

What It Means to Love (Through A Black Lens)

Senior Thesis Paper

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Description:

“What it Means to Love (through a Black lens)” investigates the roots of Black love intergenerationally. The research puts into conversation a collection of data and research papers, interviews, movies, and music to help understand the impact that culture has on African American’s perception of love. I used scientific studies to find the quantitative statistics of African American relationships through articles like *Marriage Among African Americans: What Does the Research Reveal?* by Patricia Dixon, as well as qualitative studies such as *A Qualitative Exploration of Why Faith Matters in African American Marriages and Families* by Loren Marks. I also read articles that explore the social and economic influences on African American relationships such as *You Ain’t no Denzel: African American Men’s Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships* by Armon R. Perry and *Courtship Season* by Eleanor Alexander. I also looked at how certain movies that have importance in the Black community showcase those romanticized ideas about love and relationships like *Love & Basketball*, *Brown Sugar*, and *Belly*. The analysis of musical influences like *Lemonade* by Beyoncé, *4:44* by Jay-Z, and *4 Your Eyez Only* by J. Cole contributed to this analysis and deconstruction as well. Lastly, I conducted interviews with my peers and family members from different generations to see how they have been influenced throughout their lives and their views on relationships.

I have learned to understand that while there is a baseline understanding of love, there are different generational influences, ideals, and concepts that shape each generations’ idea of love. These ideals could include the role of marriage in economics, social media, new movements that influence both sexes, and educational disparities. Through analyzing the generational conceptions of love, I hoped to answer some of the following questions: What are the

commonalities and differences between individual's perception of love, what contributed to those differences, and was there a way to identify and trace the roots of those differences.

I've taken special interest in investigating and dissecting this aspect of my culture because it is something that directly affects my everyday life. As I've grown and learned the importance of many types of relationships throughout my life, I was curious about how the behavior that I observed and learned from those around me shaped my perceptions and way of thinking. I am very protective and careful about the people I surround myself with and thus wanted to learn about the "why"; what were the cultural norms about relationships, how much influence have I encountered, and why were they considered influential. The presentation of this research is performed with two dancers and a male accompanist who sang and played the piano. The performance included two solos and a duet. There were many different sources that informed my movement making and creative choices including Pop Culture like music and movies, the Civil Rights Movement, the Family Unit and Church.

Critical Analysis:

When starting the research portion of this project I worked outward in, first looking at external sources of influence. In my initial predictions of investigating Black relationships, I thought that the Church would be the main source of influence. But throughout the research process I found that there were multiple external influences that were just as, if not more important, than the Black Church. The main external influences in Black relationships were the secular family unit and the roles of the Black woman and man in the relationship: inside the house as well in society, the Black Church, Pop Culture and social media promoting what a relationship should be and the romanticizing of relationships and their struggles, and the Civil Rights movement and what that changed in the Black man.

There have been few studies done on Black relationships and their stability. These studies mostly investigated how the roots of a marriage either resulted in a long or short marriage, and identified factors contributing to a couple's marriage. These studies sought to make qualitative information quantitative and provided a lot of vocabulary to indulge in; additionally, provided numerous couples to analyze and pull inspiration. While reading the studies, I pulled out the most used words to describe their relationships or important aspects of their relationship. Some of the words were "equally yoked", "compromise" and "trusting". After pulling out these specific words, I would choose one and improvise to it without any other outside information. This improvisation would be in silence. I would then listen to music that also had the same themes as the word I had just improvised to. From there I would improvise again, this time I would have the influence of the music on the movement I created, while still focusing on the word I have chosen from the study. After having both of those improvisations recorded, I then went back and watched what I made. Hours or days later, I would go back and try to recreate the movement. Trying to recreate the improvisation challenged me because when recreating movement, you are not in the same space as you were when you were originally creating. This forced me to be very detailed oriented in making sure that I was recreating the same details and feeling that I tried to portray in the original improvisation. This process helped me create a lot of the movement that would be in the final performance. Since these were scientific studies, they spoke about love without embellishment and emotion as most scientists would to make sure the data and results were clear, and the study could be replicated. However, as an artist, I have never heard anyone talk about love so objectively; this allowed me to put love into perspective. Sometimes it's hard to put words that carry a lot of meaning and feelings into a plainly stated issue. This started my path to unpacking the multiple meanings of love. The way that the

scientists described love and the couples involved in the studies described “love”, showcased how differently people could explain love and their relationships. This was informative to me when beginning the process of making movement and creating meaning behind the words associated with relationships. It led to interesting movement choices about how to display love and explain what the feelings involved with love could look like. Improvisation provided a creative outlet to unpack the multiple meanings as well as color the words.

