

Finding, Rubbing, Tasting, and Using the Salt. of Black Women

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Abstract

My senior project's focus would've been on the literal and metaphorical meanings of the intersectional identity of black women in the 21st Century. The project would have been staged as a "choreopoem". The literal construction of this performance piece comes from the roots of the word, "choreo" meaning dance, and "poem" meaning poetry. I've chose the poetry of "Salt." by Nayyirah Waheed to voice this narrative. Her allusions to nature and the ironic burn of her words, she provided the perfect canvas for me to paint with my performance. With my extensive background in dance, I've taken the liberty and constructed the choreography of the pieces myself. There are a total of 3 individual pieces representing 3 of the main themes with in the poetry: Nature, Momma Said..., and Straight From the Horse's Mouth. Waheed uses nature to allude to the pure beauty, fluidity, and roughness of black femininity. I planned to use my choreography to combine movements and words to form a work that gave the identity of black femininity an outlet of expression.

Within my journey, here at SUNY Purchase, my professors as well as my peers have come to guess my background in dance without me having to say a word. My first experience with this happened in my Fundamentals of acting class with Sophia Skiles. She instructed us to do a walking exercise, where we just walked and our peers made assumptions on why we walked that way. My classmate and professor came to the conclusion that I "had to be dancer". Majority of the classes I've taken are movement based as well, and with that, my professors have always pushed me to follow my instinct. I decided to use the four years of encouragement in my plans for my senior project.

In the Spring of 2018, that semester I took the class Women in Performance. The professor, Bess Rowen, introduced the class to the choreopoem “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf”. I had seen the Tyler Perry adaptation of the production and assumed it was the same, but after actually reading the script, I came to realize that this work was much different than I assumed.

Artistic Aims

If I could summarize my production, I would use the 1962 quote by Malcolm X, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” For so many years, hearing this quote just seemed like a black history month lesson until I became a black woman. I’ve experienced the ups and downs and the insides and outs of this identity. I felt it was time my audience paid witness to it.

For my senior project, I plan to delve into the alternative performance world and construct an original choreopoem based off of the poet Nayyairah Waheed’s *salt*. The book is about self-discovery and self-identity within both woman’s body and soul, and a woman of color’s identity and self-healing in this era, but all the while battling the white oppression of white people, love, and self-destructing tendencies. Liam Donaton, who is a Stage Manager, has signed on and agreed to help facilitate all that this piece needs. Emely Rodrigues has also agreed to sign on as our director to facilitate the vision that this choreopoem will have on the stage.

From the start of this process, I knew I wanted to do a performance that had all of my talents intertwined in the production. While I have worked mostly on alternative performances (dance) here in my time at Purchase, I have planned to do something related to the stage as a type of play, but something never really done before. I do enjoy the classes at Purchase mostly because they are movement based. Most of my professors know I have a dancing background with out me having to say it, and have pushed me to continue down that role. Since I don't find a reason to resist it I would like to showcase it in my senior project. I believe this production will showcase the many talents I have been working nurturing since I began my journey Purchase, and the capability of the ideas I hope to grow from and continue in the future.

I intend to produce a choreopoem. A **choreopoem** is defined by the two root words we see in the compound word. "Choreo" meaning dance, and "Poem" meaning a piece of writing that is nearly rhythmic. This word was also coined by the famous playwright, Ntozake Shange.

A clear example of this form of theater is Ntozake Shange's work "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*". I drew inspiration from not only Shange's work, but as well as Beyonce Knowles-Cater's visual album *Lemonade*. In her work, she combined different forms of media to convey her message of black feminism and expression of a black woman's rage after her significant other cheats by using music, poetry, and videography deeply interwoven with the text she used. All of these works have inspired me tremendously to produce my own production. The book of poetry that I have chosen to base this production

on is Nayyairah Waheed's *Salt*. This book is a great read and super encouraging to all who feast their eyes upon it.

Liam Donaton, has signed on as my stage manager will facilitate the many apparatus that we will be juggling for this performance. Emely Rodriguez has also signed on as director and will be contributing many wonderful ideas to incorporate on the stage that coincides with my choreography and the visuals I plan to incorporate also. Her contribution will help me make this production a theater piece, rather than a just dance production. Frandy Cisnero, my co-choreographer, will act as my assistant director/ assistant creative director to help me capture my vision via movement.

Waheed's book touches on multiple themes such as feminism, nature, and self care. Seeing how the author is a woman of color, and frequently touches the subject thought the book, I would like to make this production about black feminism. Any person could benefit from this production but there are specific poems that are only for black women.

I believe that my main challenge lies in the process of growing my cast. I plan to have 5-8 women dancing and acting along side me, but I do not know how their commitments just yet and I feel it would be the most important. I also see the shooting of the visuals be become a challenge as well but I have high hopes for the production and the different strands of media that will be incorporated.

