the Black voice within society. By allowing an author the ability to include their own choice of imagery coupled with their own piece of writing, I believe this will empower African Americans to continue to express their opinions within society. As digital storytelling allows for physical writing to be coupled with creative imagery, the next medium of film allows for technology to further exemplify the Black voice within society.

Film has been a useful medium of expression since its inception. Archiving artifacts through film allows for written expression to become oral, which allows for a different form of sensory observation to occur. In relation to African American artifacts of history, using film as a medium of expression will allow for these artifacts to become active pieces of living history. The combination of verbal storytelling combined with active imagery is a medium that creates an active Black voice. Moreover, such activity will allow for the Black voice to be illustrated both through the sensory use of hearing and sight. By implementing film as a transformative medium to express the Black voice, artifacts of African American



history can be brought to life through motion. For digital storytelling and film allow for the Black voice to be transformed in such a manner, social media will allow for these voices to be shared throughout different communities efficiently.

The rise of social media as a constant form of social interaction within society, has created avenues for individuals to share their opinions easily. Utilizing this medium to further expand the Black voice will be integral to continuing to create living artifacts of African American history. Through social media platforms these artifacts can be shared efficiently throughout society, but more importantly allow for engagement and feedback to be shared with the artifacts. One of the goals of liberating the Black voice by using technology is to create avenues for constructive discourse regarding the overall standing of the African American experience within American society.

Altogether, the use of technology through expressive mediums such as digital storytelling, film, and social media will allow us to continue to help broaden the impact and scope of the Black voice. Representing aspects of the past, current, and future African American experience through these mediums is the pathway toward invigorating the “forgotten history” of this group. Furthermore, I believe that utilizing technology in this manner will be beneficial to other minority groups yearning to strengthen their voice within American society.

Luke Patmon



Like a Dew: On my Way to School



Figure 1: My grandmother Hattie Jackson and Bus Driver Mr. Joseph. If you look closely by the bus number, you will locate the "Blue Bird" Symbol

"Like a Dew"

"Let the presence of the lord rest in you. Oh yes, you can take this presence that you're now receiving... you can take it in the grocery store; you can take it on your job; you can take it to school; the presence of the lord never has to cease." – Juanita Bynum

At the corner of Morton and Woodmere adjacent to the Norfolk Hardware store, my grandmother and I awaited our large, flat-nosed "BLUE BIRD," to carry us on our early morning flight north to Arlington Public Schools. On warmer school days, our feet hit the pavement outside of our green, and yellow trimmed, two-family home on Gallivan boulevard by 5:45 am to begin our journey to the bus stop. During these early hours, while much of the neighborhood was beginning to wake from their slumber, and the streets were largely empty except for the usual passersby who made their way to work, the dew that amalgamated atop the green strip of grass lining our way to the bus stop commanded great attention. She would often reference its beauty; that is, how the soft dew broke the callousness of the



abutting cement sidewalk and asphalt road. It was an illustration of how tenderness can form, even at the edge of two antagonistic forces such as the coolness of the night and the impending heat of the day. During the cold and long New England winters we missed this sight as my mom hitched us up the street in her blue Toyota Corolla. Either way, we made it to the bus stop before 6:20 am, just in time to witness Mr. Joseph wrap his long and slender arms around the wide steering wheel to swing the “BLUE BIRD” around the bend of the hardware store. The sight of Mr. Joseph, cued my grandmother to announce, “time to make the donuts!” Although this announcement occurred each day, and with the regularity of a solemn evening prayer, I never quite fully understood the phrase until recent years.

Every morning as my grandmother prepared for the school day ahead, the sweet gospel of Juanita Bynum’s “Like a Dew” played from her living room stereo, loud enough to grace all sleeping ears. As she fixed her hair, put on her jewelry, and applied her favorite fragrances, Bynum’s voice cut through the scene, calling upon the lord’s presence:

“Like the dew in the morning
Gently rest upon my heart
Like the dew in the morning
May it rest upon my heart”

These moments of personal adornment signified much beyond their physical representation. It was during this early morning ritual that my grandmother dressed herself both materially and spiritually for the ensuing workday. Unless she was running unusually behind, you could count on the sound of “Like a Dew” playing in the background to dress her with the necessary fortitude to navigate a predominantly white school district with a history of being hostile towards the idea of racially integrated schools.

