

A Treasure Within Us

A Senior Thesis

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Goals and Impact

Project Description

Behind Us Is Noise is a devised and original theatrical production, which went up in the Fall 2022 semester featuring Skylar Hertz, Reina Lebron and myself. My senior project is a collection of original devised poems that relate to beauty standards and perception. My roles in the production included playwright, actor, and co-producer. *Behind Us Is Noise* discusses the many issues that members of different marginalized groups face (i.e. Skylar faces sexism while playing golf - a male dominated sport or people assuming Reina's white when she's actually hispanic) as well as celebrating and uplifting us despite those struggles. I wanted to dig deeper and cover the experiences, thoughts and feelings from my cast and myself, about what we've been through when it relates to our own journey through the world. As a writer and an actor, I felt that it would be most appropriate that all actors played themselves since the poems addressed their personal experiences, giving us the opportunity to connect to the piece on a much deeper level.

Goals and Impact Statement

From the beginning of the process, my goal with this project was to create a piece of work that allowed me and my fellow actors to become vulnerable on stage with our experiences in regards to society's perception of us. I wanted this project to bring attention to the mental, physical, and emotional aspects of how people's perception of our appearance can warp one's own perception of themselves and how they walk through the world. Also, I wanted to give the audience an opportunity to be able to connect with the actors on stage, see their stories performed, and hear their voices uplifted. As someone who fits into several marginalized groups,

being a young queer woman of color, I've had my fair share of experiences with the people in my life that use their power and privilege to keep someone like myself suppressed. In the past, I've struggled with opening myself up and being vulnerable with others because I've dealt with people in my circle who dismissed my feelings and experiences time after time. *Behind Us Is Noise* provided a voice for us that has been silenced many times before. In and out of the rehearsal space, I wanted to create an environment and make work that gave my collaborators and I our power back from those who kept us oppressed. I really wanted to use this moment, almost as performance therapy, to build a sisterhood with Skylar and Reina who've shared similar feelings and experiences.

As a writer, my goal was to showcase my versatility and range through the use of poetry. Even though I have taken poetry classes and written poetry in the past, this project was really the first time that I could write out a fully fleshed out story that followed the journey of three young artists' experience with society's expectations of us. My inspiration came from Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and also my Fatou Diouf's adaptation *For Colored Women*, which I had the privilege to be a part of in Fall 2021 as her senior project. I wanted my piece to be different from other people's senior projects by using their real-life stories and channeling that into poetry because we don't have enough of that.

Some of the artistic challenges that I was hoping to conquer was to stay on track on making sure that each rehearsal was used effectively; that includes making sure that we covered a sufficient amount of material, balancing any rewrites alongside my studies and personal life, and also having important conversations amongst the cast and crew about the work to earn a deeper understanding of ourselves. Since I was the only playwright it was extremely difficult due to several casting and creative circumstances that my team experienced, and having to make

several changes to the script and overall story. Given the nature of my script, my director, collaborators, and myself agreed that it's pertinent to have these important conversations about the topics of sexism, body image, and race because these are still social issues that we face even to this day. My entire cast and crew was all women, we're members of multiple marginalized communities. During rehearsals, our conversations contained talks about what our words mean to us looking at it weeks and months later and why those experiences are important today.

In terms of long-term goals and plans, I think that this project will help me with my post-Purchase plans. Before this, I haven't written a full length play, let alone a devised piece of work. So coming into this, it definitely was intimidating to say the least because not only was this devised poetry but I also wrote on behalf of my collaborators which was something that brought me closer with Skylar and Reina because I saw them express a side of themselves that I wouldn't have seen otherwise. When I took Playwriting I and II, I really wrote for myself and not the intent of showing it to anyone else because I didn't feel confident in my ability as a writer. I think the initial writing process, over the past summer, has helped me build a strong foundation with my writing abilities. I've learned the importance of preparation (outlining, outlining, outlining!), making sure the story has a good flow and structure, and staying true to people's experiences while incorporating my own style. After many rewrites, my confidence in my ability had gotten stronger and better with time.

My impact goal has been consistent since the beginning of this process; I've always wanted my cast, crew, and the audience to feel a sense of intimacy with my work and form a deeper connection with us in terms of shared real-life experiences that are still presently ongoing. I wanted to do this project here and now because I felt like devised theater is something special and isn't done enough in this program. I also felt that the subject matters that were discussed had

an importance to them that would be better suited for Purchase. Even though the THP department has put on several productions that talk about racial issues within and out of the community, I wanted to take this to a deeper level. I didn't feel like I was exposed to many plays that could relate to my experiences nor did I feel connected to those plays enough to want to work on them as my senior project. When I worked on *For Colored Women* with Fatou, workshopping my poems, chants, and movement pieces alongside other women creatives that shared some of my experiences felt powerful and empowering. Even though I was playing a character, that production gave me a chance to take my work to a pre-professional level and make a meaningful story out of my experiences. When I was crafting my senior project in junior seminar, the idea I had in mind was to recreate that sense of empowerment and reclaim our experiences, as women creatives. I thought it would be easy just to do someone else's work and call it a day, but I think that devised work is something that makes the meaning of the message more powerful because it hits closer to home. Now that's not to say working on a published piece is a bad thing but it's just not the same as making your own work and performing it. I want my team to build strong relationships, have respect for each other, and for themselves as people and artists.