My goal in this project is to ultimately provide an outlet in which black women can heal from their oppression by learning to unapologetically love them

selves. As well as becoming a better performer and learning what my audience will respond to.

Technical/Production Details

Sadly, my production never lifted off due to poor communication, commitment issues, and time management. This section will include all of my plans prior to the production. Cast, crew, and a summary of what failed, what I would have done better, and how some one could learn from my mistakes.

Expected Cast Size:

5 All Female (Dancers/Actresses)

There will possibly be one male dancer, to help with the leveling in the choreography in order to add further depth. His role will not become one of the foci in the piece.

Copyright Issues:

Seeing as how the script of this production is from a book, I would have to contact the publisher of the book and ask for permission to adapt to a play.

According to the title page of *Salt*, the author, Nayyirah Waheed, published the book herself. I attempted to contact her via her social media platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, but I received no response. Her reputation for being a quiet poet proceeded her.

Estimated Budget:

Set: \$0

Props: \$0

Costumes: \$200

Advertising: \$50

Book Rights: TBD

Photography/Videography: \$150

Total ~ \$400

I understand that this price is only an estimated guess, and quite possibly could change to a higher price. For this reason, I came to the solution of fundraising. I will come out of my own pocket if need be. I planed to ask ethnic clubs, such as OAPIA and SOCA, on campus for donations as well. These clubs are given an allowance by the school each semester and can make contributions to student functions.

Fundraising Goals:

GoFundMe: \$500

Bake Sale: \$150

Donations: \$200

Total: \$850

Conclusion:

As I stated before, my project did not go up. In the beginning stages, which was a year before the expected date of the show, commitments made to the show by the director, and stage manager were not kept. This left me with the whole production to manage myself. In retrospect, I thought I could handle all of the responsibilities myself. I thought wrong. The production meetings, and extra costs of the money I didn't have resulted in an internal panic within myself.

I wish I had planned for my project better instead of waiting until the last minute. The lack of communication was detrimental to my project. I did not plan the dates correctly and failed to execute my schedule of the show.

Actor's Workbook

Conservatory of Dance Musical Theater (Dance Performance) Fall 16'

In this production, I was involved in 2 dance pieces. They were Jazz, and Modern pieces that reflected the theme of "Middle School". I had a lot of fun during these rehearsals and it reminded me of home as well because we danced to song by Beyonce. I learned during this time what it was like to work with the Dance Conservatory students.

Sabotage Fall Showcase (Dance Performance) Fall 16'

In this production, I joined the dance team, Sabotage, at Purchase. We focused on all different genres of dance and rehearsed twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9-11pm. Closer to the show, we amped up rehearsals to three times, including Wednesdays from 9-11pm. I was even responsible with creating a few pieces as well as teaching and co-choreographing, as well. We rehearsed for about 5 weeks. I learned in this production and rehearsal process what it took to really pull together a show.

Sextacy, Sabotage (Dance Performance) Spring 17'

In this production, we performed on the main stage at the Stood for Sextacy weekend, this is a annual theme/party my school throws to raise awareness on safe sex and consent. The dance troupe I was apart of rehearsed for 4 weeks. This

performance wasn't as extravagant as the recital performance, so the hard work that went into this production was not the same as the last.

(Staged Reading) Fall 17'

This production was a staged reading that was looking for some one to read stage directions. I was thrust into this production within a matter of days. There was no character development needed for it was only stage directs, and setting being recited on my part.

All Those Friendly People : Leah (Student Film) Spring 17'

Similar to the production before, this role was placed on me within days and we began filming almost immediately. My character was, Leah, Alex's new girlfriend. This was my first experience with film and I loved it. The role was small but I still liked the process of it all.

Quantico: Extra (TV Show) Fall 17'

This was my second experience with film but my first working in the professional world. I had discovered this role on Backstage.com and got cast in October. I was given a bunch of instructions via email before I got to set. The day started at 4am and ended at 8pm. Usually the day for non-union actors would only be 8 hours, but we ran behind schedule and they paid us over time as well as providing breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I was an extra role in two scenes: the church, and FBI Quantico student. I got to work with actors that I grew up watching in film as a child: Blair Underwood and Marlee Matlin.

Jephtah: Narrator/Angel Understudy (Staged Reading) Spring 18'

This was a staged reading where I auditioned for the role of the Angel and wound up getting the roles of the Angel Understudy, and the Narrator. The roles didn't require me to do much character work. We didn't do any table work either. I was encouraged by the director to "go out there and be myself". I didn't find this role challenging because it didn't force me to step outside of my comfort zone. I learned that as comfortable as I am playing roles close to my own personality, if I want to become a better actor, I'm going to need to find characters that force me to push my boundaries.

