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QUEERING IDENTITY IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA:
PERFORMANCE DRAMAS OF SHARON BRIDGFORTH AND TREY ANTHONY

A Thesis Presented

by

ADEWUNMI R. OKE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

February 2015

Theater

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ADEWUNMI R. OKE

Approved as to style and content by:

Priscilla Page, Chair

Megan Lewis, Member

Gilbert McCauley, Member

Penny Remsen, Department Chair
Department of Theater

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to little Black girls
Questioning their identity, their purpose
Tired of crying and fighting because people
Do not care or understand
Who they are

To little Black girls everywhere
Who don't fit the mythical norm
Who are not afraid to dream
Little Black girls
Who go against the grain to do their own thing

For feisty, little Black girls
Who are creators of their own worlds
Dancing to the rhythm of their own drums
Not allowing what they see on multiple canvases,
Stifle their shine

Let this work inspire and move you to action.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for what the Lord has done for me. He has put people in my life who are roots. I appreciate you all and my heart is full of gratitude for each of you.

I first want to say thank you to my thesis committee, which consists of Priscilla Page, Megan Lewis and Gilbert McCauley. As my thesis chair, Priscilla has gave me books to help me with my writing; pearls of wisdom; and copious notes on my various drafts. She taught me to be more self-critical and accountable for the role I play in a situation no matter how the cards fall. Then, Megan has encouraged me to think critically about putting theory into practice, including the successes and the pitfalls. She taught me that failure is nothing to be ashamed of because we learn our best lessons from our mistakes. Lastly, Gil has been a sage elder who recognized my strengths when I did not. He taught me that owning my brilliance is a beautiful thing and I should not worry so much.

Next, I want to thank the Department's faculty and staff for their involvement and support in my project. I want to shout out Judyie Al-Bilali, Willow Cohen, and Melissa Cleary (of the Fine Arts Center) because they are three extraordinary women who gave me incredible advice and support when planning and executing my thesis festival.

In addition, I want to thank my mother, my sister, and the Johnson family for their unconditional love and support. Even though they were a thousand miles away, they checked in and kept me in their prayers this past year.

Then, I want to thank my fellow graduate students who went through and are still going through the struggle that is graduate school. I have met several graduate students both in and outside this Department who have listened to me talk about some aspect of my thesis. Thank you for being listening ears to my triumphs and my frustrations. I cannot forget the undergraduate students who were a part of my festival: thank you.

Most importantly, I want to thank the artists, Five College faculty, and Valley community members involved in BQDW Festival. Working with each of them on my project has been a life changing experience. I learned so much about myself during this process. I am humbly grateful.

ABSTRACT

QUEERING IDENTITY IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: THE PERFORMANCE DRAMAS OF SHARON BRIDGFORTH AND TREY ANTHONY

FEBRUARY 2015

ADEWUNMI R. OKE, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

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Noticeably, there is little to no cross-cultural analysis of Black queer women artists of the African diaspora in Diaspora, Literary and Theatre and Performance studies. These disciplines tend to focus on geographic locations with an emphasis on the United States, the Caribbean islands and Europe in relation to the African continent. In addition, the work of Black men artists holds precedence in discussions of blackness, diaspora, and performance. Overwhelmingly, the contributions of Black women artists in the diaspora pales in comparison to their male counterparts, especially in number. More drastically, the voices of Black queer women artists actually published are few. Because of these discrepancies within scholarship and practice, I follow the footsteps of the late scholar Gay Wilentz to advocate a diaspora literacy of Black women writers across the diaspora. I employ a transnational feminist approach to survey the work of Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony, two Black queer women artists who explore intersectionality in regards to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationality. I also curated and produced Black/Queer/Diaspora/Womyn Festival, a festival of staged readings and panel discussions that placed both artists at the center. This thesis fully details the planning and execution of the festival, an evaluation of the successes and pitfalls of the festival,

and then draws conclusions on how both scholars and practitioners can further engage in a diaspora literacy for Black queer women artists.

Key words: African diaspora, theatre, Black queer women artists, transnational feminism

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Growing up in the American South during the 1990s, I struggled with my identity as an African-American (Black) girl with Nigerian heritage. I experienced two different worlds while living with my divorced parents—my Black side and my Nigerian side. My mother, a Black woman from Mississippi, fell in love with my Nigerian father while they were students at the University of Mississippi (also known as Ole Miss). They soon married following their graduations at Ole Miss and a few years later had my older sister, Adeola, who was born in my father's hometown of Ibadan, Nigeria. I, on the other hand, was born in the United States in Atlanta, GA. Shortly after my birth though, my parents divorced. As a result, my sister and I lived with our father in Georgia for the school year. For holidays and summer vacation, we travelled back and forth to Mississippi well into our teenage years. We became extremely close with our mother's side, our Black side, of the family the Johnsons, who are descendants of the Harrisons. The Johnsons not only spoke our language with a Southern dialect, but they also fed us soul food while teaching us their family history and the agonies and ecstasies of being Black in America.