I wanted to do devised poetry because I think poetry opens up the opportunity to do something different, in the sense that it's lyrical and melodic without being musical theatre or songwriting. Poetry allows me to go deeper in my imagination as a writer because I'm putting more thought into not only what you say but how you say it. In general, I don't think writing should be something that's rushed just for the sake of having something to work on; and when I was writing poetry about people's personal experiences, I didn't want to make a joke out of it. When it comes to poetry, there's so many kinds of forms and shapes it can take such as

alliteration, free verse, epics, haiku's, etcetera. It's something that when done well, it can be absolutely beautiful and touching.

For the community, I want them to come to this production willing to listen, learn, and see themselves being represented and leave feeling educated, inspired, and seen. Whether that's being a member of a certain race, gender, sexuality, etc; we all have a story to share and can find something within other people's work. I wanted the audience to feel just as empowered as I did when writing my script as well as when my cast read it and performed it. I wanted people who came to see my show to open their hearts up and share that vulnerability that my cast and I shared with each other during our rehearsal process. The staging was always meant to be kept simple because I didn't want blocking to be a distraction on stage from the message of the story and I just wanted them to sit with us and listen. My hope for the audience was to leave my show feeling like their voices are amplified and they feel more empowered than they did coming in.

Research Essay

What is the Empowerment Theory?

According to Oxford Languages, empowerment is defined as the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights. As a term, the word “empowerment” originated from psychologist Julian Rappaport in 1981 and has popularized over the course of the 21st century. Now more than ever self empowerment and mental health advocacy has been on the forefront of today’s social media climate and I want to take a closer look into the empowerment theory¹ and its relationship with marginalized groups in America. How does the empowerment theory affect marginalized groups in today’s society and allow for these groups to overcome societal roadblocks? What relationship does empowerment have with beauty standards and perception in young girls and women?

The empowerment theory is mainly used in social work as a method of intervention so individuals or groups of people can be guided towards having more autonomy and control in their lives. Usually disempowerment comes through oppression and this theory seeks to give back that power to gain personal, interpersonal, and political power to create better lives. Implementing this theory requires social workers and advocates to thoroughly understand systems, policies, and practices that keep marginalized groups oppressed. There also needs to be a consideration of different perspectives, experiences, and ideas as well as asking critical questions. Those who practice tend to use a five step framework that includes: identify problems, define strengths, set goals, implement intervention, and evaluate success on a collaborative level (United Way NCA). An example of this from the Virginia Commonwealth University would be

¹ Empowerment theory seeks to empower individuals and communities to gain personal, interpersonal and political power to better their lives. This work also strives to challenge systems that hinder these groups from meeting their needs.

social workers who organize programs in which participants discuss how racism affects their lives and explore forces that support racism. Programs like these can help people unravel their internalized oppression and improve their ability to confront direct and indirect power blocks.

The empowerment theory's approach in today's climate helps develop the three main pillars of awareness in self efficacy, critical consciousness, and tool development. These pillars allow the individual to change their outer world by recognizing that it's even possible, gaining insight on the systems at play, challenging those power blocks, and putting that awareness into action through healing. Healing can take forms through sources such as therapy, advocacy, program development, or art forms like playwriting.

The Relationship Between Perception and Self Esteem in Young Girls

Body image is defined as one's own perception of their physical self that influences their thoughts, feelings, both positive and/or negative. With the recent rise of social media usage on platforms such as Instagram and Tiktok, social media exacerbates the pressures to "present yourself" through the influence of our peers in order to keep up with the ever changing beauty standards. Many women and young girls have come to believe that their lives would change for the better after they've successfully imitated their favorite celebrities and socialites. These ideals run deep on a social and psychological level because it runs a reward system where once you've reached that standard, you'll be rewarded with societal acceptance which is what a lot of this boils down to. This with the "like" system on apps like Instagram and Tiktok, the whole idea being that you share a photo and/or video of yourself and each post gets a number of likes from your followers. This can easily create a negative feedback loop of constantly trying to keep up with gaining followers and likes and the impact it has on your self worth and esteem. Teenage

girls especially are susceptible to constant comparison with their peers, feeling dissatisfied with the way their body looks, and even self harming if it extends that far.

Celebrities such as the Kardashian family have been slammed by the media and general public with reports of them using photoshop and filters to edit their Instagram selfies. Already, that raises issues of these women creating unrealistic alterations to look like something they're not. Of course since a lot of young girls don't know better, they idolize these images and internalize them, which creates high expectations within themselves to be something they're not. It encourages a "pedagogy of defect" that women see in themselves (Henriques and Patnaik). So they might go try filters/modification apps, unnecessary plastic surgery use, and esthetic benchmarking apps so they can visualize how they look with those changes. Those changes can also be as small as airbrushing which allows you to remove any imperfections such as blemishes, dark marks, acne, etc. However, it can go as far as whiten teeth, slimming waists and generally reducing sizes to fit into the accepted beauty standards. These images and ideas create a toxic idea of femininity and beauty - the main idea being that beauty equals success and place in today's world.

