

Express yourself

Four Soho House members, working across varied disciplines, take on the task of examining and explaining identity. The pages that follow offer a series of personal explorations into what makes us who we are



GLYNN POGUE LITERATURE

Local House: *DUMBO House*

Writer and essayist for publications including *Vogue*, *Essence* and *National Geographic*, Pogue is currently writing a memoir on race, class and identity. She is also one third of the Black Girls Texting podcast.

'Identity is sense of self, history, lineage, tradition, expression, home, place, comfort, connection.'

‘We were a true **COMMUNITY**.
The type of place where
EVERYONE knew your name,
and your business’

**BED-STUY PHOTOGRAPHY
BY SEMINA BILDIK**

LOCAL HOUSE: *SOHO HOUSE NEW YORK*

I got the tattoo when I was 18. A big-ass ‘718’ scratched right into my hipbone. It was for the block I was raised on, ‘money-making MacDonough Street’. It was for Brooklyn. My childhood wasn’t exactly a gritty scene characterised by a Jay-Z song, and if we’re being honest, some say, his wasn’t either. But he and I can both wax poetic about hugging the block. I can spit every one of his lyrics, with conviction, verse for verse, even though there was very little fire hydrant frolicking, quarter water drinking, Double Dutch jumping, or general stoop kid shit in my story. It wasn’t Spike Lee worthy.

There was the occasional corny block party and trips to the Chinese spot for cartons of French fries doused in hot sauce. But, for the most part, my ‘hood was like a tree-lined New Jersey suburb tucked away in the middle of Bed-Stuy, barely hiding beneath the cloak of its assumed infamy. A best-kept secret. Soon enough, though, realtors looking for hot new neighbourhoods came in, promoted my section of the Stuy as Stuyvesant Heights, with a tagline of ‘charming and historic’. And well, you already know what happened next.

Still, we were a true community. The type of place where everyone knew your name, and your business. In the evenings, I’d watch my neighbours gather at Peaches, the restaurant on the corner, to trade gossip and gardening tips over mason jars of sweet tea and steaming bowls of shrimp and grits. There was always Deborah, who organised our annual Christmas-tree lighting with my mother, chain-smoked and sipped Scotch from a flask because she said it put hair on her chest; Eddie and Bee the cute couple who lived across the street, and whose colourful flowerbeds

almost single-handedly won us the Greenest Block in Brooklyn every year; Morris and Marianne the first white couple to move into the neighbourhood, a pair of hippies who’d bought their house by selling a Basquiat; and Miss Joan, the elderly woman who babysat me every day after school and taught me to read. They were the ones I could wait with if I’d lost my key, and the ones who’d snitch on me if I’d snuck a boy in the back door. They were family.

In true small town fashion, we had our beloved mom and pop shops, quite literally. My parents were at the forefront of the economic revitalisation, opening a string of small businesses in our community in 1995, including the 18-room bed and breakfast I was raised in. Jaws dropped when friends came over for playdates. ‘You live in a mansion,’ they’d exclaim. Always one for modesty and, as a kid, for wanting to fit in, I’d laugh it off. But somewhere deep within, I beamed, mostly because my house was the best for playing hide-and-seek – more dark corners, more closets to crouch in. But what I really relished were the sleepovers at my friends’ homes, because their small apartments were filled with family members and energy and loud music, and maybe the smell of jerk chicken wafting in through back windows. Somehow, it all felt more real. More Brooklyn. More Biggie Smalls.

As early as age eight, I wanted what I believed to be a more authentic Brooklyn experience. I’d break into my piggy bank, stuff my pockets with coins and ride my bike down the block to hang with the fast girls my parents warned me about. We’d go to the bodega and I’d buy everyone 25 cent bags of salt and vinegar chips and an Icee from the old Mexican lady on the corner. I’d sit back on the girls’ sizzling stoop, sticky blue Icee



Above: self-portrait by Pogue showing her 718 tattoo, which celebrates her connection to her neighbourhood



**‘Getting Brooklyn’s
AREA CODE tattooed
on my very BEING...
was a rite of passage’**

juice dripping down my fingers, and watch them jump rope. I couldn’t jump for shit and whenever I tried to turn, they’d tell me I was double-handed, but just being in the mix made me feel down. When I turned nine, those girls moved away and I went back to embarrassing Girl Scout meetings, piano lessons and quiet afternoons reading on my sun porch, with no edgy distractions in-between.

In high school, my hunt for the ‘real’ Brooklyn accelerated. My innocent longing for a game of Double Dutch or a swirled cone from the ice-cream truck my father never let me chase after, for fear that Mr Frosty was slinging more than soft serve, turned into a quest for true street cred. I made friends with Kerrecia, a rowdy girl from east New York, a section of Brooklyn where gunshots and gang activity weren’t just happenstance. We wore side ponytails, slathered our lips in gloss and spit sunflower seeds out on the A train as we rode back to BK from our Upper West Side school. Some days we’d cut class to link up with a booster who’d sell us Rocawear shirts and Baby Phat jeans for \$20. And in the lunchroom, we’d pick fights with kids we knew wouldn’t fight back.