Music has played a huge role in the perception of relationships and the roles of those in relationships. Although all music genres are influenced by African Americans, Hip Hop is the most prevalent genre with African American presence. Notably, many Hip Hop male artists make songs about not wanting serious relationships, while their women counterparts often make songs about being in relationships and their trials and tribulations throughout them. This creates an imbalance in perceptions of who wants and is actively in a relationship. Popular projects like *Lemonade* by Beyoncé and *4:44* by Jay Z frame private experiences of a public relationship. I found it important to analyze these projects side by side for this project there are many themes that are important to discuss that occur in others' relationships as well. *Lemonade* dissects many themes like generational trauma, distrust, grief, and reformation in relationships. One of the most influential things in *Lemonade* are the poems by Warsan Shire that connect the songs together as a through line that further dives into the themes throughout the project. One of the lines of the poems in the intuition section says, “I tried to make a home out of you, but doors lead to trap doors, a stairway leads to nothing. Unknown women wander the hallways at night. Where do you go when you go quiet?” Many people in relationships try to “make a home” out of person with the perception that they are now whole because of this person they are with. In my piece, I thought about what that meant to create a home out of somebody physically, mentally, and

emotionally. What are the positive and negative implications of allowing one person to have such significance in your life. I thought about the cultural context of that statement because it is very common that when two people are together they now become whole, using terms like “my other half”, and “I wouldn’t be the same without you.” When creating movement with that as a prompt, it was very difficult for me because I couldn’t imagine that amount of trust or how to portray that. I looked if that same sentiment came out in any of the other studies, interviews, or articles. It didn’t quite show up explicitly in those texts but was very evident in films that are deemed culturally important in the African American community. While I knew this wasn’t just a cultural problem, I wondered why it was much more evident in those films. I knew I could emulate that feeling more deeply and thoroughly with the sound that would accompany the movement instead of in my movement. I found that with the interviews and the lyrics of the song that was sung in the performance.

Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* showed the trials and tribulations of her marriage and some the major flaws she has dealt with due to her familial relationships and with her husband. In another poem she says, “You remind me of my father, a magician ... able to exist in two places at once. In the tradition of men in my blood, you come home at 3 a.m. and lie to me. What are you hiding?” Which directly reflects Jay Z’s 4:44 lyrics where he says “Look, I apologize, often womanize/Took for my child to be born, to see through a woman’s eyes/Took for these natural twins to believe in miracles/Took me too long for this song, I don’t deserve you.” This shows how they were in very different places in their relationship and their marriage, which shows how trying to live within these persona’s created by the media and hip hop are detrimental to a relationship and the consequences of it. I worked to dissect why these persona’s can’t work within and out of a relationship. Putting these pieces in conversation with each other

allowed me to create movement that went along and against these stereotypes and implications. This created very lively movement that changed direction and level as a way to work against each other but still create cohesive movement. I felt that it was important to use these two musical pieces of work because they are so important and influential to my generation, and to leave them out would make my work feel incomplete.

Everything that was talked about throughout *Lemonade* and *4:44* start with perceptions and problems that started in their respective households. A main source of influence throughout my research is the family unit, and how the influences and behaviors of parents were incorporated into an individual's life. I conducted interviews with my peers as well as members of my family from different generations. A commonality through those interviews were the behaviors and interactions they observed from their parents. The family unit serves as the basis for a lot of relationship constructs that develop through one's life. While conducting interviews I found it interesting that many of my peers used their parent's relationships as strict markers of achievement on the spectrum of "what defined a successful relationship." A lot of my peers said that would want their relationships to either be very close to their parents', or they wanted the exact opposite. Parents served as a huge source of influence when defining their own relationships.

