Stardust
Dust to dust they intone
Out of clay they say
From earth you came,
and to earth you will return they admonish.
They remind us we are human
and subject to death yet insist on their eternals.
Demons and angels, paradise or purgatory,
merely human with a finite number of days.
But we have exploded as novas.
Burned through countless galaxies,
danced on the edge of asteroids, rode on the tail of comets
Until in a dizzy frenzy of passion, we fell through the viscous ozone
passed cooling clouds to settle on the ocean floor.
It was there that we grew arms and tongue,
all the while remembering our origins.
Calcium, magnesium, iron...
We are the stuff that stars are made of.
It’s a scientific fact, a cosmic truth.
We hold grades of the divine inside ourselves and we always have.
Stardust

We are stardust.

Deborah Major
San Francisco Poet Laureate
I refer to San Francisco as my city, my love or as my baby. My baby is in an awkward position right now. I feel like it’s in some awkward teenage stage where... you know, when you see an adolescent kid and they haven’t quite formed into anything yet. I question myself over and over again as to why I’m here in San Francisco. Why don’t I just throw in the towel and go somewhere else? Yet, I’m still curious to see what’s going to happen. What’s going to come out of it?

I’m concerned. At times, I’m really disappointed and at other times very distraught, which is funny to me because that’s probably how parents are when they’re looking at their teenage kid. If anything, I’m just hoping that San Francisco grows up. And, grows into something that I’d be proud of, into a place where I’d still be welcomed and loved.

I think for a lot of parents of minorities, they’re always hoping their kid remains and retains the core essence of who they are. So for a black person, they would hope… I don’t know. I’ll speak for myself:

If I had a little kid I would hope that my kid would still enjoy, embrace, and love the fact that they’re black and not feel like they have to conform to mainstream America and a Eurocentric way of life. I hope the same for San Francisco.

I hope that this doesn’t become some whitewashed, Silicon Valley secondary home, but rather that it maintains all of its flavor, zest and whimsy, free-spirited feel that it used to have. So even though it’s in this awkward stage, I keep waiting with bated breath hoping that essence won’t crumble away completely and I’ll still be able to see it come into fruition.

My love has not changed. It’s a love-hate relationship at times, but I just want the best for my beloved San Francisco and I hope to see it come into that fullness. Just as history goes full circle, I hope that San Francisco will too, and that it won’t take so long and it won’t have to go through falling on its face in order to come back around into the goodness that’s always been there.

**Kristine Mays**

**Wire Sculptor**

**Three Point Nine Art Collective**
Too many people make a lot of bad decisions choosing to see evil and wrong in things because they don’t know or understand it. Nobody has a monopoly on spirituality. Spirituality is what you do with the totality of your being and treating others with respect. What Dr. King valued was personalism. Personalism means every individual has worth and dignity. Your religion is not to be dumped on someone else.

Slavery, the Crusades, and the witch-hunts were done in the name of religion. I visited this beautiful chapel in Ghana. The chapel is up top, but under the chapel was a dungeon where our forbearers were stacked like sardines to prepare them to be corralled onto slave ships. That is the contradiction of America. The church needs to have a renaissance of its best beliefs and practices. There was a holistic concern about what happened to the group, to the people. What happened to us, as a group, was enslavement.

Many of the elders were intimidated, threatened and even killed for holding on to the best of our African traditions. Any Negro who was educated, really educated, was a dangerous Negro. They were mutilated and whipped. Their fingers were chopped off. Our forbearers were afraid to raise questions. Hence, we did not stay put in terms of embracing the best of our spiritual traditions that came from Africa. Our slave masters saw it to their advantage to cut our ancestors off from their roots.

One of the factors that has enabled the Jewish tradition to survive is that they've always had a ritual of remembrance. They never forget the fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We so easily forget or we're so easily told by our oppressors: don’t remember. We don’t have rituals of remembrance in our black community. Once a year is not enough. We need repetition and daily rituals.