When my mum got wind of all this, she cried, lectured me for hours and sent me away for the weekend to stay with a family friend who lived in the projects with her son and daughter, who were about my age. The intent was to scare me straight, to launch me right into the life



Scenes from Bed-Stuy's streets



I thought I wanted, so I could see how fortunate I was to live where I did, how I did. I put on a good show to indulge my mother, dragging my feet and convincingly whining ‘whyyyyy do I have to go?’ But once I got out of the door, I was tying my hair with a knockoff Chanel scarf and putting the backs on my giant, gold door knocker earrings, readying myself for my weekend adventure. I took it all in with wide eyes, furiously scribbling mental notes as I watched curse words roll fluidly from the tongues of 14-year-old girls with long, acrylic nails and hair swirled around their heads and held into place with oversized bobby pins. To me, that was Brooklyn. I wished I could be that tough, that street smart. I talked nonchalantly about my trip to the Van Dyke Houses for the weeks that followed. Ironic, because maybe after nights at my house, friends would do the same.

On my 18th birthday, I sat in Brooklyn Ink, on Nostrand Avenue, sinking into the painful euphoria of needle on skin. Fists clenched, toes curled. Listening to the sound of the tattoo machine buzzing softly beneath Wiz Khalifa on the stereo. I was yelling out, ‘ink my whole body, I don’t give a motherfuck’ in unison with Wiz as I squinted down at Steven Steel, who was etching short strokes of grey shading into my brown skin. I reminded him to ‘make it gangsta. Think 2Pac. Thug Life,’ as I lifted my elbows to dance like Pac himself. But getting Brooklyn’s area code tattooed on my very being wasn’t a last-ditch effort to

prove I was Brooklyn-worthy. It was a rite of passage, an acceptance that though my life didn’t mirror the stereotypical rap lyrics that permeated my adolescent existence, I was no less Brooklyn.

718, the Brooklyn area code, found a home on my body, just like the girly tattoos I already had secretly ingrained there, the peony slightly beneath my underarm, the infinity symbol on the small of my waist, and the clichéd French saying in the middle of my back under my bra strap – a study in contrasts, much like my life had been.

When Steel finished his handiwork, he misted my skin with a spritz from a water bottle. I got up to check out the damage. The lines were thick. Jagged. I looked like I’d just done a bid and had let my cellmate try her hand at tattooing. Mission accomplished? I pushed my instant thoughts of regret from my mind.

‘Aye, nice work, son. This is trill,’ I complimented him. My friend looked up from the other side of the shop, where she was intently inspecting the pineapple she’d just got tatted on her ribs.

‘Yo, take a pic of this,’ I said, sticking out my tongue, pulling down the waistband of my jeans and throwing up my middle finger. Bona fide, Brooklyn badass.

BONNIE DOMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Local House: *Electric House*

After a decade of working in some of the most prestigious advertising agencies in London, along the way receiving accolades such as *Campaign's* 'Face to Watch' and *The Sunday Times* 'Next Big Thing', Doman picked up a camera a little over a year ago and has never looked back. She will exhibit her current series of photographs, entitled 'Her' – some of which are shown here – later in the year.

'For this assignment I choose to photograph real women who aren't models and show their natural beauty as I saw it through my lens. While we were shooting, we talked about their lives, their relationship with their bodies, relationships with others, sometimes even heartbreak. It's from this place of exposed vulnerability that they find their strength and identity in front of the lens.'



**'I choose to PHOTOGRAPH
REAL women... and show
their natural BEAUTY as
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Clockwise from left: 'Her 1' (2018), 'Her 32' (2019), 'Her 20' (2018), 'Her 19' (2018)

A NEW SCENE
(PIRATE RADIO)

a devil to you is an angel to me
hell to you is heaven to me
vice in '97 is virtue in the year of the 26
and decades bring change like a slow bleed

a knife to a flesh wound
a few cells and some blood
falling to the ground to make their mark
but nature and time will make it fade

from plaits to a mohawk
from a hi-top to dreadlocks
a t-shirt with your face
in 10 years' time
has the face of kate moss
and a red box

from yellow brick and the red blocks
to the blue borough and gang green
to a new scene and an old saying:

“there is nothing new under the sun”

that's why we started getting high!
and so we rise! all raving again
to shake off funeral the dust
to funky
on flex

found by mistake
on your ship's pirate radio
but we all know life makes none
so do what you'll do till it's done
even the sun will have its day

JAMES MASSIAH POETRY

Local House: *Shoreditch House*

Award-winning poet James Massiah uses his work to explore ideas around sexuality, mortality and ethics. He has been commissioned to produce writing for the BBC and Nike, and performed readings of his work at Tate Modern, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Houses of Parliament. His latest project, *Optimism 101*, is a series of 101 poems reflecting on materialism, hedonism and excess.

‘The important thing for me is knowing that my identity, my self and who I am are individual and specific to me, not so much as a physical self but as a psychological entity, in a Cartesian, dualistic way.’



Euthanasia Party/ Twenty Seven (2017), by Rachel Kate Noble; artwork created for and supplied by James Massiah

‘IDENTITY, its creation
and also its DESTRUCTION
are CENTRAL to my work’

NINA MAE FOWLER ART

Local House: *Soho House London*

Artist Nina Mae Fowler is known for her detailed drawings and installations investigating the themes of fame and desire. Most recently she was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery to create pencil and charcoal portraits of nine British film directors for the museum's permanent collection. Fowler has been shortlisted for numerous prizes and awards, including the Jerwood Drawing Prize and the BP Portrait Award.

'Identity, its creation and also its destruction are central to my work and my drawings dig around this idea. Whether or not it is real or fictional has no bearing as long as the impression created is desirable.'



'Imitation (Part I)', coloured pencil on paper, (2017)