American sociologist, Charles Cooney, came up with the concept "the looking glass self", which you can find in his work "Human Nature in the Social Order". The concept is based on the idea of "reflected-appraisals" - a main theory in psychology about how we form opinions of ourselves (Henriques and Patnaik). The looking glass self states "that our self view forms as a result of our perception of other people's opinion of us. This idea is seen most applicable with children/teens in regards to their self esteem development. An example would be if the parents or teachers would praise a child for their academic skills which can possibly lead them to believing that their academics are linked to confidence. There's a frightening idea the theory presents and

it's that we don't have full control over how our self-esteem forms. A big chunk of the way we think of ourselves is based on the way we think the world sees us - however the silver lining is that not everyone's opinions hold the same weight. The opinions of the relationships we hold close to us (i.e. close family and friends) tend to naturally carry more weight than strangers. The same could also be applied to those who have authority or credibility and have greater leverage as well. We tend to be more sensitive to the opinions we deem important to our development and sense of self. The main takeaway from this theory is that our self esteem is formed by our social interactions, on top of our own self knowledge and how much we like/dislike ourselves.

During my senior project process, I wanted this concept of "reflected-appraisals" to play throughout the course of the play. Some of my favorite examples of this are in poems like "Area 51", "Well You Don't Look Hispanic", and "Girlfriends" because I felt like each illustrated the real experiences of the perception of others and how it forms our self view. With this production being a women-run one is also something that I want to highlight when it comes to these concepts because in one way or another, we've all experienced pressure from outsiders to "perform" a certain way based on their perception. Reina, Skylar, and I often joked that the rehearsal process felt like therapy because there was a sense of release after each rehearsal while experiencing my own healing journey concurrently.

Finding Empowerment Within Yourself and Others

A new model of self-empowerment was proposed by psychologists, which states that true empowerment must involve real world evidence of our abilities impacting our relationships and social interactions. It can't just be feeling empowered. One of the main concepts of this model is that popular culture often misrepresents personal empowerment through feeling a subjective emotion in which one feels empowered. Lauren Cattaneo & Aliya Chapman of George Mason

University proposed a model of personal empowerment, it places emphasis on the real world actions we take within our social sphere, which is described as an interactive process. Even though feeling empowered is great, applying these feelings in real world experiences, and getting results is what furthers that feeling of empowerment. An example of that would be watching a youtube video about setting boundaries with your parents for a healthier relationship, but not being firm with those boundaries or not sticking to them will keep you in the same place that you started.

When self-empowerment is achieved, you can become a model of what's possible, which can elevate individuals and even communities. You also obtain a greater capacity to contribute to their communities even through inspiring others to find their own paths to self empowerment. The relationships around you can become more caring and equitable when you seek out ways to empower others, and vice versa. It creates a greater sense of belonging in a given community when everyone is given a better chance to realize their potential and help other individuals discover their unique gifts and talents.

There's a few steps to personal empowerment, I want to highlight in the following paragraphs that I think are beneficial for people who are starting their self empowerment journeys. One of the first steps is gaining more knowledge and insight, which can be quite transformative. Sharing knowledge brings people together and comes in various forms, finding a self help book, telling people about it, and discussing those ideas to develop new understandings. These conversations can introduce different perspectives and teach people habits and ideas that help them grow in the long run. Being open about personal struggles or even hearing the stories of others takes courage which can feel liberating, validating, and empowering. Now more than

ever, access to this knowledge is getting easier to find through podcasts, websites, and daily activities. These resources act as a bridge that connects people and away from loneliness; learning about these experiences gives hope to those who feel isolated.

Sharing personal stories creates a safe space for people to resolve feelings of shame and embarrassment from their own difficult experiences. It's said that sometimes hearing someone expressing similar emotions and thoughts on an experience helps remove the stigma one has attached to a situation. Empathy is a powerful emotion that can create a meaningful and affirming experience when listening to someone else and it can empower them to find the strength to overcome those challenges. Listening to others' experience not only empowers them but makes them feel valued and heard. This further continues to encourage people to express themselves openly in their personal and professional lives.

Empowerment involves standing up for one's own rights and the rights of others. Speaking out against injustice or mistreatment can affect real change within a community or even individually, that brings greater equality to everyone, supports one's values, and can protect communities from abuse. It can be as simple as offering words of affirmation and support to those who received harsh treatment and it doesn't always require joining movements or involving oneself in acts they oppose. Words of affirmation can have a powerful impact more than many people think and acts as a form of support and comfort which is truly empowering. It lets the person know that they're supported from whatever mistreatment they received and they didn't deserve that treatment either. It can also inspire them to stand up for themselves in the future.

Although this sounds cliché, positive thinking is said to decrease stress, boost immunity, and increase a person's ability to analyze. In addition, positive thinking can support creativity and encourage people to take risks and try new things. Nurturing positive emotions send signals for the body to release serotonin - the "happiness" hormone that generates feelings of calm and euphoria. An individual would typically have more energy and their brains have heightened abilities to process information. Not only does embracing positivity empowers oneself but it frequently empowers those around them. That's not to get confused with toxic positivity² which has been proven to invalidate an experience someone is going through which leads to isolation and unhealthy coping mechanisms. In this case, finding the positives within an experience allows for the individual to process information in a healthy way. Positivity breeds positivity which provides people "The Three E's": energy, enthusiasm, and encouragement.

The last step in attaining personal empowerment is having strong support systems to help cope with life's challenges. Whether your support system is your family or you created your found family, these relationships can enhance self-esteem, ease the effects of emotional distress, and even lower a person's blood pressure. Maintaining a support of family, friends, co-workers, etc, not only creates meaningful relationships with the people in our lives but it often plays a role in achieving our goals. To develop a strong network, cast a wide net. Casting that net expands a person's access to useful information, pool their resources and skills, and increases opportunities for everyone - as long as it's reciprocal and nobody makes more withdrawals than deposits.