The secular family serves as source of influence for many different reasons including the familial roles and the behavior exhibited within the family. I began analyzing what influenced those leading the household. I wondered how far back this generational influence went, such as contributing factors from previous generations including the Civil Rights Movement to see how those moments in history influenced current generations. African American influence didn't

begin with social media or athletes, but long before with singers, musicians, and Civil Rights Activists. They were icons to many and their demonstration of character formed a lot of the institutions, principles, and teachings that are still in effect today. These themes will resurface when I discuss the role of fathers in the family and their influence on love and relationships. It would be ignorant to ignore how their presence impacted how the African Americans of that generation viewed relationships, love, and partnerships. bell hooks describes in her book *salvation: BLACK PEOPLE AND LOVE*, that the Black Panther Party members were not allowed to show empathy, care, or what would be considered a “soft side”. They were always sharp, hard, and vigilant which is understandable considering all the hate and criticism they faced. However, that rhetoric disenfranchised generations of men by not allowing them to be able to effectively communicate or show their emotions. While constructing my work, I thought about ways I could incorporate this information because I do think that there is validity in this line of thought, and the themes of toughness and insensitivity are present in the article *You Ain't No Denzel*. The article also talks about how these stigmas can impair African American men when communicating their feelings and their stereotypical role of being the “Man of the house”. In the article *You Ain't No Denzel*, one of the participants of the interview process said:

“I had a college roommate who was a classic Neanderthal. He had issues throughout his marriage because his wife got on the corporate track and I think at one time he became a alcoholic because he had a hard time accepting that. And I think a lot of guys who have that mentality struggle with that...I tell people all of the time that in terms of male female relationships...” (Perry, 491).

This learned behavior becomes the normal behavior that is expected from Black men, which trickles through generations until someone actively chooses to unlearn that behavior. Even though that is a problem in the African American community, that is not the stigma I wanted to highlight in my work. The article *You Ain't No Denzel* states, "Although hip hop culture continues to provide a significant number of media portrayals of African American men, contemporary representations are more varied and diverse than in years past." (Perry, 487) I wanted to highlight that there are men who can effectively communicate, and the role of the insensitive male isn't always positive. Also, what would happen if there was more communication of feelings and vulnerability?

Fathers play a vital role because they set an example for how the behavior their sons should exhibit, and how their daughters should be treated. This is a cultural and religious ideal that greatly influences the Black community. The man should assertive and dominant over his household, but compassionate and respectful. Society and the Black Church expects Black men to hold contradictory traits because what his home needs and what the world needs him to be are two separate things. Society's construct on what the Black man should be greatly affect the "home life". The standards of a Black man in the world often are not helpful to him when he is with his wife and family. The world can't see the Black man fold, cry, or be vulnerable; however, those are healthy emotions that contribute to a healthy relationship. While trying to find ways to portray this influence in my work, I considered the following questions: How does the influence of fathers on their daughter become something I can portray on stage? I thought about if that thought process would be effective or if having a male involved in the project be more effective.

While analyzing the role of fathers, it is imperative to look at the role of mothers when discussing how family roles influence relationships. bell hooks writes about an interesting concept in her book *salvation: BLACK PEOPLE AND LOVE*. “The wife (Black woman) creating the sanctuary for her family and husband against racism—a space for them to feel important, loved, and valued.” (hooks, 100) How detrimental is it that to the Black woman who creates this space of security and safety for everyone but herself? The article *Courtship Season*, wrote “Unions between the Black upper class, on the other hand, symbolized proper conduct, which was understood as necessary for racial advancement in a racialized nation. The elite believed such marriages countered the racist stereotype that people of color were incapable of loving, sustained relationships.” (Alexander, 1) A generational shift occurred when younger generations of women saw their mothers play the self-sacrificing role and wanted nothing of it. bell hooks calls this idea “sacrificial martyr- a self-sacrificing woman who gives all her love, attention, and devotion to husband and children” with no reciprocation except love. That younger generation of women were forced to pick a role of self-sacrificing or the polar opposite, the selfish diva—a woman who wants her own autonomy and wants to explore without limitations, whether that includes love or not. As I started creating my work, I thought about this theory would inform my work. I made movement with contradicting tempos, textures, and feelings to illustrate the constant struggle between the two perceived roles of women. I looked for middle ground in the choreography that had not been talked about in either of the readings.

