

In this issue, we present a multigenre review feature, curated by Jess Jelsma Masterton, with six reviewers addressing the topic of art and activism.

RAGE HEZEKIAH

## The Promise and the Compromise

*Finna*. Nate Marshall. One World, 2020. 128 pp. \$17.00 (paper).

Deep in the strange pandemic summer of 2020, I went to my local bookstore to pick up my copy of Nate Marshall's *Finna*. When I told the clerk, an older white woman, that I'd come for my preordered book, I knew I was speaking an unfamiliar language. *What's the name of the book? Fin awe? Let me check again? Spell it for me?* I'm a Black woman living in Vermont, so our interaction did not shock me. I spelled it three times, watching her try to make sense of the collection of letters. Later, as I read Nate Marshall's poems, my initial annoyance felt more significant. In experiences like these, we are taught to adapt, we are shown how our language is devalued.

*Finna* is a collection that celebrates Black language and speaks to the self-doubt that can accompany colloquial speech for a person of color. He captures how the deepest reverence for Black vernacular exists alongside a deep shame. Still, throughout the book, Marshall stakes a claim to language's power and the intimacy of a shared idiom. He celebrates the beauty of how we as Black people communicate, while inserting Black language into an academic context to help it gain reverence and relevance.

Marshall's definition of *finna* appears on the book's cover:

fin

na

/ˈfɪnə/

contraction:

1. going to; intending to [rooted in African American Vernacular English]

2. eye dialect spelling of “fixing to”
3. Black possibility ; Black futurity ; Blackness as tomorrow

Marshall’s exploration of Black hope feels energizing. *Finna* honors history, while focusing on potential. Black joy is central to the book and is infused in his definition of *finna*. The poems throughout his collection speak to the complexity of Black identity in America. His work celebrates the power that evolves when we are in community, and at home in ourselves, while acknowledging the ways we learn to code-switch and assimilate into white spaces.

Marshall speaks to the complexity of feeling the power of language, while simultaneously doubting the validity of expression. As a reader, I deeply identified with this sentiment, and I was grateful for his naming of this experience. For example, in “FINNA is not a word,” he says:

sometimes, i believe in all that my people make their mouths do.  
other days, i read books on grammar & proper style, correct  
my own usages.  
in those times my language is elevated,  
my diction is deliberate.  
my mind, undisciplined  
& spinning.

In the first line here, Marshall describes speaking in Black vernacular as an intuitive and physical action, in contrast to the cerebral and intentional “grammar & proper style” of white academic speech. These few lines emphasize the way the intellectual richness and rigor of Black vernacular is usually unacknowledged in that other context. Musically, the alliterative *m*’s in the first line sing, with *my*, *make*, and *mouths* in quick succession. The music rings through the lines that follow, with percussive *d*’s and soft *i*’s in *diction*, *deliberate*, *mind*, and *undisciplined*. Marshall’s use of rhythm and musicality seems effortless, demonstrating his experiences as a rapper, spoken-word artist, and page poet. The definitive end-stopped first line of this excerpt works in opposition to the title’s insistence that *finna* isn’t a word. However, the next line is enjambed on the word *correct*, leaving the reader with a sense of punitive self-doubt. The poem moves back and forth from acceptance and celebration of the words of his people to an internalized insecurity. In

the final lines, the tension shows the speaker regaining the power of Black language.

In fact, as in Marshall's definition (*finna* as "Black possibility ; Black futurity ; Blackness as tomorrow"), he opens "FINNA is not a word" with an epigraph aligned with hope and Black joy, by activist Mariame Kaba, whose work focuses on dismantling the prison industrial complex: "Hope is a discipline." This powerful statement suggests that in order to celebrate Black possibility, we must practice hope. We must dedicate ourselves over and over again to the celebration of our own vernacular, despite the constant drum of white supremacy.

The juxtaposition of internalized racism and Black joy is a primary theme in *Finna*. "FINNA," one of the closing poems of the collection, opens with Marshall's natural speech rhythms:

so this one time i was finna say finna in a academic context  
& a voice in my head said *shouldn't you be worried*  
*about using a word that ain't a word* & i was like *word*.

& for a long time that was how i let my life happen,  
i let my mind tell me a million nos that the world  
had implanted in me before i even formed questions.  
i let my power be dulled by my fear of fitting.