² Toxic positivity or positive toxicity is dysfunctional emotional management without the full acknowledgment of negative emotions, particularly anger and sadness.

Conclusion

One can create their own empowerment if they believe in the rights they befittingly deserve in life and reclaim their power to control their life. We live in a time where resources are plentiful and more easily accessible than it was before. Truly empowered people not only walk through the world empowering themselves, but that empowerment radiates to others around them,

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Reflection Essay

The Creative Process

My senior project was quite a process to say the least. It felt like I had two different experiences. Originally, my team consisted of five collaborators; Qasim, Jahnae, Skylar, Reina, and myself with the project proposed as a double-billed, double-casted performance. After the Spring 2022 semester was over, I felt very prepared with my project since my team had our full cast and we had a plan in terms of getting the script done. Since this was my first time writing a full length 20-35 page script, I really wanted to make sure that I planned accordingly. I wanted my half to have the cast contribute to the script with their experiences, my goal at the time was to make sure to do a casual interview for the cast's experience when it came to their stories about beauty standards. Interviewing the cast was rather easy for me, but transcribing them and trying to build a story out of them, at least initially, was very tough. Including myself, we had a full cast of nine actors; having to write for eight other people was definitely more challenging than I thought it was despite the stories' real experiences. Setting up the interviews and the questions was relatively easy for me because I also major in Journalism and I have wrote over twenty articles for the school's online newspaper, *The Purchase Phoenix*, during my sophomore year in quarantine. To facilitate the process, I created a google form for the cast to fill out so they had an opportunity to choose what they wanted to talk about. My collaborators at the time and I made an agreement that we should make a deadline for the script to be done by July 15, which would've given Qasim and myself who were writing each half, about a month and half to complete our respective halves. At the time, we figured that be plenty of time for the script to be done and it would give us the rest of the summer to do any necessary edits. I didn't want to wait until the last minute to write this script not only to relieve myself from the added pressure of time. When June rolled around, I had already transcribed all of the interviews and was ready to start. Transcribing

those interviews definitely took up a lot of my time and energy, but it was worth it because it made outlining and writing the script so much easier for me. With outlining, I really wanted to focus on the flow of the story. “What is the takeaway message?” or “what order of the poems will make my message most strong?” were questions that I considered. I didn’t want the poems to be lined up as trauma, trauma, trauma, and then sunshine! I wanted to have a good mix of topics discussed because I wanted to give the audience and also the actors a few breathers throughout the story. Outlining was actually fun for me because it was like seeing the “bones before the flesh” of my project and it allowed me to be creative with my poem titles. I finished my original script by the end of June. I felt relieved and proud of myself for finishing the script early.

As the school year started, my team separated due to different work ethics, and it was just Skylar, Reina and myself by the end of September. Unfortunately, work on the other side of the team wasn’t getting done in a timely fashion and all three of us felt like it was appropriate to break apart and work on our respective pieces. After many attempts of trying to re-cast and rewrite over and over and over again by the end of October, with the decision of the department of keeping it a performed piece, my cast and director felt like it was best to keep the cast to just the collaborators. We had a finalized script by the first of November to be honest, I wasn’t happy with the way this situation was handled, and my collaborators and director felt the same way.

After the dust finally settled and it was time to continue working on the performance, there was a sense of unity amongst my cast and crew with the goal of getting our project done as soon as possible. We had our rehearsals Wednesdays (3-5PM) and Fridays (12-1:30PM) during rehearsals, we took about two to three poems to do some table work in. I was very grateful to work with Alyssa Bernstein as my director because she really understood how to decode the

message beneath the words. She's also part of a few minority groups as well; being a Jewish, Chinese young woman, she was able to relate about being marginalized too. During those table reads, we would do a cold read of each poem and go through each section of them to gain a deeper understanding of why we said the things we did. Each section had a variety of topics so on a given rehearsal, we would talk about feeling bullied, sexism in sports, and society assuming Reina is white. Alyssa would ask the primary person questions such as "where did this line come from?" and "thinking about this line now, how do you feel looking back at that moment?" There was this running joke amongst the cast that these table reads felt like therapy. At some point, my director pointed out that if we had the opportunity to have some elements of this performance be a staged reading, it would have allowed us to continue to explore more topics and themes to talk about but unfortunately that wasn't the case as we were also on a time constraint. Regardless, I wanted to give credit where credit is due because my director really dug into the root of the issues being expressed with each poem and it made reading it again feel and sound much stronger the second, fifth, and tenth time. Having the chance to dissect what each line and even certain words made me think about why I chose those words.