Dr. Amos Brown
Pastor of the Historical Third Baptist Church
President of the San Francisco Chapter of the NAACP
Let me tell you a story. I was 15 years old. I was a quiet dude and I was dorky. I wasn’t hood and I wasn’t in your face. That wasn’t me. I liked golf. I liked little toy models and I liked graffiti. There was this Armenian kid who used to love wearing Southpole jeans, which was cool back then and I’ll never forget what he told me. This white kid says, “Man, I’m blacker than you.” I just sat there quiet. I didn’t know what to say to that at the time. I’m thinking, “What does that mean? What did he mean by that? I’m blacker than you?”

That North American pop culture contemporary perception of blackness is influential and present everywhere in the world. We’re seen through that lens and we’re supposed to fit into that mold… that box. Neither being mixed, nor my deep appreciation and love for soul and funk music mattered at that moment because I wasn’t that box. I didn’t sag my pants. I didn’t cuss out my teachers. I didn’t act tough. I wasn’t the stereotypical black male. I didn’t fit that construct.

To him, blackness was a way of dressing. It’s a way of speaking. It’s the music you listen to. I’ve always tried to understand that mentality. You can be in hip hop culture and identify yourself with hip hop. But that’s not the same as someone who thinks they’re black.

“I’m blacker than you.”

XAVIER ESTRELLA SCHMIDT
MURALIST AND GRAFFITI ARTIST
The intersection of art and politics started in the Constitution with the First Amendment, which is about freedom of expression. From that idea, we embrace expression, and sometimes you have to be political about it in terms of artistry.

How does the arts and culture contribute to economy and social well-being? How is the history of art important for people in terms of their cultural well-being? For example, during colonial wars, when the Europeans were taking over large swaths of the African continent, they also claimed a lot of the cultural property of Africans. So if you go to the British Museum you would see shelves of dolls, iconic instruments and masks that were taken wholesale from villages in Africa up and down the west coast. People were deprived of a part of their cultural heritage, and maybe in a way that made it easier to colonize them because you could then come in with your own system of education, values and language and replace all the things that were grounding people in their own culture and history.

So we looked at a lot of the issues involving infrastructure as well as history and politics. I think if you applied that to our situation in San Francisco you would say, “Are we managing our cultural resources so that they can’t be taken away and are we using them? Are we celebrating our culture enough?”

People were starting to say, “We need to recover our past. We’ve been ripped off. We need to get some of these things back that are really important.” The takeaway from that is: what do you owe for removing something more than a hundred years ago? Do you need to return that? And, on the other side, if you get it back, how do you reintegrate it into your society? How do you care for it? Do you have the cultural infrastructure in place—the museums, the thought leaders, the art historians—to really manage collections and can that information be transferred in an effective way?

Alma Robinson
Director
California Lawyers for the Arts
African Americans built San Francisco and I don’t just mean the bricks. In its earliest origins, historian John Templeton said that there were four black men involved in what San Francisco was going to become. Look at people like William Leidesdorff Jr., whose statue is in the Financial District. He’s one of the key architects to decide whether San Francisco was going to be called San Francisco or Yerba Buena. He was a multiracial brother of African descent. And, Pio Pico was Mexican, African American and Spanish. These were some of the architects of this area we call San Francisco. So in many ways you can say black people were involved in the founding of San Francisco.

San Francisco is an estuary. It’s a place where things grow, flourish and spread out. It’s the energy from this geographical region that established a fertile ground for artistic creation. Many black artists came here to become who we know them as today. They talk about San Francisco making Richard Pryor into the Richard Pryor we all know because of our art scene.

The African American Art and Culture Complex in particular has been serving the community for almost 40 years. When San Francisco had over 100,000 black people in its population, it was where people went when they needed a place to grow their creativity and professional experience so they could find more opportunities. Many historic and significant black leaders and artists got their start here. Delroy Lindo and Danny Glover were part of the black writers workshop hosted here with Burriel Clay. This center has functioned not only for preserving culture but also for elevating black arts for generations to come.