My relationship to my Nigerian side, however, is drastically different. I felt disconnected from my father and his family because of distance, language, and knowledge. The rest of my father's family still resides in Nigeria, a place I visited once during the summer I turned six years old. From what I remember of this visit, I found communicating with my father's family limiting. Only a handful of his relatives spoke

English that I actually understood. For reasons I do not know, my father never taught his children how to speak his language. He only spoke to my sister and I in English, but he often spoke Yoruba to his family and friends in our presence. Not knowing how to speak my father's language put us in an awkward and frustrating position, especially amongst my father's relatives and friends. We desperately wanted to communicate with my father and his family, but our ignorance of Yoruba signified us as "Americanized."

In reality, my sister and I resided somewhere in between our Black side and Nigerian side. We ate spicy, Yoruba cuisine, listened to Nigerian music and wore African garments on special occasions, which meant that we were not just "Black," but also "African." In spite of our brief exposure to Yoruba culture, I felt closed off from my Nigerian side. I viewed the Yoruba language as a gateway to understanding my father's personality, worldview and family history. I wished to talk to him in his language because I thought it would bring me closer to him. Living in this reality and attending public school was no small feat. No one knew what to call me and I had no idea what to call myself. I struggled with finding the language to not only to define myself, but also to express myself.

Black feminist scholar bell hooks says it best "language is a place of struggle" for the broken voice of "the Other" whose pain and "speech of suffering...is a sound that nobody wants to hear" (145-146)¹. I had a voice broken by the racial categories on standardized tests, which never accurately portrayed me. These categories marginalized my identity into the blank circle next to "Black/African American." The term "African

¹ See hooks' *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.

American” felt like a huge umbrella that fused Black Americans and African immigrants together as if being Black and African were one in the same. (I know first-hand how similar and different these two cultures actually are.) According to my teachers and classmates, I did not fit the mold of what it meant to be “Black” because I did not sound or act Black. My name itself was a clue that I was “different” and not from here. Once I revealed that my father was Nigerian, I became “Other.”

Suddenly I had an African accent—in one instance, a British accent—that I never knew I had. My childhood visit to Nigeria warranted questions about *the Lion King* and a request to speak “African.” I also had several arguments with my peers and adults about the validity of my citizenship even though I was born in the U.S., which makes me a “U.S. Citizen.” Non-Africans deemed me “Nigerian,” which was not a bubble that I could fill in on tests. I was uncomfortable with this label because I did not see myself as “Nigerian” and neither did other Nigerians. Yet, my grade school teachers referred to me as a good student who was “articulate” for her age, while a few of my Black classmates whispered “Oreo”—Black on the outside, but White on the inside—within earshot of my presence.

In spite of my struggles at school and home, I mended my broken voice through my relationships with my mother and sister; these two women taught me the beauty of reading and writing. Although I cherished my long-distance phone calls with my mother, I felt there were things I wanted to say, but could not always articulate over the phone. As a solution, my mother encouraged me to write down my feelings and send them to her in letters. In my letters, I disclosed to my mother my detachment from my father’s roots and my feelings towards not being “Black” or “Nigerian.” Her response was

that I am both because of who my parents are. Her prayer was that one day I would learn to embrace both sides of me without worrying about where and how I fit into these two identities.

In addition, my older sister became another person that I could confide in about my dual identities. I remember sharing some of my school experiences with my sister after school one day. Despite of our age difference, she shared similar stories and lessons she learned. Our conversation taught me that even though I felt like I was alone, I was not alone. My sister had already experienced my struggle and understood what I was going through, especially when it came to my father's aloofness. Another way I connected with my sister was my passion for reading books. Along with her old clothes and shoes, my sister passed down her collection of books, which included poetry, novels, and plays she had to read for school. When she went away to college, my sister's books became my prized possession. Reading her books not only brought me closer to her, but also allowed me to escape my reality and explore various perspectives from the expansive literary canon.

In retrospect, my struggles with identity resulted from lack of communication with my father and the fixed identity categories I learned in school. My relationships with my mother and sister served to assuage my broken voice. Language, in spite of its limitations, gave me the freedom to explore different worlds and create my own truth in the written word. I developed a passion for reading literature, particularly poetry, classic novels, and plays. I experimented with language by writing essays, poetry, short stories, and eventually plays. My positive experiences with language empowered me

intellectually and creatively. I sought to reclaim my sense of self by finding my voice in the words that I wrote on the page. Although I typically reserved my words for personal reasons, writing became a device for my self-expression.