The Deuce: Extra (TV Show) Spring 18'
Billions: Extra (TV Show) Spring 18'

These two shows happened within 2 months of each other. I used the database, backstage.com, I've used to get these kinds of works before. These days were similar to the Quantico production day I had done before but they didn't run over time. I've concluded that this is fun but I want more. The extra life isn't the kind of work that I would like to settle for. Since then, I've been continuing on taking extra jobs, but my goal is to eventually star in a feature film, preferably in a leading role.

Script

Water

Water clings to my wrists. It has been my fragrance since birth. 1

I am a black wave in a white sea. Always seen and unseen.
--the difference 65

What will your eyes do with me when they are done. Will they lay me in the tender
flesh behind the sun. fold me into your memory's back. Keep me a running water
down your arms.
-- where 66

if the ocean can calm itself so can you. We are both salt water mixed with air.
--meditation 94

these are not tears. This is the sea
--tides 139

you blush like an ocean in love. Wild with blueness.
--yemanja 149

I want you to drink the sea inside of me.
--summer juice 222

when I am lost touch the back of my water and I will return. 234

Flowers

can we speak in flowers. It will be easier for me to understand.
--other language 3

flower work is not easy. Remaining soft in fire takes time. 12

Black women breathe flowers, too. Just because we are taught to grow them un the
lining of our quiet (our grandmother's secret). Does not mean we do not swelter
with wild tenderness. We soft swim. We petal. We scent limbs. Love. We just have
been too long a garden for sharp and deadly teeth. So we have grown ourselves into
greenhouses.
--greenhouses 14

a black woman can write of loneliness. Or love or softness. Or the moon. You may try
valiantly to cripple her but she will still grow flowers in her flesh.
-- a genocide of flowers 148

she was a flower salt in my heart, and she hurt beautifully. ²⁴²

Momma Said...

Trust your work. ¹⁰

Where you are. Is not who you are.

-- circumstances ²⁹

expect sadness like you expect rain. Both cleanse you.

-- natural ³⁷

if you light falls out of your mouth pick it up. (and put it back).

--noor ⁵⁰

you will drown if you do not have boundaries. They are not optional. This structure counts on your inability to say no. mean no. they take no from our first breath. Go

back and return it to your mouth. Your heart. Your light.

--swim | women of color ⁵¹

Stay soft. It looks beautiful on you. ⁵⁹

Cry wild. You have probably never cried wild. But, you know what doors feel like.

You have an intimacy with doors that is killing you.

-- break ⁸³

I will tell you, my daughter of your worth not your beauty every day. (your beauty is given. Every being is born beautiful). Knowing your worth can save your life. Raising

you on beauty alone you will be starved. You will be raw. You will be weak. An easy stomach. Always in need of someone telling you how beautiful you are.

-- emotional nutrition ⁸⁶

your heart is the softest place on earth. Take care of it. ⁸⁸

in our own ways we all break. It is okay to hold your heart outside your body for days. Months. Years. At a time. ⁹⁶

you do not have to be a fire fir every mountain blocking you. You could be a water and soft river your way to freedom too.

--options ¹¹⁹

you will find your way. It is in the same place as your love.

--seek ¹²⁶

“no” might make them angry. But it will make you free.

--if no one ever told you, your freedom is more important than their anger ¹³³

never trust any one who says they do not see color. This means to them you are
invisible.

--is ¹⁴⁰

apologize to your body. Maybe that's where the healing begins.

--starting ¹⁴⁵

put some salt in that honey. Warm it up. Heal.

--stove ¹⁴⁷

some people when they hear your story. Contract. Others upon hearing your story.
Expand. And this is how you know. ¹⁵⁸

you are my favorite kind. Nothing that i can name. ¹⁵⁹

if you are softer than before you came. You have been loved. ¹⁶²

you are not a mistake. You are too many exquisite details to be a mistake. ¹⁶⁶

the warmest light is your body. ¹⁶⁸

you are a story. Do not become a word. One word. Because you want to be loved.
Love does not ask you to be nothing for something.

--name ¹⁷⁶

healing begins the moment you want it to.

--time ¹⁷⁸

knowing your power creates humility. Not knowing you power is what creates
insecurity.

--ego ¹⁹⁶

beautiful is the highest compliment you can pay a woman. I watch women dive. To
the ground. Eat it. Stand up. And smile.

--shame ¹⁹⁹

you must put healing on the list. The grocery list. The to do list. The night list.
Because you are teaching your baby the very same chemistry that took your eyes
and heart when you were four.

--the list ²⁰⁶

you. are your own standard of beauty.

--mirror work ²⁰⁷

make sure they have fallen in love with your spirit. First. Your body. Secomd.

