

I. To put it plainly:

Communication extends far beyond the realm of what takes place in college classrooms, what's read in textbooks, and is lauded by the academy. To be in conversation with someone else can be a head nod as you pass them by, a wink or smile in the direction of the elderly lady you see on your daily commute. Writing has always been my primary tool of communicating with the world. For as long as I can remember I would be gripping gel pens and scribbling in cheap notebooks. My earliest memories are sitting on the edge of my bed with my father, him teaching me to read and write. I was about three or so.

hat. rat. bat. cat.

It was important that I cultivated literary interest early. It was through reading and writing that my ability to engage with the world at large truly began. My understanding of language came by way of rhyming and unusual syntax. A walk around the block meant overhearing a litany of yo's! aye's! what's poppin'! In school, there was *The Cat in the Hat* and other selections on the required reading lists. It was almost inevitable that I would be drawn to those sounds and want to replicate them. Teachers began praising me for my capacity to write, to articulate, and to read at a pace that set me ahead of my peers. At home, my desire for knowledge was fed with a curriculum of Black American writers. Many of them women like me. It was in stark contrast from the kind of classic of American Literature I was reading in middle and high

school. I often found myself reading under my desk, resenting the fact that I had to analyze Antigone when I knew Lorraine Hansberry was creating plays that felt closer to home.

However, as I began to look for guiding lights in the realm of the written word, I soon found that Black women writers across all mediums were speaking directly to me with writing that was not only relevant to my experience but informing a possible future for myself. For so long I thought the ability to write was something anyone can do. That it wasn't a talent, a possible career, or even a creative outlet. That impulse to discredit my own capabilities is a byproduct of the ways our stories are deemed not as valuable as others.

And so, I want to pay homage to the Black Women writers who came before me and continue to shape my worldview. These women write prose, poetry, choreopoems, theater, etc. Always breaking form as a means to bringing us closer to them. An idea that I want to explore further in my own writing, both within the context of Purchase College and upon my graduation when I will officially be a woman in the world.

A major theme tying all of these different forms of storytelling together and one that I come back to over and over again is that of communion.

II. Communion:

the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level.

Communion takes place at my great grandmother's dining room table in Pamplin, VA. With a population of less than 300, it can be described as a village. As a child, it was a place the elders all went. A few to die, most to keep in touch with their roots. My Nana would stick her

hands in the earth. The same hands that made biscuits from scratch most mornings. She had grown up there with her 8 siblings, all of whom had plenty of stories to share about their respective childhoods. It was all oral history, very little in the way of physical records. One's memory was sound enough to tell the story, and that story would extend generationally. It was the trips down south that shaped my relationship with reading. There was no TV to keep me entertained, just myself, my imagination, and those stories.

Being from “up north” as my cousins put it, it was the first time I'd been somewhere that had no street lights. Long stretches of trees and cows in every direction. Sometimes, I'd get a glimpse of cotton or a stray dog as we drove down there. In order to maintain one's sanity, there were games of baseball, riding ATVs, and long hikes. It was a life so distant from the one I'd been raised within. It allowed me to understand my Nana's cause for coming to New York a little better, but I wanted to truly feel like our lives were connected beyond her birthing the person who would later be responsible for my own life.

Nikki Giovanni's poem *Nikki-Rosa* became a way for me to bridge the gap between my Nana's life and my own. It has since become the driving force and my own objectives when I want to portray my life and the lives of others. Primarily, because it's a big responsibility, to be the keeper of secrets and knowledge and to remember.

Giovanni's poem gets to the heart of what it means to be a Black woman seeking to write about the moments that shaped you. Any biographical detail that sneaks into an essay or poem becomes a moment for the audience/reader/spectator to criticize the writer's life from a sociological perspective. Toni Morrison once succinctly summed it up: “Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form.”

When Nikki talks about the role of the White gaze, “I hope no white person ever has cause to write about me because they never understand..” To tell the story of my family of my past would be to confront realities that aren’t all beautiful, but that aren’t all suffering either. When my Nana talks about getting fruit as Christmas presents or her first home having no running water or indoor plumbing, I don’t find it to be pitiful. It’s akin to the sentiment dripping from Giovanni’s poetry. She was happy. I know she also ran barefoot in the grass, ate her food farm to table, and was loved by the few folks populating Pamplin, and most importantly by Jesus.