Both my connection to the African Diaspora and my love for the written language place me in a socio-historical position. There is a significant tradition of writing, especially amongst Black women of the diaspora. The late Nellie McKay acknowledges that there is a long history of Black women, including Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker, investing in the art of words. She also notes that these Black women writers and others provide “a rendering of the black woman’s place in the world in which she lives, as she shapes and defines that from her own impulses and actions” (151).² Rightfully so, I believe Black women artists of the African Diaspora of the twenty-first century, such as Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony, not only give specific renderings of Black women, but also queer the notion of identity as fixed categories.

Significantly, I find it necessary to discuss my positionality in relation to my project. I write from the perspective of a Black heterosexual woman from the American South who is half-Nigerian and half Black American. In no way do I believe that my personal story of identity is akin to that of Bridgforth and Anthony’s herstories. However, I view myself as an ally and I am advocating their work as Black queer women artists; thus, acknowledging Bridgforth and Anthony’s contributions to art and culture. As Black queer women artists, Bridgforth and Anthony disrupt fixed categories of identity by investigating the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality in

² See McKay’s essay “Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon.” [1987] in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl.

their work. This disruption and intersection of identity is what I am exploring in my graduate thesis project. For instance, how does the work of Bridgforth and Anthony engage the complexity of identity, particularly the identities of Black queer women in the African Diaspora? In what ways do these artists employ tropes of African performance (music, language, and form) to challenge Western conventions of art? How are the works of Bridgforth and Anthony in conversation with one another from a transnational feminist perspective?

Background and Context

Almost thirty years ago, *The Black Scholar* created its spring 1986 issue in hopes of encouraging the next generation of Black female writers of the African Diaspora. The editors credit Michigan State University's "The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora" conference in October 1985 conference as its inspiration. The conference was a success given that some 500 people attended the conference and participated in workshops and panel discussions on black women's literary traditions in the diaspora. For instance, the involvement of women writers and critics from the United States, Africa and the Caribbean introduced a global dimension to the conference. *Black Scholar* editors claimed that the "maturation of a black women's literary movement...is a serious international phenomenon whose time is to come" (n.p.).

Since this issue's original publication, there have been subsequent conferences marking the literary movement of Black women writers of the diaspora and the potential for future generations. With the exception of the aforementioned conferences and few other attempts, there has not been a variety of cross-cultural studies on Black women

writers of the diaspora. Within literary studies and diaspora studies, scholars tend to focus on specific geographic locations and Black men writers of the diaspora. The strength of Black women writers in the diaspora pales in comparison to their male counterparts, especially in number. More drastically, the voices of Black queer women artists³.

According to the late Gay Wilentz, there is a historical literary tradition of Black women writing across the African Diaspora. She points that MSU's conference on "The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora" in the mid-1980s not only evidenced past women writers of the diaspora, but also shed light on emerging women writers as well. The position of women in the diaspora is fraught because of the male-oriented and Eurocentric literary world, which also affects the publishing world. As a result, Black male voices overshadow the voices of Black women because their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives do not always fit into Black political thought. Wilentz suggests that the difference between Black men writers and women writers is women's inclination to "mother," or pass down creative traditions to the next generation. She compares the literature of African women writers, Caribbean women writers, and U.S. women writers to investigate the commonalities amongst women writers of the diaspora and the differences within their work. Ultimately, her study evidences that the experiences and writings of Black women in the diaspora are not monolithic, but diverse.

³ For the clarity of this thesis, I define Black queer women artists (BQWAs) as Black women from Africa or from the African Diaspora, which includes the United States, Canada, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean Islands (also known as West Indies). These women are artists who perform original work by singing, composing, dancing, or spoken word; write as playwrights, poets, essayists, and novelists; and/or create visual art/media. BQWAs not only identify as queer because of their sexuality, but also queer the boundaries between race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and nationality in their creative work.

For my thesis project, I am employing the lens of transnational feminism to engage in the work of two Black queer women artists, Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony. I define transnational feminism as a theoretical approach that advocates the intersections of identity, such as race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality as part of the conversation of the creative work of both Bridgforth and Anthony. Identity categories are complex and are not mutually exclusive of one another, but in conversation with one another. In addition, transnational feminism promotes collaboration and working across disciplines as well as national borders. Collaborating with people within and outside of theatre is already a given, especially considering my graduate coursework has delved into Afro-American studies, Women, Gender and Sexuality studies, and Literary studies. Moreover, transnational feminism challenges academic scholarship and its reverence for the Anglo-American model. In its current moment though, scholarship rarely blends Theatre, Diaspora and Literary studies together. My vision for my project is to follow Wilentz's footsteps and advocate diaspora literacy of Black queer women artists in theatre.