--the fragrance of your laughter ²⁰⁸

you can not remain a war between what you want to say (who you really are). And what you should say (who you pretend to be). Your mouth was not designed to eat itself.

--split ²¹⁵

Black Woman

I am such a sensitive summer thing. ²²

I found flaws and they were beautiful.

--ugly ²⁴

i bleed every month. But do not die. How am i not magic.

-- the lie ²⁷

i will crawl for white beauty. Eat my arms. Barter my legs (make my thighs into altars of grief). For skin that does not drink night. Hair that is not angry. Body that is not soil. I place curses on my flesh call them diets. Tell my ancestors they are ugly.

Howl at my nose until it bleeds. Run my heart across my teeth, repeatedly.

I am dying to be beautiful. But beautiful. Is something. I will never be.

-- by the time we are seven ²⁸

i am your friend. a soul for your soul. a place for your life. home. know this. sun or water. here or away. we are a lighthouse. we leave. and we stay.

-lighthouse.³⁴

my english is broken. on purpose. you have to try harder to understand me. breaking this language you so love is my pleasure. in your arrogance you presume that i want your skinny language. that my mouth is building a room for it in the back of my throat. it is not.

-i have seven different words for love. you have only one. that makes a lot of sense.

i don't pay attention to the world ending. it has ended for me any times and began again in the morning.

you tell me 'burn yourself white, it will make me happy.' my sadness is sharpening itself against my teeth. you are the color of soft coal. and just got back from visiting your mother in nigeria last month. you say 'look baby, look, what i brought back for you.' i move out. ...

i am often broken into language. whether i want to speak or not.

i am a brutally soft woman.

as a woman i know the difference between appreciation and teeth. what really hurts is that as a girl i had to know the same thing.

-survivor

i am a silk field of vulnerability.

if you deserve honey mine will flow from my arms to yours no effort, no asking. but,
if there is none and you feel wind instead. know that my spirit already senses that
when you smell sweetness you begin harvesting blades in your hands.

-kindness is a form of intelligence

my whole life i have ate my tongue. ate my tongue. ate my tongue. i am so full of my
tongue you would think speaking is easy. but it is not.

-for we who keep our lives in our mouths

africa does not need your tears. or your prayers. or your money. or your t-shirts. or
your telethons. or your hands ever so lovingly placed on her buttocks. your mouth at
her breasts. your fists in her eyes. she wants you to stop pissing in her face and
calling it water.

if we. are with child. and you believe that fatherhood begins when my body pours a
baby into your hands. not before. you do not deserve this child. you are a coward.

-you are a father the moment you enter me

you ask to touch my hair. or worse touch it without asking. this is not innocence. this
is not ignorance. this is not curiosity. this is the very racist and subhuman belief that
you have a right to me.

-i will break your hand | do not ever touch me | every time you touch me. my
ancestors place a curse on you

if a man can only show vulnerability for what is between my legs. can only be a heart
during sex. if an orgasm is the only way he can weep. what is his life but a cage.

-prison

listen to my poems. but do not look for me. look for you.

-you

to call me black . is one of the most beautiful. incredible. compliments you could ever
give me.

-insult

there is a tender thing i am made of. i have always felt before i breathe.

what i never learned from my mother was that just because someone desires you
does not mean they value you. desire is the kind of thing that eats you and leaves

you starving,

-the color of low self esteem

being in love with my people does not mean i hate others. how ridiculous is that.

-self

i have always been the woman of my dreams.

there is peaceful. there is wild. i am both at the same time.
-sum

all that was taken from me is still here.
-root | immortal

if someone does not want me it is not the end of the world. but if i do not want me.
the world is nothing but endings.

my silence is wet and hot and drinkin my mouth to death.

it is about being honest about my pain that makes me invincible.
-yield

my mother was my first country. the first place i ever lived.
-lands

i do not feel i need a name or a movement to legitimize the defense of myself. i am a
woman of color. my bones have been bought and sold every morning. so, now i carry
a machete in my mouth.
-ivory

i fell apart many times. so. what does that say about me besides i live through wars.

my ancestors made sure i was born the color of their eyes.
-sight

it's not about making you uncomfortable. it's about making me comfortable.
-reparations

i knew read sonia sanchez. nikki giovanni. audre lorde. before i ever even heard the
name charles bukowski. finally, a proper education.
-the order

Research Paper

My senior project's focus would've been on the literal and metaphorical meanings of the intersectional identity of black women in the 21st Century. The project would have been staged as a "choreopoem". The literal construction of this performance piece comes from the roots of the word, "choreo" meaning dance, and "poem" meaning poetry. I have chosen the poetry of "Salt." by Nayyirah Waheed to voice this narrative. Her allusions to nature and the ironic burn of her words, provided the perfect canvas for me to paint with my performance. With my extensive background in dance, I took liberty and constructed the choreography of the pieces myself. Included would have been a total of 3 individual pieces representing 3 of the main themes within the poem: Nature, Momma Said..., and Straight from the Horse's Mouth. Waheed uses nature to allude to the pure beauty, fluidity, and fierceness of black femininity. My plan was to utilize my choreography skills, combining movements and words, to form a work that gave the identity of black femininity an outlet of expression.

