Hello! My name is Jai Davis and my Writing and Rhetoric 1 professor, Kathryn Bergquist, has encouraged me to submit my essay for consideration. This essay was one component of our Chicago Portfolio; the only subject matter guideline imposed was that it had to be about Chicago. The essay was followed by writing our introduction to the portfolio, an analysis of how we used the key concepts we covered so far in class (alphabetic text, ethos, affordances, arrangement, and organization).

Thanks in Advance,
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Black Arts in Big Cities

The walls vibrate with velvet melodies and soulful voices. My tiny eight year old feet hurriedly swing off the bed, lightly dancing across the floor as they patter into the short hallway and down the soft, carpeted stairs. The southern smell is so familiar to my young nose; the spicy cinnamon, the sweet brown sugar, and the tangy, smoky smell of apples frying. The velvet melodies are now in symphony with the distinct, harsh sizzling of the cast iron skillet. The soulful voices now entwine with my grandmother’s soft hum. I walk into the bright kitchen where the curtains are pulled back and the breeze drifts in through the small open window over the sink.

“Good morning baby,” my grandmother says. Her voice is soft and sweet like her cascading curls that brush my skin as she leans in to hug me.

“Morning Grandma” is all I can muster before I am swept from her small, tender hands into strong, calloused ones that feel ginormous, almost as if they wrap around my entire waist.

As soon as my feet leave the ground my great granddad and I are suddenly in the 1950’s, bopping and swaying to the upbeat sounds of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing.” In a matter of seconds I am in a past time I know nothing of, but is as familiar to me as
my kitchen, my grandmother, and those fried apples.

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The sounds of Jazz, as well as many other historically black genres of music, come from struggle, pain, and love for our people. The birth of today’s Jazz in particular started in the heart of “Black Chicago.” During the Great Migration thousands of African Americans migrated to Chicago, and many other northern places, for the hopes of a better life. It is estimated that this migration, from 1916-1970, increased the black population from a mere two percent to thirty three percent. Many were forced to live in a group of neighborhoods called the “Black Belt” of Chicago, stretching about thirty blocks along State Street. It was, by any definition, a slum. Though the living conditions in most parts were deplorable, that did not stunt the growth of the community.

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I am about ten years old in the backseat of my great grandad’s car, braiding my Barbie doll’s hair whose skin is like my mother’s; toffee brown and glistening like the chocolate beginning to melt after you left it in your hand a little too long. My great Granddad is focusing on the road as he drives, glancing in the mirror to check on me, almost rhythmically, as the radio hums soft gospel songs. We drive through our Maryland neighborhood shrouded in tall trees; some with pink flowers, others with white, and some with none at all. I see families; mothers, fathers, and their children, walking to the park or synagogue and the geese from the neighboring pond eating away at the lawns of the corner houses.

As we drive, the tall trees turn into tall buildings, the families walking to the park or synagogue are now a mix of older and younger kids jumping rope in the street, or walking from the corner store with their ice cream. The geese are now dogs tied to the parking meter while their owners run into the multitude of tiny liquor stores, corner markets, and hair and nail salons that decorate the narrow streets.
After a while the car finally eases to a halt, I unbuckle my seat belt excitedly, as if it were the only thing preventing me from flying.

“Hold on now, wait for me to come and open the door for you,” my great granddad says to me.

“Grandad, where are we?” I ask.

“Well, we are where I spent most of my life and where I work. This is DC. This is Howard University. This is Chocolate City.”

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There were many names for the artistic parts of the south side; The Stroll, Black Metropolis, and commonly today, Bronzeville. This is where modern day “Chicago Jazz” was conceived. There was the mix of New Orleans sounds with Chicago sounds, and the sounds of the Mississippi River. This artistic black community would get together and toy with the traditional concepts of blues and orchestra. It is a city of inspiration and innovation. Where Louis Armstrong, who came to Chicago during the Great Migration, birthed the Jazz solo, taking jazz from something almost exclusively orchestrated or improvisational band music to something that can be twisted and turned into both group and individual expression.

