

Hi everyone, and welcome to my thesis defense titled *Black Magic*. For those who don't know me, my name is Morgan Berry and I am a General Fine Arts student. A little bit about me is that I am from Kentucky, and after taking a long break from schooling to focus on working, I transferred here to PNCA in 2022. I'm a left-handed October Libra, I have 2 cats back home named Butter and Pepper, and my favorite food is potatoes. As for my project, this is a photography series exploring my experiences with food, family, community, and Southern/Midwestern Black culture. During this speech, I will be going through the formal aspects of this project, my intent for creation, inspirations, and sources used throughout the process, and then discuss some shifts from when I proposed in the fall.

BREATHE

Starting off I want to discuss what we are seeing here in front of us. The dinner table not only acts as a place to physically sit and eat, but it is a symbol of community: a place to gather, to share, to confide. A symbol of ritual. From starting every meal off with a blessing, to spending hours upon hours on schoolwork every day after school while waiting for my parents to get off of work. Many years of birthdays, anniversaries, and other milestones have been spent here at the dinner table. The plates and tablecloth were thrifted, but I had my grandmother pick out which items she would like to see.

The title *Black Magic* is a play on words. The word "black" is more literal in the sense that this is about Black American culinary practices and items. The term "magic" is a mixture of the topic of tarot cards and how the act of cooking and eating is something I consider a magical experience.

The recipe book here contains the recipes that are shown through my photocards, in which I will be describing here shortly. This book acts as a tactile collection of my favorite foods

to eat and make for others. It is set up more so in the way of a scrapbook than your standard cookbook. It has family photos and handwritten recipes from my Grandmother and Mother. I chose this type of format because I felt that printing the book on fancy paper and having it look nice and neat somewhat defeats the purpose of what I am trying to show, which is the act of makeshifting. While the photos included are more on the premium side, all of the other materials included are found at the thrift store, or ones I have already had at home. There is a curated playlist of songs that remind me of my parents and grandparents. Church songs we'd listen to on a Saturday morning while spring cleaning Gram's house, to bass-heavy tracks that my dad would play in his car. I chose the act of handmaking this book because I wanted others to feel the tangibility of what I have created. The different textured papers and adhesives gives into the "hominess" of what this project is to portray.

My cards are photographs of foods from my childhood that I have cooked, styled, and photographed myself during the thesis process. These meals were chosen specifically for personal significance, of course, and cultural significance.

- Biscuits
 - Though this is a breakfast staple, my mom makes these all the time for any meal of the day.
- Rice
 - Black Americans have a deep history with rice, especially in the south, so this is a meal we would eat any time of day. Sweet or savory. One grain goes a long way.
- Fried Potatoes

- My all-time favorite thing to eat. I make this multiple times a month because of how simple this meal is. My mom always has to make extras because I always eat so much
- Fries
 - This is super nostalgic for me. My Gram would chop up a few potatoes and fry them up as an after-school snack for me. Using an aluminum pie pan covered with paper towels so the fries aren't greasy is something I still do.
- Grilled cheese
 - I don't know how my dad does it, but I can never get my grilled cheese to taste the same as his, even though I use the same ingredients. I just wish I could find Parkay here.
- Sandwich
 - This sandwich is something I ate almost every day all 12 years of grade school. After I graduated high school, I had to take a break because I got sick of sandwiches, but now I crave them pretty often.
- Macaroni
 - A staple, a make or break item. Since my mom always makes the macaroni and cheese, I don't have to ask who made it whenever we go to a function. The correct way is to bake it by the way.
- Rv cake
 - This one came up for a familial project in a different class I had last spring, and it kinda stuck with me since. I've actually never tasted this whenever my grandma

cooked it, but she would make it during the holidays when my mom was younger.

This recipe was also one of the foundations for the brainstorming of this series.

- Apple pie
 - I ask my grandma to make this for me every single year for my birthday, and of course, it never tastes the same when I make it. But I hope you guys enjoy it, I'm going to be telling her yalls thoughts after.
- Pound cake
 - My mom used to make this more often when I was younger so I haven't had it for several years until I started this project. The almond extract makes a huge difference.

While creating these images, I tried to use as few outside materials as possible, when possible. Many of the props in these photos are from my own collection from back home, like the placemats and loaf pan. And some items that I bought here in Portland, such as the Corningware dish and pie dish. Each and every prop used was curated with the sense of "home" in mind. I wanted the images to show the textures of each dish so all of the photos were taken using a macro lens, which in short, is a lens that helps you to get amazing detail within close distances. I was lucky enough to have a professional photo studio to use in order to help me create some of the images you are viewing. Thank you so much to the members of Polara Studio for letting me use your space. You have helped me incredibly.

