

Creative anthology on Black Mental Health is an avenue to destigmatize and heal
by Romaine Washington

Imagine a poem, short story, essay, or artwork that speaks to you about a struggle you wrestle with in secret. The reason you don't share your very private experience is shame. You feel like you should be stronger, you shouldn't be going through this.

Perhaps it is not you, maybe it is a loved one, a friend, or your child. Questions of why you, or why they harass you. What did you do wrong to allow this to happen? What could you have done differently? Is there a way to make it go away without anyone knowing about it? All of the stereotypes and negative talk you have heard, what you have seen in movies and shows, now has you pinned in the spotlight, if anyone finds out.

Just to know there is someone else who has had a similar experience and feels free enough to use their craft to breathe truth and light into confusion and pain, can be a great comfort. Stigma begins to dissolve. Each time you read or hear about someone who has had a similar struggle, the more you realize the secret will not devour you, and maybe it doesn't need to be hidden.

You begin to wonder what owning it and speaking up about it would feel like. The cloak of shame gets lighter and lighter until truth lifts it completely and makes healing out loud an option.

In 2022, two Southern California authors, [Nikia Chaney](#) and [Lisbeth Coiman](#), were guests for Inlandia's Conversations at the Culver, speaking about their personal experiences with mental health.

In Chaney's critically acclaimed memoir, [Ladybug](#), she lovingly and poetically reveals her experience of growing up with a mother who suffers with schizophrenia, and we can see how it impacted her life, family, and worldview.

Coiman's memoir [I Asked the Blue Heron](#) describes the abusive household she was raised in, her search for love and value, and her darkest moments of being a mother with a mental health diagnosis, determined to live free and healed. She now lives a successful life and has been a regular presenter for the [National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI](#) since 2012.

It was encouraging to see these two local authors of color talk openly about their intimate power struggle of mind, heart, and hope, with vulnerability and compassion. We were allowed to witness and experience their empowerment.

In 2024, [Blacklandia](#) member Nia Sharron Campbell wrote, and her mother Nia Lewis-Campbell directed, a play titled "Elephant in the Room," which deals with the topics of healing and redemption in facing mental illness. It was performed in Fontana and Riverside to a warm reception and continues to receive well-deserved accolades.

All three authors explore the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and shame that accompany mental illness.

In the general population those who have wrestled with symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment have been subjected to skepticism, criticism bullying and shaming comments. It is difficult enough to have the symptoms but to be made to feel guilty and bullied is one more hurdle to overcome. For Black Americans there is also the added history of racism in the mental health organizations.

As far back as 1851, Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright used pseudoscience to create the term [drapetomania](#), a supposed “illness” of which the only symptom was a Black slave’s desire to run away from their master. Cartwright also created the term [dysaesthesia aethiopicatoan](#), another supposed “illness” which caused Black slaves to be lethargic or lazy. The prescribed cure for both of these conditions was beatings, and worse.

In an interview with [Psychology Today](#), Jonathan Metzyl, author of *The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became a Black Disease* (Beacon, 2010), revealed a horror in the 1960s that lasted to 1979 wherein Black people involved in freedom marches and fights for equality were arrested, labeled as violent, dangerous schizophrenics, and warehoused and brutalized in asylums until they died.

Despite the not-too-distant past abuses, there is a dire need for mental health advocacy in the Black community. According to Pew research, the [suicide rate rose 144%](#) among 10-to-17-year-olds from 2007 to 2020. We believe these honest conversations are crucial in the Black community, so Blacklandia is curating a new creative writing anthology about Black mental health. Please go to the [Inlandia Submittable](#) for full submission guidelines. We are accepting poems, fiction and non-fiction stories, essays and artwork. We are looking for work that is honest and vulnerable. Submissions opened March 1 and will close July 31, 2025.

Editors for this anthology will be myself, alongside accomplished assistant editors Angela Franklin, a recent recipient of an Honorable Mention from the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Contest, and artist, writer, poet, and playwright, Ginger Galloway. The project will include generative workshops and editing workshops prior to the publication.

It is my hope that this will open up readings and conversations, and provide opportunities to interact and break down stereotypes, fears, and stigma, to move toward support and healing.

Byline:

Romaine Washington is the editor of *These Black Bodies Are... A Blacklandia Anthology* and a workshop facilitator, and author of *Purgatory Has an Address* and *Sirens in Her Belly*.