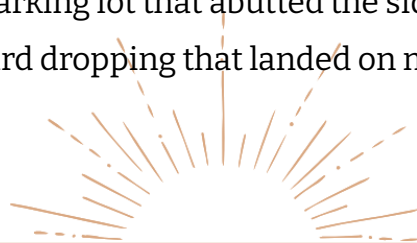
Decades before I arrived as a student at Bishop elementary school, my grandmother began work with the Arlington’s METCO program. Founded on the heels of African American political activism, the METCO program began in 1966 to



address the issue of unconstitutional school segregation in the Boston Metropolitan area by instituting a formal plan for bussing. When my grandmother began working in with the program in the 1970s, her school bus reached Bishop to face violent opposition. White students and parents alike express outrage at the program. Red, and filled with the venom of race hatred, the growing mob shouted racial epithets and cursed the program as my grandmother and her students made their way into the building. It was as though all those years later when Mr. Joseph rounded the corner, her yelling out “time to make the donuts!” anticipated the gratuitous violence that came with her role, while also signifying a powerful enactment of resolve to continue on for the sake of the children she served.

It wasn't until a game of foursquare during recess in the second grade that I realized the differences between my peers and I went deeper than skin complexion. In a fit of rage after losing to me in a game of foursquare, a white classmate charged at me and proceeded to spit on me. I will never forget his angry face, red as a fire engine with a large vein bulging out of his forehead, as he screamed it was impossible that I won. Feeling powerless in that moment, I resigned unsure of what to do. I stood there crying as I watched teachers run over to calm his incessant fit of rage. Having no idea how to console me, they removed my classmate and proceeded to call for my grandmother over the walkie talkie to soothe me in this moment of despair. As she gently wiped away my tears and washed my face, my grandmother noted she “was afraid a day like this might come.” I can only imagine that the debacle aroused memories of her own upbringing and early encounters with the humiliating elements of Jim Crow schooling in rural Alabama. She said, “you must stay prepared for days like these for they will surely come.” She ended with a smile overlooking my now clean face. I was renewed.

On a separate occasion, it wasn't a classmate, but a bird flying overhead that left the mess. When the bus arrived at Bishop, the contest to see who can make it to the playground behind the school the fastest began. One morning as I raced across the front lawn toward the parking lot that abutted the side of the building, I was stopped in my tracks by a bird dropping that landed on my forehead. I was mortified.



It wasn't the same humiliation that I experienced when my classmate spit on me – in this case I was embarrassed. Turning towards me, my grandmother said “now, Chris Robbin,” a nickname she affectionately called me for as long as I can remember, “that’s a sign of good fortune. I wish I had a bird poop on my head.” She spoke as though that bird dropped something on me that was a privilege to carry. Perhaps, it was the daring spirit of those who took flight. See, flight holds deep symbolic and historical meaning in the Black tradition – wisdom I did not know then – but now understand as central to my story and the story of my people. This time I went to go clean myself up in the bathroom. It was as though in that moment she knew I was always-already prepared to answer the call.



Figure 2: Art by Justin Welch, my younger brother who graduated in 2023 and is the last in the family to go through the METCO program in Arlington.



“Time to make the donuts” enunciated a tradition. It signaled that something sweet can be made of even the most humiliating of circumstances. It just takes you to make it. While I had a long bus ride, Sarah Roberts had a long walk to school that was a catalyst in the pursuit of equal school rights here in Boston. While I struggled academically, William Cooper Nell, who graduated at the top of his class did not let his misrecognition stop him from successfully vying to end school segregation in Boston. Taking flight meant more than the physical act of flying, it was about transcending the parameters that racial prejudice placed on them. This was history, nestled right in the thicket of Beacon Hill as I made my way past the neighborhood on Storrow drive to Arlington. It was also living history on the school bus by way of my grandmother who made her way to Boston during the second wave of the Great Migration in pursuit of a better education for herself and her children. It was not inconsequential that we rode on the “BLUE BIRD” to Arlington. As Black children on that bus it stood as a metonym for our collective spiritual strivings as we inherited them from our parents and guardians. Although we were met with opposition and hostility from teachers, school administrators, and peers, we made our way on the bus each day – in spite of/despite of – as if to say collectively “time to make the donuts.”

Christian Walkes





**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES**