Today artists are fleeing San Francisco in record numbers. They have been for the last 10 years. It’s too expensive to live, right? This is one of the few places that subsidizes black art and black art companies—Cultural Odyssey, African American Shakespeare and Lorraine Hansberry Theatre—making it almost more important because thousands of artists go through black art companies. If we lose a center like this, we lose pretty much the last place where black art is allowed to exist in San Francisco in a real way. We need black art and culture because it’s the social fabric of San Francisco, a place known for its multicultural diversity. The idea of multiculturalism has been here since the Gold Rush.

We did a study recently with Hewlett Packard and found out that 42 percent of our audience is from Alameda County and 42 percent from San Francisco. The African American Art and Culture Complex is not just important to the city of San Francisco; it’s important to the Bay Area and black culture from both sides of the Bay. Pretty soon we are going to depend on places like this to connect us to black culture. It’s not going to be in a lot of other places.

Mohammed Soriano Bilal
Executive Director
African American Art & Culture Complex
Welcome to America. We were not invited in. We were systematically kept out. We were not even considered people. We were listed as property: a table, a chair, “African American female,” and “African American male.”

Someone said to me the other day, “Who says we want to be included?” I said, “Hmm. If you don’t want to be included because you’d rather be left alone, is that a healthy psychological state? Have you become so frustrated by what goes on in the mainstream, so discouraged by the lack of access, so hurt by very overt or covert acts of racism, sexism, homophobia and oppression? Are you so undone by what’s going on in the mainstream that your desire to be immersed is actually a retreat into a refuge? If that’s the case, should I be insisting that you come out of that space of safety?”

I believe we should heal ourselves in community and then move into the mainstream because I’m an agitator. I think other people get better when diverse communities are together. Diversity is a component of excellence. I’ve always thought inclusion and integration as the goal. But there are people that are questioning whether or not they want to be included. They’re like, “You don’t want me to be in your city? I’m going to build my own city. You don’t want me to patronize your business? I’m going to create my own.”

I worry about the rhetoric that’s going on in America right now. As an educator my job is to help children recognize these lies about who people are, what their contributions have and have not been and who is moral and who’s not. As parents and educators we must interrupt this cycle of inferiority so that they feel that America belongs to them. Langston Hughes said it best, “I, too, Sing America.”

Wanda Marie Holland-Greene
Head of The Hamlin School
For African Americans in the West, San Francisco had the same allure as it did for various ethnic groups who came here in search of a better life and opportunities. Those that planted roots in the city traveled the longest of the three major migration routes out of the American South. They came from Texas, Louisiana, and various other parts of the Diaspora. Black people have been in California for centuries prior but they came in numbers that surpassed black pioneers of the Gold Rush and the mid-to-late 19th century Gilded Age. The population of San Francisco was steadily rising as the United States became involved in the Second World War (1941-1945). The African American population multiplied almost 10 times the amount it was in 1940. It rose from 4,846 to 43,502 by 1950. By 1960, the black community in San Francisco continued to rise, making black Americans the second largest ethnic group in the city.

They brought not only suitcases and hopes, but the invisible bags of culture, tradition and kinship networks that would transform into active, engaged and organized communities. They planted seeds that continue to blossom in this generation. Their legacy lives in the lives of their descendants. I Am San Francisco: Black Past and Presence honors the link between our ancestors and the lives of people that live in their shadows often hidden from history. In a 1966 article in the Bayview Hunters Point Spokesman a journalist asked, “What would happen if San Francisco’s symbols of neglect for its forgotten citizens were torn down?” We’d continue to create, dance, organize, earn degrees, build families and dig our roots even deeper into the rich soil of San Francisco, California.

Aliyah Dunn-Salahuddin
City College of San Francisco African American Studies Professor
haitian folkoric and Katherine Dunham technical dancer