

# ESSENCE

SPECIAL ISSUE

## Black Girl Magic

CLASS OF 2016

**Yara Shahidi**

RISING STAR

### PLUS

- TEYONAH PARRIS
  - JOHNETTA ELZIE
  - ZENDAYA
  - WILLOW SMITH
  - SIMONE BILES
  - KEKE PALMER
- AND MORE

RADICAL!  
BEAUTY!

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TURNING  
STYLES  
SCENTS &  
SURPRISES



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CELIBACY  
IS THE NEW  
SEXY  
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ELECTION  
2016  
INSIDE KAMALA  
HARRIS'S BOLD  
SENATE RUN

# BLACK HISTORY MATTERS

BEST NEW BOOKS & FILMS FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY

FEBRUARY 2016



BLACK GIRL

# MAGIC

TODAY'S YOUNG BLACK WOMEN ARE BEYOND BOLD. THEY'RE UNAPOLOGETIC. CONFIDENT. DIVINE. MEET THREE OF OUR FAVES, WHO ARE NOT ONLY EMBRACING THEIR UNIQUE GIFTS BUT ALSO REDEFINING THEIR WORLD—AND OURS

BY BENÉ VIERA • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS LEUPOLD • STYLING BY ADE SAMUEL



HAIR: KYAH WRIGHT FOR CLAIROL; MAKEUP: LORA ARELLANO FOR MELT COSMETICS/CLOUTIER REMIX; INSET: RON BATZDORFF/ABC

# Yara Shahidi

## IN HER SPARE TIME YARA SHAHIDI LOVES LOOKING UP JAMES BALDWIN SPEECHES.

“The American Dream and the American Negro” is her top pick. Reading Baldwin’s novel *The Fire Next Time* is up next, given that she has already devoured Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. At 16, she considers herself an “early-onset older person.”

Unlike the sassy, angsty Zoey Johnson she plays on ABC’s *black-ish*, the popular comedy in which she costars with Tracee Ellis Ross and Anthony Anderson, Shahidi is grounded in something deeper. She’s meticulous about the projects she chooses and what they represent for Black folks as a whole. Those that are too stereotypical get a polite “Nah.” “When I turn down roles, it’s like not only does this do nothing for me as an actor, but it also doesn’t portray who I aspire to be. It’s one-sided, one note. I feel like it would be doing a disservice to my community.”

This kind of atypical thinking for a teenager may make sense when you learn she’s the cousin of lyrical titan Nas. Shahidi is far too smart to fall prey to the dark and twisty road that many child stars have gone down. Plus, she has vigilant parents who monitor her social media activity and keep her humble with chores. Born to a Black mom and an Iranian dad who work as a commercial actress and photographer, respectively, Shahidi knows better than to be solely focused on fame. Education and giving back are her passions.

After nearly ten hours on set, she has an honors chemistry quiz with her name on it waiting for her. “I’ll designate a time this weekend to hang out and be a kid,” she says from her trailer. “But I have some very pertinent AP calculus homework that I must complete.” That it’s a Friday night is irrelevant. No wonder she maintains a stellar GPA at the Dwight Open World School. Despite her demanding schedule, humanitarian work is a priority: She’s developed a digital meet-up called Yara’s Club and filmed a PSA to encourage girls to go into STEM fields. “Being a part of this reemergence of a movement both pro-diversity and pro-woman is the best part of being a Black girl,” she says. “It’s more than, ‘I stand for this because I should.’ I stand for this because this is part of who I am as a human being.” >

“  
**Being a part of this reemergence of a movement both pro-diversity and pro-woman is the best part of being a Black girl.**”