I had to make choreographic choices while creating movement whether to dive deep into the stereotype to investigate and truly dedicate myself to creating movement that exhibited this, or I would go against the grain and make movement that showed the invalidity of those notions. I chose to create movement that showcased both sides of the theory. In my process I chose to

incorporate both aspects into my piece because they are both valid Black experiences that impact every type of relationship. I didn't want to invalidate any experience because there is not one path that Black people take in their relationships. I have seen many young women battle the line of maintaining autonomy and their free will while still having "love" and devoting attention and devotion to love, relationships, and a family. This is where the phrase "you can have it all" stems from. However, it's very interesting that whenever this phrase comes up in popular culture, it does not always have a positive connotation. Most of the time in popular film, it shows a struggle to try to maintain it all, where the woman is still sacrificing in order to maintain. This struggle is seen in movies such as *Love & Basketball* and movies like it that document the journey of balancing career with relationships. Both Black men and Black women are supposed to be superheroes and superhumans who can flip their intentions and emotions on and off without letting it affect their personal/intimate life and their work/world life. This balance is one that is very important, but one of the most difficult to obtain. These ideals made me think about the structure of my performance and how I would include those influences with only having two female dancers. This helped me refine some of the movement I was making from improvisation and word association sessions because I had to decide which perception I was going to showcase at any given point throughout the piece. It forced me to make clear decisions so they would read to the audience without being confusing or unclear. I reevaluated if my movements were portraying any of those stereotypes; if so, why? I looked at how those ideals might sway an audience member to read my movement differently and that impact on the piece.

While doing research, I found that most young black adults are realizing the harm in promoting a single relationship as their "relationship goals". "Relationship Goals" is a new phenomenon in the social media age that exemplifies what an ideal relationship is. The "It"

couple of the street/town/state/country or being the Jones' that everyone was keeping up with ("keeping up with the Jones'"). This generation is finding that while it is still a prevalent phenomenon to idolize couples, it is becoming increasingly dangerous and unrealistic. "You never know what is going on in someone else's relationship behind closed doors", became a common answer I received while conducting interviews with students (my peers) here at The Ohio State University. Culturally, this idea can lead to false advertisements of what relationships truly are; this often times leads to lies and facades as couples try to keep up appearances for the public. I tried very hard to avoid these types of idealistic falsehoods and only work with what was right in front of me whether that be song lyrics, interview audio, or research articles. I didn't want to make anything that wasn't authentic to the moment. In my making process, these types of moments helped keep me honest, raw and real. In the moments of making that were difficult or didn't feel right, remembering those things helped me lean into the difficulty and discomfort. Not only because it would help create a better final piece, but because that's what people often do in relationships as well. It was important to me to recreate as many of those raw and real feelings when creating as possible in order to keep it authentic and true to the meaning and development of the work.

I was able to do a lot of this research through interviews with my peers, parents, and older generations. This was my favorite part about my project, besides the performance. The opportunity to hear another person's story from their unedited, raw perspective is something that should not be taken for granted. While I spent a lot of time unpacking the word love when reading and analyzing scientific studies, this process was the total opposite. If we were to compare the word love to a surgery- looking through studies was the dissecting of the word, while the interviews were putting the body back together to make it whole. I made a lot of

movement to the audio from the interviews because each person I interviewed had something different to offer. I chose to record my interviews instead of writing handwritten notes because I wanted to use the voices, their talking pattern, inflection, and cadence to inform my movement. It allowed the interviewee's emotion to truly tell how they felt, and thus helped me create material that reflected that emotion. In this process, I would listen to the interview and create material. I found that my material was different for every person I interviewed even though, for the most part, I asked everyone the same questions. It was interesting how someone's voice and words could inspire different movement. For example, my grandmother is from South Carolina, and when I was creating movement from her interview it was more delicate classic. Southern stereotypes influenced my movement because of what she was saying and how she was saying it. However, in the same movement, I felt as though I was moving very deeply and connected to the earth because of her Southern accent, and that drew something else from my body and my movement. In contrast, when I created movement to one of my peer's interview, the movement moved quickly and traveled a lot through space. This could be due to the fact that she was a fast talker, or got a lot of different ideas into one interview. Different aspects of the interviews inspired my movement in different ways. I also tried to recreate the movement at a later time to make sure that the emotion I originally thought was in the movement, was able to be recreated and still have the same authentic feeling as when I first created it. These interviews showed all the emotions that are associated with love and added the heaviness, weight, and meaning back into the word. It made "love" human, and meaningful.

A lot of individual's relationship capabilities stem from their character built on their foundational beliefs. These foundation character building blocks that solidify a person's beliefs and values, are the same building blocks that help them discover how they will develop inter-

and intra- personal skills. A lot of these foundational building blocks for interpersonal relationships are not taught but observed. Of course one's parents will teach them basic manners and how to interact with elders, but deeper interpersonal skills are often observed in conventional places of teaching. However, these places of teaching do not teach what someone will observe- for example; a familial household. A mother and father are always teaching their children's lessons, but what a child observes in the household between their parents, and their extended family, forms a lot of lessons that will be taught verbally. The same happens in social settings and places of faith, such as Church.