I wanted my senior project to reflect who I am, so that I would leave my mark at this school in a way that had not been presented before. The elements of dance, acting, poetry, music, and film all incorporated into one theatrical performance. More commonly, this form of theater is referred to as a choreopoem. Even though film is usually not a part of this type of performance, I wanted to utilize all of my creative assets to form this project. Each element has its own specific purpose. They each bring an emphasis to the table to amplify the imagery projected on the stage.

In reality I have been preparing for this project my entire life. I was 3-years old when I began formal dance classes. My aunt, my mother's youngest sister, was a dancer and I

was always trying to emulate her steps from the time I took my first steps. My studies began with tap, jazz, and ballet. At the young age of 7, I had joined the senior rank of my tap company, making me the youngest to ever do so. At the age of 11, I refined my study of dance to include classical ballet occasionally branching out to attend some modern workshops. Along with the natural gift of rhythm, I was always choreographing my own private pieces that I would intermittently show when I felt confident enough. My most recently recognized choreography was in a high school production of the musical *Pippin* where I was both the head choreographer and lead understudy. I dedicated myself to the role of head choreographer and won my school a nomination for best choreography in the Tommy Tunes awards, a Houston based award show that recognizes local high school musical theatre performances. While matriculating at SUNY Purchase, my professors, as well as my peers, have acknowledged and recognized my dance background without me having to say a word. My first experience with this happened in my Fundamentals of Acting class with Sophia Skiles. She instructed us to do a walking exercise, where we just walked and our peers made assumptions on why we walked that way. My classmates and professor instantaneously concluded, that I “had to be dancer”. The majority of the classes I’ve taken are movement based as well, and with that, my professors have always pushed me to follow my natural instinct. Because of their prodding, I decided that it was imperative to involve dance within my project.

It’s only natural that music is important to me, seeing how dance takes up an enormous amount my life. However, dance is not the only reason. Because my mother was adamant about me being well rounded she enrolled me in violin lessons around the age of 5. During this time, I began to develop an ear for music. Since then music has

become my second language. I chose to design 3 separate pieces, each representing a theme from *Salt*, choreographed to a different music track. Each track of music was chosen strictly with only instrumentals; my rationale being the words would distract from the actual message the performance was attempting to portray. My desire is for the audience to truly feel the movements through the vibrations in the music, so much so that are inspired to get up and move too. The tracks, are common songs but they may not be recognizable in their instrumental form. I chose pieces that have a strong baseline, and a kick within each track in the music to symbolize a human heartbeat. The purpose for this is to remind the audience of the humanity coursing through each and every one's veins. . I drew inspiration from the visual album *Lemonade* by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, and decided to incorporate the musical pieces into this performance. I also saw this as a means to help transition from one piece to the next.

As far as I can remember, I've always had an attraction to poetry. My mother can testify that I've written a few pieces myself in my childhood; she keeps the torn-out pages in her nightstand till this day. In 2017 I found the book *Salt* by Nayyirah Waheed on Instagram. Because I am passionate about reposting positive and inspiring quotes in my stories, I became so entranced by her words that I had to buy the hard copy book. I will describe this book in more detail later on and how it would have taken part in this project.

I've always had a fascination with film. My fascination with film is my driving force for wanting to pursue further studies in acting. I've always dreamt of starring in my own movie one day and my desire is to get there soon. I have purposed partnering with one of the film students here at Purchase to produce 3 short films based off the book *Salt*. My

plan was to make 3 short films that connected to the themes within *Salt*. : Nature, Momma Said..., and Straight from the Horse's Mouth. Nature would focus on the imagery depicted in the book alluding to the many ways black femininity can be seen, through the lens of a black woman. Momma Said... would emphasize the advice of self healing, and defense. Last but not least, Straight from the Horse's Mouth would emphasize the voice of the 21st Century woman speaking from the poetry piece.

I wanted my performers to represent a reflection of who and what this project is giving a voice to, Black women, all shapes, sizes and colors. It was imperative that the performers, including myself, reflected the audience I was aiming to connect with physically and emotionally, women who identify as black and understand the struggles we face almost every day.