Shahidi as Zoey on ABC’s *black-ish*



# Johanna “Netta” Elzie

**FOX NEWS IS BLARING ON THE TV AT THE ENGINE CO. NO. 28 RESTAURANT IN LOS ANGELES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, BUT SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVIST AND ST. LOUIS NATIVE JOHNETTA “NETTA” ELZIE TUNES IT OUT.** After all, she has heard a lot of the rhetoric before. The 26-year-old is just like one of the eloquent around-the-way homegirls we all know. The only difference is that Netta’s realness and ability to speak truth to power has taken her from obscurity to a high level of visibility. She has 82,000 Twitter followers, including *Selma* filmmaker Ava DuVernay, who sent her a private message asking if she needed anything after being arrested during a sit-in at the federal courthouse in St. Louis. Even the woman who birthed Beyoncé and Solange, Mrs. Tina Lawson, thanked her for her activism, encouraging her to keep going.

Elzie rose to prominence in 2014 as one of the faces of the Ferguson uprising, which led to profiles in *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* magazine and an appearance on MSNBC as a voice of the new civil rights movement. Since then she has met with presidential hopefuls Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders and had a seat at the table with U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch to discuss Campaign Zero—the ten-point solution to end police violence that Elzie helped develop.

But there have been sacrifices, for sure. “When Mike [Michael Brown, Jr.] was killed, I would be out protesting on West Florissant and get calls about a job,” Elzie says. “I made a decision to ignore all calls and I kept believing that this is what I should be doing. Yes, I’m broke. It’s not fun not knowing how you’ll pay your bills. I’m hoping the universe shows me some favor.” You can find Elzie in a sea of protesters and supporters across the country, including the Mizzou sit-ins, where she helped call out bias against Black students at predominantly White colleges and universities, last November.

But she’s learned that movement work can be taxing, and without the backing of her mother, who passed away in 2014, it can be extremely lonely. Although she’s an admitted introvert, Elzie surrounds herself with a tight-knit circle of Black women and men who serve as her support system. “I have an amazing group of friends, like my friends before the movement started, and friends I’ve made through being a protester.” She feels a special affinity for fellow activist DeRay McKesson. “I never thought he would be one of my best friends. We were in jail together. I think that’s one of our peak moments because I was just like, ‘I’m not moving if he’s not moving.’”

Elzie’s focus right now is on continuing her work on Campaign Zero and Mapping the Police, including planning for a presidential town hall. Through it all she’s learned that she cannot be all things to all people. “I’m a protester.... I’m not speaking for every Black woman. I’m not speaking for every Black person. I’m one of the thousands in the movement. It’s bigger than me. It’s bigger than any individual. It’s bigger than any organization. The movement’s still going to be here even if we disappear tomorrow.”



**Elzie has dedicated herself to being a voice in the Black Lives Matter movement.**

HAIR: NEEKO/TRACEY MATTINGLY. MAKEUP: BRANDY ALLEN/PIPPANY ARTIST GROUP. INC. INSET: WALLY SKALUP/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES



“

*I kept believing  
that this is  
what I should  
be doing... I'm  
a protester.”*

On previous page:  
Shahidi wears a  
**Moschino** reflector paillette dress,  
**Melody Ehsani** earrings and **AGL Attilio Giusti Leombruni** patent oxfords.

This page: On Elzie:  
a **Lane Bryant** draped jacket, cami and fringe skirt,  
**Fallon** earrings and “TBar” ring, and **Melinda Maria** “Paige” cocktail and “Mia” rings. Cuff, stylist’s own. ▷

“

***I pulled [my inspiration] from Black women in my life who are strong, determined and leaders.”***

Teyonah wears a **5:31 Jérôme** sequin dress, **Vita Fede** pearl stud hoops, **Melody Ehsani** “North Star” ring, **Rachel Katz Jewelry** dagger ring and **Marcia Moran** 3 stone ring.

For clothing details, see Where to Buy.

HAIR: JAMIKA WILSON/EPHANY ARTIST GROUP, INC. MAKEUP: UZO FOR NARS COSMETICS / TRACEY MATTINGLY. MANICURE FOR ALL: CHAUN PETH AND NOEMI DIAZ/EMANEL DICTION.