The theme of communion has reared its head in everything I do. When all the Wooldridge Sisters save for one decided to migrate up north, eventually settling into the same apartment buildings in Mount Vernon, NY they made themselves at home with a bunch of transplants from the South. This meant that by the time I was born, I had been christened a descendent of hardworking Southern folk. A byproduct of which included hearing, “You Bertha grandbaby!?” around town. Growing up in Mount Vernon meant being the (insert role here) in relation to (insert person here) in a way that meant that I carried the weight of great responsibility.

Being Kendra and Jeff’s daughter was a serious role. I couldn’t do anything to bring about accusations of not being raised properly. And with this great responsibility also came about a sense of understanding only someone deeply entrenched in time and place could have. Yet, I’ve never harbored any resentment about living in the role of daughter. To be one’s daughter or grandbaby was something I welcomed, because I was so proud of the people who ensured my existence.

III. In Search of Our Mothers Gardens

“And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.” - Alice Walker

Nikki-Rosa became the standard by which I wanted to portray my community, free of the White gaze, and bogged down by the weight of the sociological. However, it was time for me to find the books that sought to put that standard into practice. I knew that I had foremothers who had similar ideas and beliefs about storytelling and it was time that I communed with them spiritually, using the only tools I knew how: reading, intuiting, and tapping into the same wanting for better spirit that made my Nana migrate in the first place. And so I left.

Taking off to Paris, which felt like an important sojourn for any would-be writer, I began to act on my interests in theater and performance.. I soon fell into a crew of playwrights, many of whom had productions that were being subsidized by the French government. Most were American expats looking to be validated in their paths as storytellers. We had beaucoup aperitifs, debating the roles of the artist in our contemporary moment, citing James Baldwin’s essay *The Creative Process*.

“The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists—by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human being.”

To us, to mine oneself for material was a political act. It was to lend voice to those to who weren't necessarily voiceless, but for so long had taken a backseat to narratives deemed worthier of telling. The impulse to tell, to blend fact with fiction, to find new forms to bring life to the people we loved (or didn't much care for) on the page isolated us. We all stuffed our faces on fromage and baguette and downed cheap red wine, lamenting the fact that we wouldn't be content as accountants. What we had in common: we traveled across the Atlantic to stare that reality down and to make peace with it. We threw a little bit of self doubt into the Seine, the rest of it on our person, just enough to keep us humble. When I arrived home, I paid remembrance to my friends and to the promises I made myself by heading to the theater.

I had known Lynn Nottage as a name since there was no such thing as the theater without Black women. I had yet to see her anything of hers staged and rectified that by seeing *Fabulation* (or the *Re-Education of Undine*) immediately upon my return to New York. In preparation, I sought out a book from her early years as a playwright to read. Stumbling upon, *Crumbs From the Table of Joy*, I read the introduction over and over. A perfect embodiment of the usage of oneself (and lineage) as a test tube as Baldwin said. As per Ms. Nottage:

“My playwriting began inside my mother’s gaze—that provocative way her eyes smiled after two glasses of Mondavi. Her gaze was warm, it was distant, magical, quixotic and at times even impenetrable; it embodied her paradoxical nature. I knew it would take my lifetime to decipher and understand the story behind my mother’s gaze, but I didn’t know that this nomadic search would take me to Brooklyn in the 1950s, to the court of Louis the XIV, to a terrorist cell in Bushwick, into the thick, dense forests of Mozambique, and through the boudoirs of old New York.”

It was in this passage that I fleshed out the precise purpose that I write in the first place. To “decipher and understand the story behind my mother’s gaze.” I was struck by this, because it articulated the ways that maternal lineage had more or less shaped my understanding of literature. Every scrap of writing I’d have ever written had been brought to my Mom for her “I like it, Tayl” / “this isn’t quite it” way of critiquing. And it’s because she was my audience, the arbiter of taste. She shared so books that she’d knew would help me unlock some part of myself. It was what her mother had done for her growing up, using texts to fill in the gaps where a mother’s warning or lectures about the perils of life wouldn’t quite suffice.