Defining Transnational Feminism

Transnational feminism provides me with a foundation for transnational feminist discourse, which questions issues surrounding race, gender, sexuality and nationality--issues that are absent in multinational projects that call for transnational approaches. In addition, transnational feminism promotes projects that decolonize feminism across national and cultural borders. Feminist scholars of this field focus on building lateral relationships instead of vertical, hierarchical relationships within academia. This

promotion of lateral relationships calls for collaboration across disciplines and practices, an aspect that I believe are crucial to my thesis.

Transnational feminist studies stems from feminists of color and Third World feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. Classic texts like the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977); Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1980); Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1982) and Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar's "Challenging Imperial Feminism" (1984) discursively challenge the gaps of Western feminism and its fraught relationship to difference, such as race and ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Continuing this thread of discourse today, transnational feminist scholars not only decolonize Western and global feminisms, but also other productions of knowledge across national and cultural borders that engender inequalities based on difference.

In their book *Scattered Hegemonies: Post Modernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (1994), Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan analyze transnationalism through postmodern theory from the 1980s and 1990s. Like several feminists of color and Third World feminists, they find postmodern thought problematic because of its omission of gender and race (Grewal and Kaplan 21). In a later essay, Grewal and Kaplan employ of *transnational* to address "the asymmetries of the globalization process...and examine the circulation of this term and its regulation" (664). For example, we must pay special attention to what scholarly publications, conference papers and panels, and personnel matters within academia are "transnational." There is a lack of non-West locations and

few works of regional and ethnic studies in Western theory collections on the subject of transnationalism.

With *Scattered Hegemonies*, Grewal and Kaplan encourage their readers to think of a transnational critiquing mode of “scattered hegemonies,” or “the effects of mobile, multiple subjectivities that replace the singular European subject” (7). In their opinion, the goal of transnationalism is to “cross cultural and economic boundaries” (21) and “intersect discourses of gender” (28). Mapping scattered hegemonies can lead diverse practices to establish transnational solidarity (19). This “transnational solidarity” Grewal and Kaplan speak of can easily be misunderstood as the goal of multiculturalism, which has a tendency to “efface all historicity and mask the legacy of racism and its systemic connection to dominant definitions of culture and civilization” (Moallem 244). The ultimate goal of Grewal and Kaplan’s transnational project is to “deconstruct monolithic categories and mythic binaries” surrounding feminism (28) and to embrace “unequal, uneven and non-synchronous expressions” (5).

Instead of embracing these “unequal expressions,” Ashwini Tambe views transnational feminism as “problematizing the notions of gender equality...dismantling gender hierarchies” (1). Tambe’s definition demonstrates the social and political capabilities of transnational feminism as a field of study. She further writes, “transnational approaches are best known for theorizing multidirectional connections between locales...the mobility of people, goods and ideas” (3). Given our contemporary age of globalization, technology has the power to connect individuals across the globe.

Yet, in spite of this virtual connection, access to scholarly material is still a tricky thing because of various time zones, geographical sites, and busy schedules in the Eurocentric publishing world. Moreover, Tambe notes "transnational feminist approaches collapse, or at least trouble the scalar divisions of conventional scholarship" (3). I think this last point is important because scholarship has its disadvantages—i.e. the literal divide between disciplines and anxiety over collaborating outside respective disciplines.

Another important issue in transnational feminist theory is the sporadic inclusion of sexuality on matters of the nation-state. Grewal and Kaplan criticize the lack of sexuality studies in scholarship. They note that it is important to "bring questions of transnationalism into conversations with the feminist study of sexuality given that there are separate spheres of [sexuality studies] as a result of disciplinary divides in the U.S. academy" (666). The separate spheres Grewal and Kaplan are referring to are "the separation of sexuality from the study of race, class, nation, and religion" (666) and "the demarcation in the United States of international area studies from American area studies" (668). The separation of these specific spheres is reminiscent of Briggs et al. wariness of transnationalism being too U.S. centric. When it comes to sexuality studies though, "academic sexuality studies can be linked to the emergence of gay and lesbian politics of identity and new queer formations based on U.S. and European examples with the primary emphasis being on white, middle class life" (669).

Adding to the transnational feminist conversation are Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, two immigrant women of color who recognize how geography separates

people of color and their respective communities. While working in academia in North America, their identities as "minorities" were at the forefront. One revelation they had while working on their book *Minor Transnationalism* (2008) is that "our battles are always framed vertically, and we forget to look sideways to lateral networks that are not readily apparent" (1). Both scholars point that there is little to no discourse among various minority groups because of "a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that has historically pitted different ethnic groups against one another" (2). Lionnet and Shih examine this historical tension and attempt to mend this tension by facilitating a dialogue between racial and ethnic minorities because "minority bodies matter" (16).