Achieving Goals and Impact

I think in certain aspects I have achieved my goals in the statement section. Obviously, due to the many changes my team has experienced, those goals had to change as well because they were written before I knew those changes were to happen. When it came to my goals as a writer, I think I achieved the goals I set for myself in terms of giving my cast and myself to share vulnerability with each other on stage. I consider the script I wrote to be one of the best pieces of work I wrote during my college career and it gives me the confidence I need to continue writing. After my performance, a lot of people came up to me and complimented me on writing skills;

ranging from “I really connect with when you said XYZ”, “I have dealt with body image issues when I was younger as well”, to “many people made assumptions about my ethnicity too.” I think hearing that from members of the audience really confirmed with me that the message landed more than I ever thought they could. I also felt like through my writing, I was able to do some internal healing as well in my own personal life, making peace with the idea that I don’t have to look, think, or be a certain way for someone to like me; I have to like me for me and if I want to change myself, it should be for the betterment of me and not for anyone else. Through the rehearsal process, I think my relationship with Reina and Skylar, but especially Skylar, has gotten so much stronger because we went through this together. There was a strong sense of empowerment and reclaiming back our power from those who tried to keep us oppressed within and out of this production process; and the audience felt that too through the power of our words. Sure, I wish that the performance part could’ve been more fulfilling if we didn’t have the pressure we had but I’m just glad this is something that we could put behind us.

The Learned Experience

The lesson I took out of this experience is to make sure to work with people who have similar work ethic and vision as you and stand in what you believe in, even if that makes other people uncomfortable or upset. Sometimes, I think about the very beginning of this process and how a certain chain of events happened and how unfortunate that it happened the way it did. I think that when you’re making a performance piece for a grade that requires collaboration with your classmates, it’s easy to get caught up about working with other people in the development stage. I didn’t have any issues working with Skylar or Reina because we all stay on top of our stuff and I believe that we share similar ways of thinking, work ethics, and our personalities mesh well with each other. I think that during junior seminar, if us and our original collaborators

really sat down and had a serious conversation about how we go about getting our work done, it would have saved all of us, the frustration, stress, and time wasted during the first few months of the semester. Also, I think with this process, I've learned to advocate and stand up for myself more towards people in places of authority. That was something that I've struggled with for a long time; being a pushover and being scared to express my feelings and needs. It's okay if we don't see eye to eye but I've learned that it's my right to speak up for myself if I don't agree with said people. We can agree to disagree, come to a middle ground, and move on without it having to be a "one way or the highway" kind of deal. But hey, that's just me! Anyways, I wish this process could've been more enjoyable for my cast and crew but as mentioned earlier, I'm glad this is an experience that I can put in the past.

Finalized Version of Behind Us is Noise

Behind Us Is Noise

Synopsis and Credits:

Devised by Anna Fofana, Reina Lebron and Skylar Hertz

Poems Written and Arranged by Anna Fofana

Directed by Alyssa Bernstein

Stage Managed by Molly Mead

Time: The Present

Synopsis:

This production is a play that discusses the many issues that members of different marginalized groups face as well as celebrating and uplifting us despite those struggles. This is a collection of original devised poems that relate to beauty standards in said communities. From hair, body image, and womanhood this play covers experiences, thoughts and feelings from the cast about what they've been through when it relates to their own journey.

Act 1, Scene 1

“Media Magic”

Anna Fofana and Reina Lebron

Reina: There’s no shortage of the ever changing beauty standards being forced fed to someone like me. Every few years, the industry tells us which bodies are in style and which are not. Reducing our bodies to nothing but a trend, there will always be someone out there who will strive to achieve a goal that will always be unobtainable.

Anna: Just when you feel like you’re about to touch gold, you end up winning silver or bronze time after time again. We are simply just pieces in a twisted game of chess. Little by little, more people are becoming caricatures of an hourglass body like they were made by a kid who first learned to use playdoh.

Reina: Women and girls alike flood the doctors office, trying to mimic what they saw online, believing that what they’re getting is unlike the others before. It’s so easy how delusion can warp the mind. So quickly, a person feeds this with the idea that once they achieve the ideal conceptualization, they can finally rest.

Anna: During that quiet period, little bits and pieces of you get picked apart in front of you by none other than delusion itself. Greeting you like an old friend with coded ill-intention, they start to tell you other little things that you can improve about yourself.

Reina: You start to become so ill and wrapped up in an image being sold behind a counter which, just like anything else, loses its value overtime. Just for that image all together to be completely different, becoming worthless just in time for a new image to be sold on the front cover.

Anna: This image being none other than what we already had from the start. Irony always has a funny way of teaching you a lesson. After putting oneself through hell and back trying to alter an image of myself that didn’t quite align at this time.

Reina: However, the power is always in our hands as long as we claim that power and stay in it. It’s about time that we use that power once and for all to demolish a system that keeps us repressed under a standard that keeps us in the shackles of our own mind.

“Well You Don’t Look Hispanic!”

Reina Lebron

Take a look at me
Which ethnicity do you think I would be?
Would any of you be surprised if I told you I’m Hispanic?

I'm really asking

Ever since I was 12, people often asked me where I was from
With pride, I'd tell them Puerto Rico, born right under the sun
They would take another look at me and ask "really?"
As if I'm some little kid telling them something silly

There's this assumption that there's only one type of Hispanic
What does it mean that there can only be one type?
Erasing, diminishing, abolishing and taking away my stripes
All because of people who think and say that I look white
Just because my eyes are a little light
And my skin is fair and my lips are rosy
Man, people really swear and start being nosy

This may sound obvious but not all Hispanics look the same
Not all of us are born with caramel skin and dark brown eyes
And that doesn't give you the right to pass upon any shame
Just because you're embarrassed from your own surprise
Being Hispanic means that we come in different shades, hair textures and facial features
Some of us have more melanin, some of us have light eyes or even freckles but none of us are
creatures