# Teyonah Parris ✨

**DEEP-BROWN BLACK GIRLS WITH CURLY COILS ARE RARELY LEADING LADIES. TEYONAH PARRIS KNOWS THIS.** With her fluffy fro, full lips, defined nose and womanly curves front and center in the controversial Spike Lee film *Chi-Raq*, Parris joins the exclusive sorority of fellow chocolate leads Viola Davis, Gabourey Sidibe and Adepero Oduye, who all boldly remind Hollywood that sisters come in assorted flavors. Less than 24 hours after the film's release, she's already in Savannah filming her next project. And soon she'll resume shooting season three of Starz's *Survivor's Remorse*, in which she stars as Missy, the witty, sophisticated wife of an NBA sports manager.

In *Chi-Raq*, Lee's modern take on the famous Greek comedy by Aristophanes, Parris manages to be both spellbinding and titillating, commanding the screen in a glistening gold body chain. Lee knew he wanted the actress to play Lysistrata after seeing her performance in *Dear White People* as Coco, the blue-contact-lens-wearing, weave-flaunting antithesis of Sam (played by actress Tessa Thompson) who, in the film, wanted little to do with the Black issues on campus. By contrast, powerful Black women, Parris says, served as her muses for her role. "I researched Pam Grier; I used Assata and Michelle Obama because in *Chi-Raq* we pull from so many different genres," she says with a precise southern drawl. "I pulled from Black women in my life who are strong, determined and leaders."

Growing up in Hopkins, South Carolina, with her parents and two brothers, Parris remembers spending summers in the country on acres of land, cutting grass and feeding the chickens. You can hear the immense pride in her voice in proclaiming her to be a "country gal." But from an early age she had dreams of leaving those southern roots to shine in front of the camera. Her first on-screen job was *How Do You Know* opposite Reese Witherspoon, a role she booked the day she graduated from The Juilliard School.

Once in L.A., Parris quickly learned that conquering Hollywood wouldn't be easy. "For a whole year I didn't get even a callback. I didn't book anything," she says through laughter. "My feelings were so hurt." It was getting the role of Dawn Chambers on the critically acclaimed *Mad Men* that kept her from heading back East. Dawn was the fictitious advertising agency's first Black employee, and Parris subsequently became the show's first recurring Black costar.

Parris, 28, attributes her cinematic success to relinquishing control to God. At this pivotal moment of the Black girl, she is happy playing her part in images showing us in all our glory. And she's bringing the whole squad along, because at her core, that's just who she is. "When I get an audition I'm texting [my girls], 'Hey, did you get this audition? Because you would be perfect for it. They're calling me in so you should go in,'" she says. "That's how I operate and I feel good operating like that."



Parris, who led Spike Lee's satire *Chi-Raq*, costarred with John Cusack.

**Bené Viera** (@beneviera) profiled Shonda Rhimes and her Shondaland casts for ESSENCE last October. Viera lives in Brooklyn.



**Ade Samuel** (@adesamuel) is a Los Angeles-based stylist, who describes her fashion sensibility as "quirky, modern and fresh." Her work has been featured in *Vogue*, *Teen Vogue*, *W*, *Elle*, *Glamour* and *CR Fashion Book*.



# ...ALSO ON OUR RADAR

**1. WILLOW SMITH** The 15-year-old Smith gives life to the #carefreeblackgirl in all of us. The singer pushes boundaries, and has carved out a unique space of her own.

**2. AJA NAOMI KING** She used to freeze up in auditions as a kid. Lucky for us, King, 31, overcame stage fright and now wows as Michaela in *How to Get Away With Murder*.

**3. FKA TWIGS** This classically trained British dancer burst onto the music scene in 2012 with her debut, *EPI*. Since then, Twigs, 28, has held our attention with her eclectic style and sound.

**4. KEKE PALMER** We love watching the 22-year-old Palmer—our homegirl in our head—soar from one career milestone (youngest talk-show host in history) to the next (first Black *Cinderella* on Broadway).