Undoubtedly, there is a need for a transnational feminist project that critically examines race, gender, and sexuality while problematizing inequalities of power across national borders. Black queer studies scholars like E. Patrick Johnson, Cathy Cohen, Rinaldo Walcott and Jafari Allen are part of a network of scholars who examine the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, which falls under the transnational umbrella. Both Walcott and Allen lean towards fashioning a queer diaspora that crosses national and cultural borders similar to South Asian scholar Gayatri Gopinath, while Johnson and Cohen challenge queerness and its relation to marginalized subjects.

Unpacking the Black/Queer/Diaspora

In the introduction to *GLQ's* 2012 special Black Queer Diaspora issue, Allen writes "the terms *black, queer, and diaspora* have already begun to be elaborated beyond the metaphors and concepts offered by these constituencies" (emphasis in the original,

211). “Blackness,” as Nicole Fleetwood suggests, “circulates. It is not rooted in a history, person, or thing, although it has many histories and many associations with people and things” (6). In other words, there are various iterations and perceptions of Blackness across the globe. According to Allen, “the ways in which African (descended) groups (dis)identify as Black, Afro-hyphenated, Kreyól, Creole, mixed...are conditioned by particularities of place, in relation to discourses and practices within other places” (216). Both popular culture and academic scholarship, however, primarily emphasize Blackness as “static and constructed only out of the U.S.” (Allen 229).

Historically, twentieth century political thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon shaped the discourse on Black consciousness in Diaspora studies. Following their footsteps, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall continued this discourse by examining the cultural exchanges of the Atlantic Slave trade and its impact on the Black Atlantic diaspora (Oboe and Scacchi 3). Gopinath praises Gilroy and Hall for their diaspora theories, which “moves the concept of diaspora away from its traditional orientation toward homeland, exile and return to the *conception of identity*”⁴ (emphasis added, 6-7). Studies on the Black Atlantic connect to the concept of the African *diaspora*, a term that has historical roots in both Jewish and Black global communities. The term originated with the former to signify the dispersal of exiled Jews outside of Palestine and now represents forced

⁴ Hall coined the phrase “conception of identity,” which refers to two different kinds of identity. The first type of identity relates to a state of being that offers a sense of unity and commonality, but also has an imaginative nature. He writes, “this oneness...is the truth, the essence of...black experience...We should not underestimate or neglect the importance of imaginative rediscovery” (393).

The second type of identity focuses on identity as a process, in which discontinuities of identification are apparent. Hall explains, “Cultural identities are fixed by the past and are a continuous play of history, culture, and power” (394). On the other hand, “identities are names we give the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (394).

See “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (1993).

migrations of other populations⁵. During the mid-1960s and 1970s, early African Diaspora scholars like John Gibbs St. Clair Drake made Pan-African connections to the scattering of Africans from the mother continent to the Americas, the Caribbean (West Indies) isles, Asia, the Middle East and Europe.⁶

Overwhelmingly, scholarship on Blackness historically fortifies the presence of Black men of the diaspora and minimizes the role of Black women. Scholar Lola Young deems Fanon's inscription of the Black woman is unintelligible, especially in his pivotal book *Black Faces, White Masks* (1957). Fanon claimed that he knew nothing about the Black woman, which suggests that he can only speak for himself. However, his exclusion of the Black woman in an overwhelmingly White world suggests that the plight of Black men overshadows the concerns of Black women. Young argues, "The absence and marginal presence of the Black woman from the Fanon's work evidences ambivalence and at times hostility toward Black women" (Fleetwood 26-27).

In a similar fashion, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) fails to take into consideration class and gender. Scholars Annalisa Oboe and Anna Scacchi criticize Gilroy for "making a few African American men the representatives of the diasporic experience and the black counterculture of modernity that it generates" (4). Both Oboe and Scacchi recognize the need within scholarship to expand the geography of the Black Atlantic in their book. They encourage "tracking multidirectional cultural exchanges not only across and around the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, but also across the Pacific

⁵ See Gay Wilentz's "Toward a Diaspora Literature: Black Women Writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States." *College English* 54.4 (April 1992): 385.

⁶ See St. Clair Drake's "African Diaspora and Jewish Diaspora: Convergence and Divergence" in *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1984: 19

and the Indian Oceans, and within the Americas” (5). Expanding and tracking these exchanges will allow for the “interplay between the local and the global and the national and the transnational” (5).

As Grewal and Kaplan evidence in their study of transnational feminist practice, discourse surrounding sexuality is crucial to the field of transnationalism because of its interconnectedness with race, gender, class and nationality. In both academia and mainstream culture, the term “queer” has multiple spellings (i.e. “quare”) and meanings with previous generations. The 1990s saw the emergence of queer studies in conversation with queer activist groups like ACT-UP (an AIDS activist group) and Queer Nation who spoke truth to power on behalf of individuals oppressed by fixed notions of sexual identity⁷. Queer theorist and literary critic Michael Warner explains that queer theory examines sexuality according to relations of power and “challenges normative [social] frameworks that legitimize and institutionalize [dominant] forms of sexuality.”⁸ Black queer theorists E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson write, “queer studies disrupts dominant and hegemonic discourse...destabilize[s] fixed notions of identity [and] deconstruct[s] binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual, gay/lesbian, masculine/feminine, and heteronormativity” (5).