In 2016, I attended a "Disney Princess Musical Theater" performance by the Purchase Dance Conservatory. There was one piece in particular that stood out to me, a Mulan inspired piece. It was choreographed around these huge pieces of silk/ribbons that were also a part of the costumes. The utilization of these ribbons provided a sort of prop to help further the story line of the performance. I incorporated this element into my costume designs to illustrate and bring alive the poetry of the book in the dance form for the films I planned to use. I also wanted to incorporate bright colors to pay homage to "For Colored Girls..." and to accentuate the various melanin tones in the performer's bodies. To aid in my designs I researched the makings of the costumes in stage and film production of "For Colored Girls...", Alvin Ailey, and Dance Theater of Harlem performances with hopes of including the same fluidity found in their costumes.

MY INSPIRATION

In this part of the discussion, I will introduce the 3 main sources of inspiration and the research I did to create this performance piece. Each of my sources have components that I wanted to incorporate into my project and I will point out which truly mattered and why. These sources are primarily projects created by other black women that wanted to achieve the same goal as my project, as well as others. I wanted to bring together their elements in collaboration with my talents to form a finished product at a level that has never been seen at Purchase

In the spring semester of 2018, I took the class Women in Performance. The professor, Bess Rowen, introduced the class to the 1976 Broadway choreopoem, “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf” by Ntazake Shange. I had seen the Tyler Perry adaptation of the production and assumed it was the same, if not exactly, loosely. However after actually reading the script, I came to realize that while Mr. Perry’s adaptation is good it fails in comparison to the actual original writing. Originally, this project was written as separate poems and were performed as monologues. When Shange moved to New York, the individual poems were pieced together and collectively titled “For Colored Girls.....”. Presented first during the era of the civil rights movement this ground breaking piece of art brought to the stage a perspective on what it is to be female and black in the modern United States. Ground breaking, then it continues to wow and is often performed in mainstream American stage and media venues (Hammad). I wanted to accomplish and present something of the magnitude in my project as well exclusive of my own poetry.

My first time hearing the word “choreopoem” was in this class. After further research I discovered that a choreopoem, termed by Shange, is not an actual play in that it has no continuous plot or conventional development as a play would, rather it consists of a series of poetic monologues to be accompanied by dance movements and music (Hammad). Because of my strong desire and inclinations to involve dance into a theater performance, I knew this is the road I had to follow.

SALT, THE BOOK

I briefly mentioned this book before, but now I’d like to delve into the literary details of why this poetry moved me so much that I had to base my performance off of it. Nayyirah Waheed’s words strongly resonated within my spirit when I discovered the collection of poems.

“i will crawl for white beauty.

eat my arms.

*barter my legs (make my thighs into altars of
grief).*

for

skin that does not drink night.

hair that is not angry.

body that is not soil.

i place curses on my flesh

call them diets.

tell my ancestors they are ugly.

howl at my nose until it bleeds.

run my heart across my teeth, repeatedly.

i am dying.

to be

beautiful.

but

beautiful.

is

something.

i

will never

be.

-- by the time we are seven” (Waheed, 27-28)

The lamentations of this poem speaks to the allusions of oppression black women face at the hands of white people are like rubbing salt in fresh a wound. This is where the title of the book most likely came from.

“when

you tell yourself

‘you can have your energy back.’

after years

of

giving

it

to white people.

and
their
requirements for acceptance. for supple
colonization.
digesting
their beliefs.
thoughts.
opinions.
of
you.” (Waheed, 127)

The satirical mentions of how ironic it is that black women are shunned for possessing the same attributes, others are killing themselves to get, reflect the tone of disbelief, disgust, and fed up angst black women have had held for decades.

“i think one
of the most pathological
things i have ever seen
is
stabbing
someone
and
then telling them that
their
pain and anger

over being stabbed

is

making you sad.

-white guilt” (Waheed, 214)

The advice given to remind us, black women, to heal from past wounds from love, family, and oppression in the micro aggressions we face daily.

“i will tell you, my daughter

of your worth

*not your beauty every day. (your beauty is given. Every being is
born beautiful).*

knowing your worth

can save your life.

raising you on beauty alone

you will be starved.

you will be raw.

you will be weak.

an easy stomach.

always in need of someone telling you how

beautiful you are.

-- emotional nutrition” (Waheed, 86)

The imagery of fire, water, and flowers are used as metaphors to describe the fierceness, fluidity, and fragility of a black woman.

“a black woman

*can write of
loneliness.
or
love
or softness.
or the moon.
you may try valiantly
to cripple her.
but she will still grow flowers in her flesh.
-- a genocide of flowers” (Waheed, 148)*

Lastly, the encouragements and affirmations black women need to hear to heal from the hurt promoting self-love, instead of tearing themselves apart to feel heard or accepted.

*“you
will drown
if
you do not have boundaries.
they
are
not optional.
this structure
counts
on your inability
to*

say no.
mean no.
they take no
from
our
first breath.
go back
and
return it to your mouth.
your heart.
your light.