**5. ZENDAYA** If we were to crown anyone queen of the “clap back,” it would be 19-year-old Zendaya. We love that she raises her voice and unapologetically celebrates her Blackness at every turn.

**6. QUVENZHANÉ WALLIS** Since scoring an Oscar nod at the age of 9 (!), Wallis hasn't slowed down. Now 12, and the face of Armani Junior, she most recently inked a four-book publishing deal.



## Celebs ✨

1. BENNETT RAGLIN/BET/GETTY IMAGES. 2. MICHAEL KOVAC/GETTY IMAGES FOR ELLE/HEARTS ON FIRE. 3. SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE. 4. AXELLE/BAUER-GRIFFIN/FILMMAGIC. 5. JON KOPALOFF/FILMMAGIC. 6. JASON LAYERIS/FILM MAGIC.

1. ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES. 2. LINATO ZHANG/GETTY IMAGES. 3. HARRY HOW/GETTY IMAGES. 4. ADAM PRETTY/FIFA/FIFA VIA GETTY IMAGES. 5. ALEX LIVESEY/GETTY IMAGES.



**1. MO'NE DAVIS** A pitch from Davis puts competitors her age to shame: The 14-year-old is the first girl to pitch a shutout in the Little League World Series. Her #blackgirlmagic is so undeniable, Disney plans on making her story into a movie.

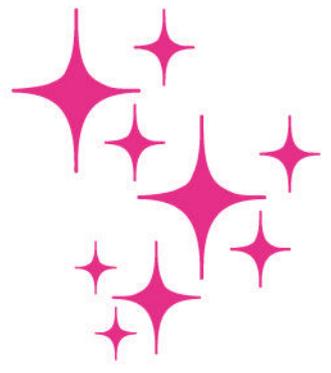
**2. SIMONE BILES** In her 13-year career as a gymnast, Biles, 18, has racked up ten gold World Championship medals—more than any other female athlete in her sport. Next up for Biles? The Summer Olympics.

**3. GABBY DOUGLAS** The 20-year-old gymnast made Olympic history at the 2012 Games when she became the first Black woman to win the Individual All-Around title.

**4. SYDNEY LEROUX DWYER** Who could forget the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team's epic World Cup win last summer? The passionate Dwyer, 25, was key in her team's victory.

**5. ALIA ATKINSON** Move over, Michael Phelps. Atkinson is the first Black woman to win a world swimming title: The Jamaican swam the 100m breaststroke in 1 minute, 2.36 seconds. ▶

# Athletes





# Activists ✨

**1. BRITTANY FERRELL AND ALEXIS TEMPLETON**  
This wife and wife duo takes #blacklove to new levels—the two met and married after protesting in Ferguson. Ferrell, 27, and Templeton, 22, cofounded Millennial Activists United, a youth-led coalition that empowers communities.

**2. JESSICA BYRD** After working to recruit African-American women to run for political office with super PAC Emily's List, Byrd, 28, branched out on her own to create Three Point Strategies—a consulting firm devoted to diverse candidate recruitment.

**3. BREE NEWSOME** Need something done? Send a Black woman to do it. Newsome, 30, embodied this mantra when she scaled a pole on the grounds of the South Carolina statehouse and took down the Confederate flag—a revolutionary act of defiance.

**4. CLARE BYARUGABA** The impassioned LGBT rights advocate risks her life daily—her homeland is notoriously anti-LGBT. But that hasn't deterred the 28-year-old co-coordinator of Uganda's Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law.

1. AARON BANKS; 2. ELLI WEIR KAPLAN; 3. COURTESY OF COMEDY CENTRAL; 4. MARC BRYAN BROWN/WIREIMAGE



### 1. HELEN OYEYEMI

The novelist wrote her first book at 18, and was named one of *Granta's* Best Young British Writers. Look out for her short-story collection, *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* (Riverhead).

