

AUNT CHLOE

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Spelman's Valedictorian Poet Ariana Benson

Note: Ariana Benson was awarded a 2019 Marshall Scholarship, which supports graduate study in the United Kingdom. She is currently pursuing masters degrees in poetry and screenwriting in London. This interview was conducted via email in August 2019.

Aunt Chloe: For those reading this interview, the first thing that may be attention-catching is the fact that you were the Valedictorian of Spelman College's graduating class of 2019. But you're also a writer and, in fact, you're the nonfiction editor of *Auburn Avenue* literary journal. What else should people know about you and your identity as a writer? What significance do you make of being at the intersection of writer-editor and valedictorian? Feel free to go all the way back and say as much about yourself as you want.

Ariana: My identity as a writer is rooted in a long tradition of storytelling. And I think that's true for many black writers and artists—from birth, we are raised and nurtured by a community of griots. I grew up hearing fantastic stories about my familial elders, especially ones about my grandfather. My work strives to curate and synthesize these ancestral memories in a way that honors their value and preserves them in a concrete way. So much of our culture is bound by storytelling, because that's where we've historically been able to draw power when we've been disenfranchised in every other arena—our stories. They make up our legacy and the core of human richness itself, a concept introduced to me by one of my most influential professors, Dr. Michelle Hite. I centered my valedictory at commencement around this concept, and the hope it brings us as black women. The ability, not only to remember, but to recount our experiences provides a radical freedom in that it's something that's entirely our own, filtered only through the lenses of memory and emotion, and a truth that lies somewhere in the middle.

I think I was able to become valedictorian because I learned how to tell stories from such a young age. In a lot of ways, scholarship is storytelling—it's relaying the information and knowledge you gain using narrative devices and memories and evidence. So I definitely used this skill to my advantage academically.

Aunt Chloe: Did Spelman influence or facilitate your writing? Is that how you did so well, achieving valedictorian status?

Ariana: Spelman provided an environment that allowed me to blossom as a writer, because it encouraged intellectual curiosity. I was allowed to write about pretty much anything I wanted as long as my work fit the structure of the assignment, which was amazing because I got to explore blackness, culturally, historically, as a part of my identity, in ways I never had before. Initially this freedom was daunting, but it pushed my writing in ways I never expected. Which in turn made me not only a better writer, but a better student. Becoming a better writer also helped me achieve valedictorian honors because it gave me the tools to more creatively express the knowledge I was steadily acquiring.

Aunt Chloe: Talk about your influences and what helped you be a student writer to the extent of being able to fulfill an editorial position with *Auburn Avenue*.

Ariana: Ironically, I actually got the *Auburn Avenue* nonfiction editor opportunity because of my poetry. My junior year, I was invited by Professor Sharan Strange, one of my greatest influences as well, to read my work at the Decatur Book Festival poetry stage. I was terribly nervous to share my poems for the first time since elementary school, but taking Prof. Strange's creative writing class had reawakened my love for poetry, and gave me just enough confidence to get on the stage. The reading went well, and Chuck Huru [the journal's editor-in-chief] approached me afterwards and told me to submit my poems to *Auburn Avenue*. I didn't, which was a mistake, in hindsight, because I wasn't convinced that my work was ready to be published, that I was a real poet. Luckily for me, Chuck remembered me over a year later when we ran into each other at a Spelman Museum opening, and asked me to submit once again. By that time I had taken more creative writing classes, and more importantly had read more. Poets like Patricia Smith, Terrance Hayes and Kamilah Aisha Moon, to name a few, spoke to me. In a way, reading their work, which is so steeped in the specificity of the black experience, validated my own.

I was also inspired by other Spelman students, in various majors, who were confident in their work and abilities and going for the opportunities they wanted. So I submitted work, had a poem published, and after that Chuck offered me the editor position. Ultimately, it's an interesting example of how my work as a student writer transcended the classroom, and was a major stepping stone towards independent work.

Aunt Chloe: The writing community at Spelman is rich. How did you connect with other writers during your time at Spelman and what was it like? What do you think art spaces need in the Atlanta University Center, based on connecting with other student artists?

Ariana: For me, finding a writing community at Spelman wasn't always easy. A few of my closest friends studied in different creative fields (studio art, art history, drama) so I would sometimes go to them for advice and critique. Which actually benefitted me in the long run, because together we examined each others' work through an inter-disciplinary lens. I also got the chance to collaborate with student choreographers. The dancers brought [the poets in our workshop] words and each of us wrote a *ghazal* using the word. They then choreographed expressions based on our pieces. I'd love to see more of that kind of collaboration in student art spaces, where artists can use various media to create unique, challenging work. And I think *Aunt Chloe* is an excellent space to foster such a community.

I also connected with experienced writers who were instrumental in my growth. I met Prof. Elyce Strong Mann through Sister2Sister. Learning from her was so crucial for me, because it was one of the first steps I took when I decided to fully commit to pursuing writing. Meeting and engaging with a black woman who had worked professionally as a writer was incredibly inspiring, and provided me with a model I used to imagine myself occupying a similar position in the future. I hope more students seek out similar role models, both within and beyond the Spelman community.

Aunt Chloe: Certainly some student artists will create the art the world will eventually consume. With what you said people should know about your identity, how do you think personal narrative affects artistic muse? In other words, do you believe your art has influenced the world around you? Do you feel that way because of who you are as an artist or what you do using art? (*"Art" of course is the art of writing.)

Ariana: My personal narrative is the central facet of my artistic muse. When I think of my personal narrative, I see a tapestry of my experiences, my ancestors' memories, and an imagined future all inextricably braided together. I sometimes think of my writing as an attempt to make concrete the abstract ideas that are perpetually floating through my mind. Thoughts about blackness, womanhood, morality, humanity, and various identities that compose who I am inevitably find their way to the page. These ideas are always attached, though sometimes in minute ways, to details of my life. Sometimes this makes it hard for me to separate myself from my work. But it also allows me to deeply invest in what I'm writing, because I see it as a part of myself.

It's tough for me to say whether my art has influenced the world around me. My instinct is to say no, because I feel like I haven't yet scratched the surface of my true ability, or reached a very broad audience—I'm still a budding writer. But a more experienced artist might argue that creating and sharing work, even with one person, is influential in and of itself. And hearing that people read my work—regardless of whether it inspired them to write themselves or provided them a momentary escape from their reality—does make me think I've influenced the world in some way. In order to keep writing though, I have to try to think of the potential influence of my work as secondary to what it does for me—how writing challenges my viewpoints and broadens my perspective and provides me solace. This way, I shield myself a bit from the pressure to enact change through my work, and can create art that satisfies me.