What I don't appreciate is everyone's need to convince me of who I am
I think that I'm getting to a point where I just don't give a damn
As people say opinions are like assholes, everybody has one
I've been taking them from everyone else and now I'm just done

"Area 51"

Anna Fofana

I never realized how many things you can dislike about yourself
I guess none of us do until other people start pointing it out
From my appearance to the way I held a room there's too many to count
My peers would comment, point and laugh amongst each other
As I awkwardly stood around having a hard time trying to recover

I'll admit that I wasn't a fashionista, a dermatologist or a model
I was just a kid whose self care techniques were simply just awful
How can you sit there and just judge someone with so much disdain?
And cause them so many tearful nights because they're in so much pain
I was a prisoner in my mind thinking that this was a punishment I wouldn't be free of
I was held captive in my heart feeling like I didn't deserve love
And I felt trapped in my body convinced that I'm something that I was not

Believing that I would be a Queen B once I got hot
My self worth and respect for myself was at an all time low
As I always kept thinking that I had nothing more to show

Walking around with my head down feeling like I wasn't beautiful
Taking insult and harsh words from people who were nothing but juvenile
I would see the pretty girls and admire their beauty, craving to earn some acceptance
Constantly questioning if there was anything I can do to rid of my feeling of worthlessness
They say that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never hurt me"
Well if that was true, then why do these words constantly disturb me?

"Gringo Girls"

Skylar Hertz

I remember being back in class right after spring break
Fresh back from the waves and a sun tan still on my face
And I look around to all of the other girls like me
From box braids to cornrows, they came with their hair laid

"How can they even go out like this?"
"Wouldn't they feel embarrassed or ashamed?"
I thought a lot about how silly they looked
Wearing a hairstyle that isn't even for them

Those girls for their hair strains to adjust and take form
Pulling and pricking their edges to this burning sensation
But they would excuse it off as to why it's okay as think that hairstyle is a trend that will go away

"You're Not a Virtuoso in Beauty"

Skylar Hertz and Reina Lebron

Reina: If someone with coily hair came in what would you do? Would you be able to do their hair? Would you be able to provide them your services?

Skylar: Those are all of the questions I ask my boss and coworkers at my job at the hair salon. I was curious to see if they would be able to work on Black hair. None of them seem to know what to do if a situation like that were to happen. None of them had the proper education or training to be able to properly handle all hair types.

Reina: I have gone to salons that had White owners and hairstylists who didn't know jack about working with my hair. Everytime my appointment was over, without doubt, I would look worse than when I came in.

Skylar: Now you might look at me and think, “What does a Jewish girl from Long Island know about Black hair?”

Reina: Why is it almost impossible for any of you to get it right? I hate that I have to cross my fingers and pray that things turn out alright. But, here I am, left with another disappointment that came out as a fuzz, a poof and filled with frizz.

Skylar: As a hair salon assistant, I wasn’t given any tips on what to do or how to handle curly hair because all hair was treated as a one and done deal. I see this all the time with other hair stylists and it’s not really taught in beauty school either

Reina: Most of you don’t understand what it really takes to do my hair. It’s led to countless instances where I was embarrassed where I wanted to walk outside because I knew my hair looked bad. It was sad to see the White woman next to me look fabulous but when I looked in the mirror, all I saw was a mess.

Skylar: I witnessed first hand, the systematic issues behind the hair industry from the other side. I’ve also witnessed the beauty of your hair, seeing the process it takes for it to get done and how your hair has so many other forms to take on.

Reina: Lord knows I’ve had my fair share of bad experiences getting my hair done at the salon. Our hair is absolutely beautiful and it’s a necessity that this industry learns to care and nurture every type of hair. Something has to change.

Both: Rather than posing the question of: What kind of training did you receive? The question should be: What type of training didn’t you receive?

Act 1, Scene 2

“Pretty Passes”

Reina Lebron

I’ve had one person tell me “How can you have gone through anything bad in life, you're beautiful!”

Pretty privilege is defined as the association of beauty with talent, intelligence, social success and health

People automatically judge my character along with my looks due to my attractiveness

They think to themselves that my talent is associated with my attractiveness

They think I can’t play basketball tough or rough because I don’t want to mess up my face

Well none of that is true

I put my all in all the things I’m passionate about

It helps me build my work ethic as a player and a creative
Some people would much rather just give me free passes than hear me out

“Divine Feminine Energy”

Anna Fofana

Growing up, I’ve never really thought about feminine or masculine energy
Or how it relates to the way I walk through the world and carry myself
I just thought people were the way they were
As a child, subconsciously, I built a protective barrier around my emotions
Feeling like my feelings were prepared to be packaged and compressed
From an environment where I adsorbed and absorbed with nowhere to go
Buckle up kid, you have a lot of unlearning to do

Over the summer, I came across a video talking about feminine energy
I remember the “get in here, get in here, get in here, darling” from none other than Malcolm “MJ”
Harris himself

As two “girlfriends” sit virtually together, sip our tea and talk about embracing your femininity
Several videos in, I’ve learned way more about myself than I ever thought I would
I’ve learned that it’s okay to be emotional and vulnerable; seriously it really is!
I’ve also learned that I don’t have to always live up to the hype of being some sort of character

As of recently, I’ve been doing a lot of reflecting and some serious soul searching
Knowing what I know now, I didn’t have any boundaries with the people around me
I was always afraid of expressing my emotions, that it would make them walk out of my life
However, I also know that that’s okay and that you have to give people the choice to do that
Sometimes the people in your life will disappoint you and that’s always okay too

“She Takes Sports”

Skylar Hertz and Reina Lebron

Skylar: Over the past year or so, I got into playing golf, courtesy of my boyfriend. The big
reason I don’t play it as much is because of the old creepy White guys everywhere, it’s horrible.
It’s the most misogynistic sport in all of history.