### 2. RUJEKO HOCKLEY

As assistant curator of contemporary art at the Brooklyn Museum, Hockley is partially responsible for bringing voices from the African diaspora, such as Sanford Biggers, to the forefront.

## Women of the Arts

### 3. KASHMIR THOMPSON

The Cleveland-born graphic designer, 26, turned her hobby into a business, giving us Black culture-centric accessories our lives were lacking. The cast of *Martin* on a pillow? Grace Jones on a clutch? Yes, please!

### 4. LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER

The 34-year-old photographer-professor was awarded a \$625,000 MacArthur Genius Grant to support her project documenting her family's impoverished Pennsylvania hometown.

### 5. ALLISON JANAE

**HAMILTON** The visual artist, 31, blends fiction and reality in her multimedia work by using taxidermy to create one-of-a-kind pieces.

### 6. NJIDEKA AKUNYILI

**CROSBY** The Nigerian-born Akunyili Crosby paints large-scale pieces that depict modern African and American domestic scenes. ▷





**1. ALEALI MAY** The 23-year-old image consultant has worked with celebs such as Kanye and Kendrick, and has also found time to launch a modeling career and a lifestyle blog.

**2. RILEY MONTANA** After working low-wage jobs in L.A. to support herself while pursuing a career in modeling, Montana got a break when she moved to NYC and booked a Givenchy campaign.

**3. AURORA JAMES** In 2013, James founded shoe company Brother Vellies. She won a \$300,000 grant from the CFDA (Council of Fashion Designers of America)/*Vogue* Fashion Fund last year.

# Fashion & Beauty Mavens

**4. AYA JONES** Hailing from the City of Light, Jones never planned on being a model. But since being discovered on the Rue de Rivoli, she has made strides in the fashion world: Last year, she appeared in more than 50 shows.

**5. MALAIKA FIRTH** In 2013, Kenya-born, England-raised Firth became the first Black model in 20 years to star in a Prada campaign. (Queen Naomi came before her, naturally.)

**6. LEONA "BINX" WALTON** This 19-year-old Tennessee native sashayed down the runway in an impressive 27 shows—from Chanel to Prada—in the 2014 Spring/Summer season.



1. JERRITT CLARK/GETTY IMAGES. 2. JACOPO RAULE/GETTY IMAGES. 3. ASSOCIATED PRESS. 4. VICTOR VIRGILE/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES. 5. ESTHER HORVATH/FILMMAGIC. 6. VICTOR VIRGILE/GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

THE VOICES: 1. DONATO SARDELLA/GETTY IMAGES FOR MAX MARA. 2. ASTRID STAWIARZ/GETTY IMAGES FOR STELLA ADLER STUDIO. STUDIO OF ACTING. TECH STARS: 1. NEILSON BARNARD/GETTY IMAGES FOR GREY GOOSE. 2. COURTNEY OF SUBJECT. 3. SAM TEICH/LEVO LEAGUE.



# The Voices ✨

# ✨ Tech Stars ✨

**1. AURORA PERRINEAU**  
The daughter of actor Harold Perrineau snagged a major role as Shana Elmsford in the remake of 1980's fave *Jem and the Holograms*.

**2. DANIELLE BROOKS**  
There's much more to Brooks, 26, than her larger-than-life character Taystee in *Orange Is the New Black*. Next? The Juilliard-trained actress is in *The Angry Birds Movie*.

**1. YAMILÉE TOUSSAINT**  
In 2012, the 29-year-old founded STEM for Dance, a nonprofit that uses dance to build girls' self-esteem and boost their STEM confidence.

**2. SARAH KUNST** This philanthropic investor, 28, launched ProDay in October. With this fitness app, you can train like your favorite athletes.

**3. MACI PETERSON** Last year, Peterson, 29, developed On Second Thought, an app that allows users to recall "sent" text messages before they're delivered. □

—Compiled by Taylor Lewis and Lauren Williams