It is also where Sidney Bechet would grow exponentially as a musician, playing under Joe “King” Oliver who assembled legendary Jazz bands, one of which also included Louis Armstrong. White musicians were found here, listening to the music or taking “lessons.” Many of these white musicians, who would take the credit as the creators of jazz, such as Muggsy Spanier, Bud Freeman, and Jimmy McPartland, were of these musicians who came for “lessons.”

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I find myself back in the Chocolate City; a little older, armed with a disposable camera, and still on my great granddad’s arm. We end up in front of a building that is big, wider than it is tall, the front a dingy white, with red and brown brick siding and a sign projecting from the side, decorated with bright lights that read “HOWARD.”

I look up to my great granddad, “What is this?!” I ask with excitement and wonder in my wide eyes.

“This is the Howard Theater,” he says “this is where black musical excellence happens. Do you know who has played here? Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, Aretha Franklin…”

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It was this black arts and entertainment district, right in the heart of The Stroll of Chicago, which held places like Vendome Theater. The importance of this theater is that it hired, almost exclusively, black employees. Its patrons were, almost exclusively, black patrons. Most importantly, it was one of the only theaters that would show “race pictures.” Almost nowhere else would you see films dedicated to honoring the lives of Black soldiers in WWI. They showed movies that were about black issues, with black directors and actors. This kind of black pride was neither so readily displayed most places, nor was it allowed to be.

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I pull off my covers and walk across the hall to my mother’s room where the door is cracked open and the light of her bed side lamp shines through. I knock gently, go inside and curl up into her arms. I find her reading a poetry book by Nikki Giovanni. I recall being dressed up as Nikki in my
elementary school for a project. I became Nikki Giovani, a militant, black poet with a strong voice, inspired by the civil rights movement and her experience as a black woman. Her poetry and other writings put her amongst those at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement. I grew up loving my skin, and not thinking that I was better or worse than anyone for it. I grew up knowing all of the black people around me were beautiful and smart, just like me. I grew up hearing about African American leaders, and artists, and was always taught to see a little bit of myself in all of them.

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The Black Arts Movement started in 1965 in Harlem, quickly spreading to cities like Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco. It was a movement to inspire pride in being black. Pride in our color, our roots, our history, and pride in our people, in each other. Chicago did a particularly good job of this; producing The Negro Digest, later to be renamed Black World, featuring articles, poems, and short stories depicting the black experience from political, social, and spiritual points of view. Then there was Third World Press, one of the largest mediums of black literature. Their slogan was "to always honor Black writers and artists and to celebrate artists of all cultures."

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"Are you excited? We are almost there!" my mother says.

"Of course I am." I reply. I hear the melodies of my favorite song and reach for the dial to turn it up. "I met this girl when I was three years old, and what I loved most she had so much soul." I listen to the soul undertones of the song, and it brings me back the sounds of the black musicians I grew up listening to.

"And when I grew up she showed me how to go downtown and at nighttime my face lit up so
astounding, I told her in my heart is where she’d always be” I think about all that DC has taught me and I feel the homesickness already setting in.

“Now everybody got the game figured out all wrong, I guess you never know what you got till it’s gone”. Then I remember that I have a purpose, and a goal.

“I guess this is why I'm here and I can't come back home.” I remember how blessed I am to have the opportunity to learn in such an artistic, iconic, historical city filled with unexplored inspirations.

“Reach for the stars so if you fall you land on a cloud.” I am on my way to study where the likes of some of my favorite musicians like Common, Chance the Rapper, and, the artist of the song that now fills my ears, Kanye West, studied. I am filled with anxiety, wonder, anticipation, and excitement to make this new place my catalyst of artistic expression, my oyster, my campus, my home.

“Jump in the crowd, spark you lighters, wave ‘em around, and if you don't know by now, I’m talking about Chi Town.”