--swim / women of color" (Waheed, 51)

Much is not written and published about Nayyirah Waheed. Desiring to remain elusive she wants her work to show her story. She's mostly known as a quiet poet because of her reserve of her private life.

"listen to my poems.

but

do not look for me.

look for you." (Waheed, 124)

In her poetry I found myself, my mother, and the other black women I have come to know in my life. She's constantly creating pieces, some of which can be found on social media, that express her everyday life and posting it. Her work rips away the veil and shines a light on the 21st century black woman experience. I wanted to use her work

to incorporate the current voice of black women now, as apposed to performing a rendition of Shange's work. In this way, the material would be an original piece based upon her work.

THE BEYONCE KNOWLES-CARTER INFLUENCE

In the spring of 2016, Beyoncé Knowles- Carter dropped her greatest collaborations "Lemonade". When this project was released, the whole world was taken by surprise. Released following the scandal of infidelity in her marriage, this whirlwind project was an outlet for her outrage and frustration over the mistreatment of black women, not only by black men, but by everyone in America. "Lemonade", her second visual album following the self-titled album she released in 2013 in which she declared herself a feminist, cemented her in the feminist movement. I was truly inspired by this album. Not solely because of the message it conveyed, but the way she and her team pieced it together to form one whole masterpiece. Poetry, music, dance and creatively directed film were all merged together to illustrate the spectacle that has been the black woman experience.

The album was constructed like a movie that composed itself in eleven chapters: ""Intuition", "Denial", "Anger", "Apathy", "Emptiness", "Accountability", "Reformation", "Forgiveness", "Resurrection", "Hope", and "Redemption". (Hall) Beyoncé was inspired by a Somali poet, Warsan Shire, and her works: "The Unbearable Weight of Staying", "Dear Moon", "How to Wear Your Mother's Lipstick", "Nail Technician as Palm Reader", and "For Women Who Are Difficult to Love". She used these poems to narrate the underlying messages of black feminism, motherhood, beauty, bulimia, abortion, sex, and, of course, infidelity, the key theme of *Lemonade*. (Garcia)

One of the components that influenced me were the visuals captured in the visual albums. The visuals in this album that spoke to me were found in the chapters “Denial” and “Redemption”. In “Denial” the visuals show Beyonce submerged in an underwater bedroom. I was inspired by this because of the billowing fabrics, free flowing shapes of her body resisting the water, while at the same time accentuating each movement making it elegant, and fluid. Along with the vivid colors used to paint the scenery, I felt I could use this as a template for one of the themes of “Salt.”, “Nature” to showcase the elegance, and fluidity of the black female form expressed by the poetry.

In the chapter “Redemption” I found the inspiration for the “Straight from the Horse’s Mouth” theme. In this chapter black women and girls are portrayed in one of their most natural states playing, chatting, walking, eating, planting, and just being. Included also were cameos from multiple famous black female athletes, dancers, singers, models, and actresses, demonstrating the diversity and representation of black women. This chapter concluded *Lemonade*’s message by stating that a black woman’s saving grace could be found in her roots. I wanted to capture black women from my campus thriving in nature, laughing, conversing, discussing, and being just like in *Lemonade*.

The second component within this project that influenced me was the strong abundance of feminism throughout the album. Edwards state, “Lemonade does all that black women have been calling for in popular culture. It provides representation of Black womanhood that celebrates us and gives voice to our complex and over looked pain... destroys the archetype of the Strong Black Woman who is independent, resilient, and over-extending in work and nurturance while remaining immune to the psychological toll

of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Lemonade argues that healing is a process as it walks us through its chapters...” (Edwards, 86)

THE DAWNELLE CARROLL INFLUENCE

The last unit of my project would be called “Momma Said...” I chose this particular name for this unit because of the advice and affirmations that were written in Waheed’s collection were reminiscent of my own mother’s motherly advice.

My mother is most definitely one of the strongest people I know in the world, and by far my biggest inspiration. At the age of 37, she became a mother and has done her very best to provide for her household as a single mother. As I grow older she’s always there to give me advice when I need it. I can remember as a little girl in her the closet trying on her shoes because I had heard the adage “filling someone’s shoes” and I wanted to be just like her. It is said that “mother knows best”, and in my opinion, it’s true. Whenever I find myself in a situation or someone asks me what they should do, I often start by saying, “My momma always says...” and it quickly becomes the solution to the problem.