In comparison, Gopinath combats political arenas and academic scholarship’s tendency to split queerness and feminism as two separate spheres that lack intersection in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005). She

⁷ See E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson’s “Introduction: Queering Black Studies/ ‘Quaring’ Queer Studies” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005

⁸ See Warner’s “Queer and Then?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 1 January 2012 < <http://chronicle.com/article/QueerThen-/130161/>>

references *queer* as “a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian’” (11). She employs the categories of *queer* and *diaspora* in her book *Impossible Desires* to “recuperate those desires, practices, and subjectivities rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries” (11). Gopinath’s concept of a *queer diaspora* allows for a critique of “heterosexuality, while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy” (11). She then outlines how a queer diaspora functions as a critique on multiple levels. These levels include “situating the formation of sexual subjectivity within transnational flows of culture, and disorganizing the dominant categories within the United States for sexual variance, namely 'gay and lesbian’” (13).

Ultimately, reading the term “queer” as dichotomous to heterosexuality and heteronormativity is too simple. For example, Warner finds the category of “queer” to be a troubling label that is primarily synonymous with the LGBTQ community⁹, which has a fraught history of giving privilege to members of the White, middle class. Although Warner mentions the advent of queer race studies, his reflection on the current state of queer studies fails to go beyond sexuality. He also neglects to offer suggestions on how to define queerness in the twenty-first century; how intersections of race, gender, and sexuality come into play; and whether there is space for marginalized individuals outside of the LGBTQ community.

⁹ See Warner’s “Queer and Then?”; Lauren Berlant and Warner’s “What does Queer Theory Teach us about X?” *PMLA* 110 (1995): 343-349

On the contrary, Johnson attempts to broaden the parameters of queerness by juxtaposing race, gender, sexuality and culture. He re-appropriates the term “quare” in his essay “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from my Grandmother.” In the spirit of Alice Walker, Johnson defines “quare” akin to Walker’s ruminations of womanism.¹⁰ Johnson’s dictionary entry is as follows:

1. meaning *queer*; also opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play *The Quare Fellow*
2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.
3. one who *thinks* and *feels* and *acts* (and, sometimes, “acts up”); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.
4. one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.
5. quare is to queer as “reading”¹¹ is to “throwing shade.”¹² (125).

What I appreciate about Johnson’s manifesto for “quare” studies is that his definitions address (Black) queerness in terms of race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion. His initial definition not only points to the cultural specificity of Black Americans, but also the social stereotypes of what it means to be Black. Then, his second definition frees perceptions of what it means to be a member of the LGBTQ community and/or a person of color. Johnson’s inclusion of individuals of the LGBTQ community loving men and

¹⁰ See Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (1983)

¹¹ “Reading” is a term that began in the gay community and has trickled into mainstream culture. To “read” someone is to point out a flaw in that person both publicly and in person. See urbandictionary.com for examples.

¹² “Throwing shade” is a phrase that also comes from the gay community, particularly the drag queen community. “Throwing shade” is similar to “reading,” but is more about insulting or judging someone discreetly or indirectly. See urbandictionary.com for examples.

women “sexually and/or nonsexually” is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich’s notion of the “lesbian continuum” and how (non-sexual) homosocial relationships fit within the lesbian identity.¹³

His third and fourth definitions hint at the relationship between “Black” and “queer,” which Johnson and Henderson lay claim to in their Introduction to *Black Queer Studies* (2005). They write, “‘queer’ challenges notions of heteronormativity and heterosexism, ‘black’ resists notions of assimilation and absorption...the double cross [affirms] the inclusive sign of ‘queer,’ while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to ‘black’” (7). To identify, speak and/or act on “Black queerness,” one must understand how dominant power structures perpetuate various forms of oppression and how multiple identities, such as race, class, gender and sexuality, color personal experience.

One thing Johnson’s manifesto lacks, however, is a direct link to the African diaspora, a goal of the Black/queer/diaspora. Johnson’s discussion of a Black “quare” studies conjures African-American vernacular and Anglo etymology, which is not consistent across the diaspora. According to Lionnet and Shih, language, coupled with the body and its physical appearance, is “a crucial marker of identity and nationality” (16-17). Sociologist Brenda Allen affirms this claim in her study on social constructionism by listing a plethora of names some Black queers of the diaspora and call themselves: “*lesbian, transgender, bisexual, gay, batty bwoy, masisi, bulldagger, two-spirited, maricón,*

¹³ See Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer’s “‘I Can’t Think Straight’ ‘Queer’ Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology” *Sociological Theory* 12.2 (July 1994): 180

same gender loving, buller, zami, mati working, dress-up girls, bois, butches, femme, etc...of African descent”(emphasis in original, 213).

