

The Atlantic

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Reaching for Black joy

1 message

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This is *The Atlantic's* weekly newsletter just for subscribers. Today's newsletter goes behind the scenes of "**What the Body Holds**" to explore how we used photography, illustrations, and other forms of storytelling to challenge assumptions about Blackness in America.

In this third chapter of our "**Inheritance**" series, writers and creators reflect on how self-expression can be both an act of joy and defiance, contemplate the inequities in how Black bodies are assigned value, and examine the Black community's search for dignity. **Jenisha Watts Osei**—who has worked closely on "Inheritance" since the project's earliest days—walks us through how these stories came together.

I was drawn to this chapter because it challenges misconceptions about Blackness.

In "**Gold Teeth Are Beautiful on Their Own Terms**," the writer **Julian Randall** explores why many Black Americans wear gold teeth. It's not necessarily to be flashy, but rather a creative way to cover a chipped tooth or gap. In the Black community, gold represents value. I was born and raised in the South, and I vividly remember my mother grinning, showing off her right tooth draped in precious gold. I am grateful for the

opportunity to portray a culture that is so often overlooked and misunderstood.

The video and photos that accompany Randall's essay are also stunning. Our design director Caroline Smith did incredible work with the photographer **Akilah Townsend** to show the significance and beauty of gold teeth in the Black community.



"Among Black folks, gold teeth have become as much a matter of community as of style," Julian Randall writes. "I think of how beauty, at its best, is a form of agency." (Akilah Townsend)

"Inheritance" takes a panoramic view of Blackness; one mandate of this chapter was to highlight different Black experiences. Whenever I read stories about, say, high maternal mortality rates among Black women, I realized I rarely saw mention of *disabled* mothers. So I asked the writer **Shalene Gupta** to reach out to disabled Black Americans, letting them speak directly about their experiences. One of my colleagues, Honor Jones, helped push Gupta to go deeper, asking her to interrogate why the disability movement hadn't yet undergone social and racial reckonings the way the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements had.

The photographer **Dannielle Bowman** took beautiful black-and-white portraits of the disabled Black Americans **who are featured in Gupta's piece**. Charts of surprising statistics on the struggles of being Black and disabled further illustrate how Black Americans are not a monolith.



Keith Jones, a community activist and disability educator with cerebral palsy, won an Emmy for his work on the soundtrack of the sports documentary "Rising Phoenix," about the Paralympic Games. (Dannielle Bowman)

To show another under-covered dimension of Black identity, **Charles Harbison** reflected on how his mother and grandmother, both former factory workers, used fashion to avoid being boxed in by their blue-collar jobs. Harbison, a high-fashion designer, stands at the intersection of the intellectual and the tactile. His essay, "**Always the Gold Sandal**," asks readers to reimagine these women in his family, and shows us how they used clothing and accessories as mechanisms for freedom.



(Mark Harris)

The writer **Latria Graham**'s piece, "**The Dark Underside of Representations of Slavery**," focused on a different kind of freedom. What happens when Black people lose autonomy over their own images, including deceased Black people whose photos are later commercialized? This was a delicate subject, especially when it came to using archival images of enslaved Black Americans. In illustrating Graham's piece, our art team was careful to work with an artist who understood the sensitivity around using such images.

Below, you can see the work of **Alanna Fields**. For the artist and for the family involved in the story, bringing dignity to each portrait was key. Fields did so by brushing layers of wax onto the pictures to clothe the people portrayed.



Seeing her ancestors in the archives at Harvard, Tamara Lanier felt that the portraits were out of place. She believed that the images of Renty and Delia belonged to her. (Lanier granted permission for the portraits' use in this piece.) (Alanna Fields)

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