I wanted my cards to be about the size of a playing card so they are more like a collectible item instead of having them set up more of a postcard format with a photo on the front and recipe on the back. Utilizing this format plays into the aspect of collecting and gathering that my thesis focuses on. Printmaking is a large part of Black history, so I wanted to make sure I

incorporated that in some way, shape or form. Risograph is a form of printmaking that I used to create the back of these cards, with the design being pulled from the classic Corningware cornflower blue motif. We have a lot of Corningware dishes at home (also here, containing the macaroni), and it's a symbol that comes up often when I think of imagery from my childhood. The green and orange color scheme is one that kept showing up in the brainstorming process, and these colors were often used throughout my grandmother's decorations. I chose this method of printmaking because I had never tried riso before, and I wanted to encourage myself to try out new art processes. This was definitely an interesting learning experience getting used to the layering process. It was also more challenging (and more expensive) than screen printing due to some complications getting the file dimensions all in order. The riso machines are not always consistent with layering while working in different sessions compared to screen printing (which I don't mind at all-- I actually like the inconsistencies riso brings. The ink also has a distressed look which also adds some visual texture to the designs. I then printed the photos on matte photo paper, cut them out, and adhered them to the back of the card design and then rounded out the edges so they are not as sharp and uninviting. Assembling these cards by hand was very therapeutic to me as I got into the rhythm of cutting and gluing.

So why did I make all of this? I am a first-generation college student living on the other side of the country, who moved as a form of rebellion and self-discovery. Creating this space and artwork has helped me to return to what I was trying to run away from. Being able to cook my favorite meals even though they are for an "assignment", really helped me to connect to what I loved about being home the most: food, and most importantly, my family. It's also one of my love languages; making, giving, and sharing food I've made brings me closer to those around

me. This series was a way for me to help reground myself as I was feeling like was floating in the middle of the ocean.

2024 was a very intense and challenging year for me, so I wanted to create a series that forced me to reevaluate my goals and focus on what I set out here in Portland to do. Being surrounded by a majority of white spaces these last 3 years hasn't really been enriching for me in terms of culture, perspective, and artistic ideals, and I still don't have a solid Black community of people my age that are outside of academia. And in all honesty, not having Black friends as a Black girl in my 20s sucks. I have been forced to continue shrinking myself into someone I'm not, both at work and at "home".

All in all, this project is dedicated to my grandparents. They have supported me not only financially (which I am forever grateful and so blessed to have) but emotionally. Whenever I doubted being out here, and felt like giving up everything, they always knew what to tell me and that no matter what I did they would hold me up and guide me to what I wanted and needed. They have spent 26 years of their lives following me around with my ridiculous endeavors even if they were impractical and inefficient.

The majority of my resources have been pulled from a mixture of oral history from my immediate family- my parents, grandparents and then Black American-centered culinary books. Samantha Box's project, "Caribbean Dreams" was what kickstarted my main idea for my thesis. She portrayed her Jamaican heritage through food and photography. Though her method was "simple", it really struck me. It stuck with me for months. The cookbooks *Ghetto Gastro* and *Black Foods* have been of importance. Showing me that combining fine art and food is a liberating experience, as these are 2 of the many critical parts of Black history. *High on the Hog* series on Netflix, gave me more insight to Black culinary history; working with so little in order

to survive. It's something that we aren't taught in schools and don't always have the familial information passed down to us.

I'd like to say that my role in this project is not only the artist but a collaborator and curator. I have spent months in collaboration with my parents and grandparents, finding different ways to include bits and pieces of my childhood within this project while curating the many dishes that they have spent years making for me while growing up, from the recipes themselves, pictures, table setup, and music.

As for the physical context of this series, if I were to continue this outside of school, I wouldn't like to put this in a gallery setting as I don't really see my work being a part of that type of space. So, I would like to see these works in more of an interactive community setting with loud music, tons of food and drinks. Alongside that I see my recipe book compressed into a more "proper" publication: I would add more recipes, family photos, and pieces of my experiences growing up as a Black woman in the United States.

Food, self-published works, printmaking, and photography are some of the many aspects of Black history; and each one of these pieces are a part of my thesis. Having so many responsibilities outside of my thesis such as having a job, internship, and other classwork, it's difficult to balance everything without having the right resources. I want these pieces to become a part of Black history, even if it's just a small moment in our long but fruitful timeline.

Though the main idea of this series is very much geared towards Black Americans, I do feel that this can be beneficial to other POC cultures that rely heavily on community, food, and religion. I think it's important for us as Black Americans to continue to be loud and proud about our heritage. We have taken part in influencing the majority of American culture, from fashion, music, to language.

Compared to my initial idea, there were a few shifts that took place. The first photo that I shot for the series was the pound cake, and that one I'd say leans more towards your typical photo for a cook book compared to the other images. As I learned and did some troubleshooting, the main shift was that as I started to progress, I noticed that I kept getting stuck on how I would include tarot aspects to create an interesting image which was making it difficult for myself to move forward. For example, like playing cards there are suits in a tarot set, and depending on the theme of the deck it varies, but in this case, I was going to use cups, plates, forks, and knives. This is a format I would love to revisit. But, in typical me fashion, I gave myself several big objectives within my thesis like basically creating my whole project physically by hand (design, cooking, photography, card assembly, and handmade publication), while also having to juggle other responsibilities such as working 4/7 days a week, alongside other classwork.

Although I am pretty satisfied with how my whole series turned out, there are definitely some places where I could have pushed my concept more. I should have spent more time talking to my family, instead of just asking them a few questions and moving on. That way, I would have been able to add more of that history and information to my publication. Having more of their opinions and suggestions for this would have been beneficial as well. I also think working with my book a bit more would have solidified the concept.

In conclusion, I genuinely enjoyed creating this project for myself and my family, and I hope you all gain something from this experience. Thank you, Melanie for being my mentor throughout this series, you have been incredibly helpful. and thank you all for being here today to share such a special moment with me. This has been Black Magic.