Seemingly, Allen’s list implies a friendly visibility of Black queers in the diaspora, which is actually far from the truth. Black feminist scholar Lisa Anderson notes, “The histories of black lesbians and gay men lie in the silences and gaps in black history...black lesbians and gay men are seldom visible in black dramatic literature and performance” (95). Then, critical race theorist Evelyn Hammonds observes that few Black feminists focus on Black lesbian and queer identities as opposed to Black heterosexuality. She explains the historical narrative of the Black female body as hypersexual and heterosexual rules out the “possibility of a Black lesbian sexuality or of a lesbian or queer subject” (180)¹⁴. Discourses surrounding Black lesbian sexuality promote difference and/or equivalence to white lesbian sexualities, which “delimits the fact that Black lesbians share a history with other Black women” (181). In other words, the belief that queerness is a so-called “White, middle class phenomenon” is problematic considering the actual presence and contributions of Black queer women artists in our cultural memory. Fewer published works explore the Black lesbian identity and Black queerness as opposed to Black heterosexuality¹⁵ within the diaspora. Anderson concludes that there are “small numbers of Black women involved in academic criticism” because most Black women are “practitioners rather than scholars” (13).

¹⁴ From *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* Eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997).

¹⁵ *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2004); *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005); and *Spirited: Affirming the Soul and Black gay/lesbian Identity* (2006) are a few projects that study Black queer identities.

Intersecting Theatre and Diaspora Studies

Although separated by the disciplinary spheres of academia that Grewal and Kaplan illustrate, Black studies, Queer People of Color (QPOC) studies and Diaspora studies are in conversation with the work of Black queer women artists. There is a void within theatre research when it comes to investigating works by Black queer women artists from the Diaspora. The time has come to broaden the pool of theatre, Diaspora and literary studies when it comes surveying the work of Black queer women artists. There is a need for a transnational feminist approach to the work of Black women artists instead of categorizing them based on language, culture, sexuality and geographic borders. Seemingly, language and international borders establish a division amongst the work of Black women artists of the Diaspora in the world theatre canon—a similar challenge in transnational feminist studies and the Black/Queer/Diaspora project. Scholars like Wilentz declare the importance of locating and identifying Black women artists, who are cultural producers and progenitors. However, there is a lull in the conversation when it comes to Black queer women artists.

Renowned for his studies on Nommo, Paul Carter Harrison published his anthology *Totem Voices: Plays from the Black World Repertory* (1989) as an effort to investigate the rituals and aesthetics of diasporic performance and Black dramatic literature. Harrison posits that the ritual of “word/song” is a generic technique to storytelling in black culture that includes incantations, polyrhythm, repetition and onomatopoeia (xii). He emphasizes that understanding the ritual of “word/song” informs the dramaturgy of performance in the Black diaspora. I think Harrison makes a case for

the employment of “word/song” in the works of Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, and other men playwrights of the diaspora. His anthology primarily examines the work of Black men playwrights from the United States, the Caribbean islands and Latin America. Harrison does not make a strong claim for Black women playwrights of the diaspora because his inclusion of Black women playwrights pales in comparison.

To his defense, Harrison has lengthy discussions on Lorraine Hansberry and Adrienne Kennedy’s works, but he anthologizes Ntozake Shange as a sole woman inheritor of “word/song.” Black women artists like Kennedy, Werewere Liking (Senegal/Ivory Coast), and Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe) created work during the same moment as Shange. Yet, Harrison’s inclusion of only one Black woman artist, an American too, perpetuates the Lorraine Hansberry effect. This effect situates Hansberry, or substitute one fortunate Black woman artist, as a one-hit wonder that scholars and critics praise for her most famous play as a standard in the theatre world. The Hansberry effect suggests that there is only room for one Black woman playwright at a time. No “shade” to Hansberry and the success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is a powerful piece about a Black American family living in the late twentieth century, but the piece is a token example of Black theatre at its best.

In a later anthology called *Black theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (2002), Harrison and his co-editors attempt to include more discussions on Black women playwrights. Their anthology presents essays (by) and about Black women artists, including Adrienne Kennedy, Sydné Mahone, Aishah Rahman, Shange, and Shay

Youngblood. Although Harrison and his co-editors acknowledge several Black women artists, I cannot help but notice the lack of women artists outside of the States. In both of his anthologies, Harrison deftly juxtaposes the works and aesthetics of multiple Black male voices from various geographic locations of the diaspora, which is an admirable feat considering the complex intersections of Black identity in the African Diaspora. At the same time, featuring the voices of a plethora of Black male playwrights drowns out the perspectives of several Black women playwrights who are of value too.