I had a list of poems from the book I pulled out especially for my mom to read, record herself, and send to me. The poems I sent to her were going to be used as a voice over for the “Momma Said..” theme. I planned on finding a black mother and her daughter and recording staged moments of intimacy between the two. For example, a mother doing her daughter’s hair, or teaching her how to cook, all in slow motion while the audio of the poetry was being read in the background. I would have liked to have gotten isolated shots

with a grandmother as well. Also included in this part would have been an actual conversation between my mother and me, giving my production a personal side

REFLECTIONS FROM MY PEERS

To give a current perspective to my project, I sat down with a group of my fellow black women peers and asked them what they would like to see in theater and films. The majority of the answers seemed to be, more representation of black women. When I asked what they meant specifically, they replied “I feel like we’re severely misunderstood in the world. They always see us as angry, granted sometimes we are, but they never bother to figure out why or even fix the problem when we clearly state the issues.” This response prompted a lot of head nods in agreeance. I decided at that moment to give these women a platform through my project. I planned to have this conversation recorded and played back over the “Straight from the Horse’s Mouth” unit. I decided to call this unit by that name because where I’m from, it means information that came from the source. What could possibly give more meaning to the voice of the 21st century black woman, than those of that century?

THE FINALE

“The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” – Malcom X, 1962. Even though this quote was said in the previous century, it still applies to today. According to Dr. Shawn Arango Ricks, a licensed mental health and addictions counselor, black women are conditioned to

“normalize chaos as a defense mechanism” (Ricks, 344) against the mistreatment we fall victim to everyday. Commonly, the narrative of the Strong Black Woman/Superwoman is pushed upon us so heavily by our own families that others follow suit and do the same.

This narrative was created to combat the negative stereotypes of Black women, such as mammy, Jezebel, and the welfare queen. It encourages black women to be strong and show no weakness. I wasn't directly raised to act in such a manner, but indirectly it was expected of me, and I fell victim to it too, like my mother and her mother as well. For example, I was always told I'd have to work twice as hard to get what I wanted, and even though it was never stated, the inference was, you don't get to complain.

Although this narrative provided a platform to form tough skin against micro aggressions, it causes black women to neglect the toll it takes on the physical and mental body. Warning signs of fatigue, anxiety, and irritability become viewed through a lens that's been accustomed to treat it as a normality when it's not. This is when mental health becomes a concern, but it won't be a topic of this discussion. This is also why pieces of art, such as “For Colored Girls...”, *Lemonade*, and *Salt*. (the book and performance piece) and others that provide an outlet for black women to express their subjugation, must exist.

Kim McMillon, a doctoral candidate in World Cultures/Interdisciplinary Humanities specializing in Black Arts Movement and African American Literature, argues that the reason why black women have survived with this toxic behavior for so long, is attributed to the art we produce. In her essay, “Black Feminism, The Ancestors Speak, and the Women of the Black Arts Movement”, she states “The ancestral tools of poetry, art, music, and community allow the Black woman to

discover her inner mecca beyond white privilege and colonization.” (McMillon, 175) She goes on to discuss how famous works have helped give a voice to the Black Arts Movement.

The Black Arts Movement can be closely described as a continuation of the Harlem Renaissance that has taken the form of black feminism by celebrating the black aesthetic and the eternal movement of art that speaks to the Black experience and our African roots.” (McMillon, 183) McMillon defines black feminism using the late great poet Maya Angelou’s “*Still I Rise*”. “The feminism espoused by Maya Angelou may not be the feminism of the Women’s Movement, but it is the feminism, of Black women determined to move past a history that does not acknowledge the power of Black womanhood.” (McMillon, 184) “Black feminism goes to the heart, it nurtures and uplifts the family and community. This is the feminism that does not require the Black woman to do anything but just be.” (McMillon, 184)

She uses Alice Walker’s definition of a black feminist from her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*. Walker describes the term womanist as ‘A Black feminist or feminist of color. A womanist appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women’s strength. One who sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or nonsexually and is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female’...” (McMillon, 1982)

McMillon further uses *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry as the catalyst for the movement. “*A Raisin in the Sun* presented new images of Blackness that upheld the tenets of ‘Black is Beautiful’ in its accurate depiction and celebration of

African and African-American culture. As a play it somehow bridged the gap between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. while communicating the urgency and necessity of the civil rights struggle. It spoke to a changing America, one where African Americans were demanding equality now. "(McMillon, 183). It was the first production that demonstrated a source of public healing within the black community, by sharing their struggles with the rest of the nation.

Dr. Ricks argues in her paper, "Normalized Chaos: Black Feminism, Womanism, and the (Re) definition of Trauma and healing", by disrupting the narrative of normalized chaos, within an expanded understanding of Black feminism and womanism, Black women can more fully engage in healing from the trauma by self love. (Ricks, 343) Works such as *Lemonade*, *Salt.*, and "For Colored Girls..." provide outlets in the media for black women to heal by making community. This includes my theater piece, and the message is shared.

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