Reina: In terms of being an athlete I would get a kick out of people being surprised that I play
basketball. If I go to the park and pick up a basketball game usually there’s no other women
playing so I would play with a bunch of men.

Skylar: The men typically go first, no ladies first here, and during the summer which is golf
season, I’m expected to wear those dainty little skirts and collars. Usually they’re kind of tight
and not modest.

Reina: If I went to a basketball game in the park, I would hear a lot of comments such as “she must play college basketball” or “she’s nice”. If I did something to another guy they would say “oh you crossed over and got faked by a girl”. There’s so much shock when a girl can play sports.

Skylar: People would line up behind the first t-box and when I would get up there I would feel all those eyes staring at me when I took my swing. It’s different when I’m on stage but with golf I know their eyes are roaming over me.

Reina: There’s an assumption that I’m just a pretty face which is something I would get from playing in the parks. Even my coaches didn’t take me seriously. They just see me for face value and of course these coaches are men.

Skylar: I also know that if I spoof the shot, they’ll have something to say about it. The pressure for me to do well is through the roof in comparison to my boyfriend who feels no pressure; it’s one, two, three go.

Reina: In basketball I’ve gotten a lot of this shit talk from others who want to go hard on me because they think I can’t handle it or that I’m dainty. Sometimes with men, they would take it easy on me because they think I can’t handle it just for me to out smoke them, no cap!

Skylar: With golf, you play in a foursome and sometimes me and my boyfriend would join another group of two if we had no one to play with, usually with two older guys. Those guys would always try to explain to me how to swing a golf ball and feel like they’re doing something. They try to be like “let me teach you how to play golf sweetheart”.

Reina: Back to my coach, he had no confidence in my abilities at all. If I would tell my coach something now, I would say that he doesn’t know how to train me properly because he didn’t have faith in me.

Skylar: I fish now and I’m on a mission to reclaim all the White people sports so I can spook people that a woman can play them. With fishing, it’s a much more inclusive community, surprisingly. I see many more different types of people out on the piers; people of all different races, gender and ages having a good time. Everyone wants to catch food.

“For Matilda”

Anna Fofana

“Listen, you little wiseacre
I’m right and you’re wrong,
I’m big and you’re small,
and there’s nothing you can do about it”
As children, we’re taught to respect and listen to our elders

Conditioned to believe that everything they say goes without questions, comments, or concerns

Given that if you break these rules, you will be punished mercilessly and put in the chokie

The walls are getting tighter and my breath is getting sharp

Caution, make sure to thread carefully, we're in uncharted territory

You smile at me and tell me how much you understand through your fake concern

"well fuck you! you have failed me, so fuck you!"

Is what I wish I can say, as I clench my jaw and grit my teeth to spit out a defeated "okay"

sometimes the people who you think have your best interest at heart, fail you

Time after time again, you've proven to me that you're an imposter

I've learned that sometimes you can't trust the authority around you

Likewise to young Matilda, I've come to realize that early on in my life

Even though she was only six and a half, not four or five, she was wise beyond her years

Not only that, but she taught me some badass lessons on the way as too

Almost 21 is a lot older than six but authoritative abuse stops at no one, adult or child

Throughout her journey, the youngest wormwood has shown immense strength

The strength to stand up for yourself against all odds, no matter what kind of abuse you're under

Through the power of self-believe, hope and resilience, I'm still learning to come up on my own

Even if that means facing head on with people who are utterly bad to the bone

Because I pray on those who prey on me

"America's Next Top Model"

Reina Lebron

As the saying goes sex sells, sex always sell

In the modeling industry, your body is literally being used a product

Even though people want to believe that this industry is becoming more inclusive

The truth of the matter is: it's not

I don't want to be the bearer of bad news or rain on anyone's parade but that's the truth

If you don't fit into the shallow cup of what is considered "sexy" or "beautiful"

Then make like Rupaul Charles and sashay away

I've been told that I have "Anglo" features
That these features are the reason why I've been picked by modeling industries
They prioritize being skinny and me being Latina even though that has nothing to do with
my modeling
That's not the reason why I came into this industry at all
And don't even get me started on the hair stories I've heard from other models

They have told me stories where they've had to get their hair done themselves before going
to shoots or casting
All because the hair stylist on set couldn't do their curly hair
It's quite sad and pathetic that we would have to still keep facing this issue
After finally thinking to yourself, "Oh now they're opening it up to all types of people!"
But still, there's this fine line between being white and being black
On top of dealing with hairstylists that don't even know how to do hair other than the white
standard

Act 1, Scene 3

"I'm That Girl"