To get a better understanding of what I wanted to make meant that I would finally be free to go forth and create. Much like Walker discusses in the quote above, it was a privilege to do so. “the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see” was the ability to not to have to work a call center or bank teller job, to finish college, to see the world, and take the moment to document it all. This wasn’t lost on me for one moment. However, now that I had found within myself the permission to fly, actually creating was something else entirely. And so I returned to a source that was integral to the bloodline.

IV. She who does her own thang.

“I feel like I can be on the verge of some kind of artistic awakening and so I keep feeding and feeding myself: art, literature, and films in hopes that I can knock something loose. So far, it hasn’t worked. I’m disappointed and for the first time I feel a bit aimless about my path. It frustrates me.” - a journal entry of mine. Fall 2018.

Attempts to knock some things loose meant to find a way to synthesize, synthesize, synthesize. I had spent a great deal of my time reading poetry, seeing plays, looking to the maternal forces that allowed for my creation in the first place. I decided to read the text that allowed my grandmother to resurrect herself from the ashes of an artistic depression. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* by poet, playwright, and phenom Ntozake Shange. When Paulette renamed herself Ntozake the name she chose was Xhosa for “she who has her own things.” My grandmother, Stephanie had long since become Stefany, a mononym she deemed fit for her poet. And when she discovered Shange, she found a kindred spirit, reinterpreting “she who has her own things” as “she who does her own thang” the name of the theater troupe that would put on their own rendition of *For Colored Girls* in 1979.

My Mom was 8 by then, and upon hearing there was a poetry contest at her school decided to perform a choreopoem by the Lady in Red, a role she watched her mother rehearse over and over with the girlfriends that made up the troupe in their railroad flat. In the end she lost the poetry competition, an experience she laughs about now. A Black girl at a predominantly White elementary school reciting Shange? She was the underdog from the beginning.

However, Lady In Red’s *No Assistance* impressed itself upon her psyche. It revealed itself to me when she was washing dishes, or folding clothes. The idle moments of women’s work doubling as time to go deep into the recesses of her mind. To trace back the maternal lineage that lead her to where she is, and would give way to me. It’s not hyperbole to say I come from a long line of women who wielded words as a means of surviving in a world they wouldn’t deem as harsh, but incapable of holding them and their dreams all at once.

I'm most proud to inherit the destiny of being one who has her own things. It's a mark of fierce independence and the undying need to confess. To confess is to tell the truth as I remember it. The latter half being the most important. Oftentimes, we're told not to rely on our own memories, to be open to the possibility that one misinterpreted or misread. This is what makes Shange's text so revolutionary. It's all told through the device of recounting something while sitting in a sister circle with your homegirls.

V. Writing is a portal to something more, but the something more is always couched in language.

Shange bucked playwriting tradition when she created this masterpiece. The pieces are written with the intention to be performed (and have been, with movement on the stage), don't adhere to typical forms of linguistics. Could becomes cd. Your becomes yr. Yet nothing is lost in translation. These are the aspects that felt applicable to my attempts at writing beyond the realms of the essay. I've written essays that were personal, academic, and critical. I wanted to pursue something far more creative. I want my pieces of writing to have more depth by being read aloud, introspection through honesty, and language that feels natural to whomever is speaking. This is the portal to something more.

With those objectives in mind, I took to the page with a pen. I wrote longhand in hopes to get close to some part of myself I'd long been neglecting. It's been an iterative process, wholly imperfect, but a culmination of all I've discussed thus far. Humor, performance, self expression, foregrounding one's experience as a Black woman. It's a step in the right direction.

Soon enough, I will be the first in my family to walk across the stage on the collegiate level. And as I attempt to chart a path to artistic future, I feel greater clarity having dissected my

artistic purpose. To embody the best aspects of Shange's work, to always make my mother and grandmother proud, and to say what they couldn't or didn't have the time to, on the page. In some sense, this is a written document. A map with references to come back to whenever I feel as if I cannot knock something loose. With Shange and Nottage and Giovanni, and so many other it's possible. They too are my mothers and I want to continue to be in communion with them; the heiress to their literary throne.

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