Marshall doesn't hesitate to name the ways Black vernacular is policed, while simultaneously staking claim to its existence. His incorporation of *word* as an affirmation is particularly resonant; white people have been surprised by my use of "word" in conversation. Even as I type these words, the grammar check in Google Docs is prompting me to correct my errors. "like word" should become "like a word," it thinks, and it perpetually flags the lowercase *i* Marshall uses as needing capitalization. While the speaker seems somewhat self-conscious in these lines, the wordplay and repetition of *word* create a sense of humor and play. The third repetition of *word* turns it into an affirmation, while the word itself links to the similar sounds of *worried* in line two and *world* in line five, unifying the text in a way that gives it power.

Also impressive in *Finna* is the tenderness with which Marshall grapples with white supremacy, and a known white supremacist who shares his name. The first section of the book, "The Other Nate Mar-

shall,” introduces this character and the poet’s navigation of their relationship. Marshall is willing to hold space for the other Nate Marshall’s humanity, despite his cruelty. In “Nate Marshall is a white supremacist from Colorado or Nate Marshall is a poet from the South Side of Chicago or i love you Nate Marshall,” he says:

i won’t lie to you Nate Marshall  
or to myself Nate Marshall  
i too have hated a nigga & lived  
to tweet the tale.  
i too have sat suspicious in my basement  
wondering who was coming for my country.  
i too have googled myself & found a myself  
i despise.

once, you left Twitter  
after i told my people to tell you  
that they loved you & your book  
& your commitment to Black people  
& i feel you Nate Marshall.  
i’ve left places & loves  
when they told me they loved  
a Nate Marshall  
i didn’t recognize.

Reading this poem, I was struck by the intimacy of the direct address, particularly in the line “i feel you Nate Marshall.” Their shared name becomes an incantation, a space for potential. The repetition has an atomizing effect, a word said enough times that its meaning dissolves, which heightens the conflation of the two characters in the poem.

However, in the staccato rhythm with the *t*’s in “left twitter/ after i told my people to tell you . . .,” the percussive effect asserts the speaker’s authority. Such a move could feel accusatory, but the sting is immediately dissolved in the following lines: the poet encourages friends to flood the unsuspecting white supremacist with affirmations of poetry and a celebration of Blackness. Within this stanza, Marshall’s ability to shift perspective repeatedly enmeshes the reader. Pulled along by his use of enjambment, I found myself trying to keep up with the poet’s

sense of justice. Do I hate the other Nate Marshall? Somehow, in spite of my expectations, within this poem I find compassion for him.

I also admire the gentleness of Marshall's devotion as he honors Black speech. In "what can be said," the speaker says:

tonight, i'm feeling tender  
because it's another time  
with my granddaddy  
& he's still here

I was so moved by the tightness and simplicity here. The lines are short and unpunctuated, and there's no pause in sight. The lines that follow are elongated, as the poet describes his desire to hear about his grandfather's life as a young man, and then they shorten again, when he acknowledges that his grandfather isn't "here in that way," that he has Alzheimer's. Instead, he just asks:

*how you living young man*  
& he answers *slow motion*.

These two lines are among my favorites in the book; they are distilled and unique, and so beautifully Black. They fall midpage in italics, calling the reader's attention to the sonic quality. The *o*'s in *how, you, young, slow, and motion* evoke gentleness, emphasizing the quietude of the poet's elderly grandfather and reinforcing the feeling of tenderness from the poem's opening.

*Finna* is a collection that fulfills the promise and potential of its title. The poems both celebrate Black joy and give voice to the internalized racism that seeks to de-language Blackness. *Finna* revels in the buoyancy of colloquial Black speech and grapples with the systems of oppression that denigrate its power. Marshall concludes "the valley of its making" with a strong declaration:

our people deserve  
poetry without meter. we deserve our  
own jagged rhythm & our own uneven  
walk towards sun. you make happening happen.  
we happen to love. this is our greatest  
action.

Marshall's poems elevate the presence and power of words I rarely see in print. In the bookstore where I purchased *Finna*, I felt the pang of isolation and self-doubt that can accompany being misunderstood. Reading this collection, I feel a renewed awareness of my own desire to celebrate words and usage that feel familiar and homey to me. *Finna* is a praise hymn; a collection steeped in reverence for the language that has been carved out, shared, and made our own.