Through my research I have found that a large percentage of African American couples base their success on their personal and their partners relationship with God. In the article *Faith & African American Marriages*, "With in the African American life, even less is known [less research is done] about how religion functions to support families. However, recent work by Curran et al.,(2010) indicates that African Americans tend to view marriage as a 'sacred vow' and a 'covenant'." (Marks, 697) This does not always mean being in Church every single Sunday, but their overall relationship with God. A lot of gospel music has the same sentiments people used to describe their relationships because it is another relationship. A lot of the choreographic themes I thought about when creating movement, resurfaced when I created movement to Gospel music. I found Gospel music to be incredibly influential when creating movement because it carries a lot of emotion. Which leads to a deeper conversation of why. Why is this a determining factor in many young adult's lives when looking at relationships? Through interviews I found that the qualities that are often talked about and revered in Church; are admirable qualities in a partner. An understanding of unconditional and everlasting love, faith, determination, hope, dealing with doubt, covenant bond, perseverance, and devotion.

Summary of Results:

I decided that most of the performance would be danced to the interviews I conducted during my research. The interviews coupled with the movement would be able to inform the audience in two ways at once which I thought would be impactful. The voices of the people I interviewed added more people and perspectives to the piece which I liked and thought made the piece fuller, while there only being two dancers. It felt like a piece that encompassed a whole community instead of a particular story of two dancers and a musician. In using the interviews, there were no counts for the movement and it was up to the dancers to be in tune with each other and use breath in order to keep the same timing. This is important because it requires a lot of time and a lot of dancing together to be able to stay in tune with another dancer, even when you're not looking at each other. This is a theme that came up in my research; dependability, trusting, and faith are all important with dancing with another person when a dance has no specific counts. The same relationship that is forged between two dancers can emulate the same traits that I explored and analyzed while doing my research.

I made a choreographic decision not to dance to Gospel music in the final performance because I didn't want the audience to think that was the only influence I studied for this research. I found that while the Church was an influential factor, there were other factors that were just as influential and I didn't want the Gospel music to overshadow the other influences.

My performance has two women performing with a male vocalist, I thought about the male vocalist role in the piece. He stood out because he was the only male, but his relationship to the dancers was just as instrumental in the story as well. His interaction and stage presence added to the tone and message of the piece that cannot be shown in the female body. The implementation of a male voice and presence was important in my piece because it was a big

part of my research as well. I strategically thought about his purpose and how he would be able to tell his own story through the lens of my piece. We had many discussions about what this piece would mean for him, how he felt the piece was important our community, and what kind of stance he wanted to take in this piece.

The piece reflects a lot of the themes that came up the research like communication, trusting, faith, and being in tune with one another. I strived to emulate and welcome the idea of many different experiences while still having a common through line. I believe in the validity of people's experiences and emotions even if they are not the ones I've experienced myself.

Implication for Future Goals/Relationship to the Field:

This work made me think more deeply about why my instinctive reactions were instinctual and what made other's perceptions and beliefs different than my own. It then challenged me to take all of the information I had gathered, and produce a work that showcased as much of that information as possible in a comprehensive and precise way. This research impacts my life daily, and it was important for me to see how my own upbringing as well as those around me affect how I perceive and share.

Creating this work made me reflect on how deeply I delve into this work and physical practice of the movement and how it has compared to other choreographic works I have been in. It made me realize the physical and emotional investment I made to the piece, and how this type of work should be transferred to other pieces I perform. I found myself working more deeply in this work than any other work I've performed and I felt I was doing myself a disservice by not being this invested in other works. Working at a deeper level and creating my own story will make me a better performer and will physically change the way I perform movement.

This process has shown me that I need to perform work that has meaning and impact on my community. I feel differently about work that has a cultural purpose and presence than other work I've seen and performed. This work was important to me because it part of the cultural storytelling through the Arts that the African American culture is known for. I was able to contribute my work and the feelings of those around me to a larger community. I felt that my work was able to impact more people because it encompassed so many different people and thought processes, and I was able to share that with others for them to then start their own dialogue about their values and what's important to them.

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