Anna Fofana

I took a walk across campus this afternoon
I've been listening to the songs "I'm That Girl" and "Break My Soul"
By none other than Beyonce herself; thinking about joining her in the Renaissance era
I've been thinking lately more and more about the person I want to be in the future
I think it's finally time to admit to myself that I'm living the life I really want
Instead of trying to shelter the person who I truly want to be
I don't think I've really allowed myself to fully believe in what I'm capable of
I've been the type of person who never settled on just wanting one thing in life
For the longest time, I was by biggest deterrent; I would always wash away my dreams
It's my senior year, I know that I don't have that much time before I have to become an adult
I've come to my senses and realized that also it's okay to be dynamic
I've also realized that I have to be my own best friend in this process, even of that path is alone
I'll come out the other end being my absolute best version of myself

"The Glass Slipper"

Reina Lebron

I've asked my other Latina friends if they knew a good hairstylist
I couldn't waltz into a White hair salon on 5th ave because they wouldn't get it
And I can't deal with being embarrassed again

They'd point me to the other Hispanic women on the block
Or even Black women who can work with me
One by one, I would test out each salon to see if the glass slipper fits
Sometimes it would barely fit me and sometimes it was too much for me at once
In some cases, it wouldn't fit me at all and I was left disappointed
After a long time of searching, I finally found the Prince Charming to my Cinderella
You wouldn't believe how elated I was that
I consider my hairstylist to be my friend because she gets me
The shoe finally fit and we lived happily ever for the past three years

"Girlfriends"

Reina Lebron, Skylar Hertz, and Anna Fofana

Reina: I walk through the world thinking about this one song, "This Is A Man's World", and I think about how I can be the best version of woman I can be. When you become a woman, you have new responsibilities. You're navigating and seeing life differently, now that you're in control.

Skylar: Empowerment to me looks like lifting people up and being on top of your shit. For me I had to learn how to do a lot of my own things when I was younger and it made me feel ready to brace myself for what the world out there had to throw at me.

Anna: Empowered people empower others. It's something I wished I told my teenage self. We live in a world where it's easy to tear each other down, especially in a girl world where it's like a lion's den.

Reina: I want to go outside feeling good about myself, all the time. A lot of people think that when you're in your own skin, you're showing off for them when it's not for them, it's for you. It's just about being comfortable with yourself.

Skylar: I would tell my younger self to stop doing shit for men. I was thinking about this the other day and I couldn't believe the amount of hours I would put for these dirtbags. I used to shave my arms and do my entire face of makeup for no reason.

Anna: Growing up, I sometimes felt like I had to compete with the guys in my life because they would think I was an easy target to verbally come after me. The crazy part was that, for the most part, I would let them because I didn't have any confidence in myself to stand up for myself or not let that take any of my femininity.

Reina: I've thought a lot about what my future would look like for me. Working with other women creatives makes me feel like I'm doing a justice, not just for myself but for them as well, having them share their story and be able to have that opportunity. It gives me fulfillment and purpose; it's truly a beautiful thing.

Skylar: I did all of that until she got with my current boyfriend, that's when I finally stopped doing that shit. You don't have to do all that bullshit unless you want to because they don't deserve that.

Anna: If I were to give my younger self some advice, I would say to never ever let anybody let you give them your power. Empowerment comes from within and it starts with your mindset. You have to show up for yourself and to not place that responsibility on a bum. Especially some corny ass mofo who isn't even that cute, period.

Reina: Empowerment for me means having my independence. Having something of my own and not falling on someone else to get things done. I want to leave my mark on this world in whatever way that is. Being a woman is such a big thing; we had to fight for rights. That's not to say that men don't mean anything but it's harder for us.

Skylar: Another thing I would add is to not take shit from people who are in places of authority over you. Just because they are doesn't mean that they're right and you have the right to speak out against that shit. Power is meant to be shared.

Anna: A wise man once said, with great power comes great responsibility. Falling into the wrong hands and power can become a dangerous thing. Therefore I refuse to let those in power throw my off of my feet due to their self righteous.

Reina: A piece of advice I would tell my younger self that she's enough and they will amount to things in life so just keep looking and walking at the end of the tunnel. Trust me, I promise that you'll find something beautiful and beyond what you ever could imagine.

“Beauty Beneath the Braids”

Skylar Hertz

When I was a kid, I had this friend who got her hair done
She asked me to come with her and I said “yes”
“Are you sure?” She asked
“Yeah, I’m sure.” I replied
We both entered the braiding salon
Little strings of hair on the floor greet us as we take a seat

Five hours
I sat next to her for five hours as each strand of hair got made into an individual braid
And it was beautiful
I didn't expect to sit there for five hours but looking back I didn't care
That moment truly showed me the process it takes that goes into her hair
The amount of effort and time it takes to transform her hair to something completely different
And not just different but something magical

All I can think at the end of it was “wow”

“A Love To Myself”

Anna Fofana

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I think about the girl who I used to be five years ago
She used to walk through the world with a chip on her shoulder believing the lies that she would
say about herself
Putting the needs of others ahead of her own and pouring from an empty cup into people who
didn't give a fuck

For so long, I hated myself.
I hated the way I walked, I hated the way I talked and I hated the way I looked.
I felt so pressured to look a certain way, think a certain way and be a certain way
Investing so much time and energy into what I thought other people would want out of me
Without realizing that I am the only one responsible for driving the car of my life

I need to do whatever it takes to make sure that I live a life that is authentically made for me
Instead of living an artificial life for the sake of getting artificial attention
I'm not saying that I won't ever give and pour into other people
But what I am saying is that, moving forward, I want to live my life with the goal of being my
best self
Because everything else behind me is just noise