Following Harrison's footsteps, William B. Branch, an African American playwright and American Book Award winner, locates Black dramatists across the Diaspora in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, Europe and the United States. In the introduction to his book *Crosswinds: An Anthology of Black Dramatists in the Diaspora* (1992), Branch traces Black performance from the Egyptian Abydos passion plays to the inception of the African Grove Theatre to the contemporary works of Soyinka, Walcott, and August Wilson. Similar to Harrison's *Totem Voices*, Branch includes only one Black woman dramatist, Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland, in his anthology. Although Branch looks outside of the United States for Black women playwrights, his inclusion of Sutherland's work not only perpetuates a Lorraine Hansberry effect similar to Shange, but also hints at the accessibility and knowledge of works by Black playwrights outside of the U.S.

According to translators Christiane P. Makward and Judith G. Miller, there are challenges in acquiring the work of Black Francophone women artists, such as the lack of literacy opportunities for women and their duties "for keeping their households

functioning” (18). I have issues with Makward and Miller’s statements about Black Francophone women because they dangerously situate Black women as victims of “backwards” patriarchal societies in developing countries. Although Black women across the diaspora do not have the same privileges as Western women, all Black women are not illiterate or keeping house. What I find confusing about Makward and Miller’s argument is that they mention a few Black Francophone women artists, such as Liking, Condé, and Ina Césaire (Martinique) as counter to their generalization.

In spite of these mentions, Makward and Miller include Césaire as the only Black Francophone playwright in their anthology *Plays by French and Francophone Women* (1994),¹⁶ which perpetuates the Hansberry effect. Although Makward and Miller’s claims fluctuate, I know language and cultural barriers do affect the accessibility of work by Black women artists. When it came to receiving work to include in GLQ’s Black Queer Diaspora issue, Allen admitted his difficulty of accessing the work of Black queer scholars and artists overseas. Even though he cast a wide net, Allen did not get the response he desired because of various factors, including busy scheduling and time differences. Ultimately, Makward, Miller and Allen’s claims and experiences raise the following questions: how often is work by Black women artists produced and where can we see their work? Who has access to publish and/or translate their work within the diaspora?

Methodology and Overview

¹⁶ In this anthology, Makward and Miller translate the works of French and Francophone women and explore the diasporic nature of the French language and women’s culture in Africa, Canada, France, and the French Caribbean.

In regards to my thesis, I specifically chose the work of Sharon Bridgforth (a Black American playwright who creates in the jazz aesthetic) and Trey Anthony (a Jamaican Canadian producer and playwright). Both Bridgforth and Anthony are two artists who deftly explore the complex identities of Black women of the Diaspora. I think Bridgforth's *con flama* and Anthony's *da Kink in my Hair* attempt to mend the "broken voices"¹⁷ of my generation and those who came before us. Drawn from her personal experience riding the bus in Los Angeles, *con flama* traces Bridgforth's family migration story from the Deep South to the Midwest and to the West Coast. Her central character Gurl, a Black queer girl, comes of age in her chance encounters with strangers on the bus and by listening to her family's history. Then, Anthony sets *da Kink in my Hair* in a Caribbean hair salon and charts the highs and lows of Black women living in Toronto, Canada. This piece examines the relationship Black women have with their hair and how the versatility of Black hair (whether it is natural, relaxed, sewn in as a weave, or worn as a wig) reflects a woman's hair journey and her personal truth. The beauty of *da Kink in my Hair* lies in how Anthony weaves stories of loneliness, love, heartache, shame, and abuse to figure the identities of several Black Canadian women.

In my second chapter, I explore the tenets and principles of the theatrical jazz aesthetic, a Black American art form, to discuss Bridgforth's style within the genre. In *con flama*, Bridgforth presents the stories of several people of color, including her Grandmother's participation in the Great Migration, a survivor of Japanese American incarceration, and participants in the various race riots of the 1960s. Then, my third

¹⁷ In her book, bell hooks writes about her difficulty with finding the language to speak about her experience. She describes her voice as being "broken."

chapter regards the historical and political implications associated with Black hair. By placing Black hair as the central metaphor of *da Kink in my Hair*, Anthony implies the direct correlation between Black hair politics and the contemporary lives of Black Canadian women. In both these chapters, I examine how Bridgforth and Anthony depart from the conventions of Western realism and lean towards African diasporic elements of performance, such as music, language, and form. As Black queer women artists, Bridgforth and Anthony address the intersectionality of Black women's voices in the diaspora.

In the latter part of this document, I discuss my process producing Black/Queer/Diaspora/Womyn (BQDW) Festival as a component of my thesis project. I detail my festival planning, such as choosing a venue, grant writing and collaborating across the Five Colleges, publicity strategies and support within my department. I also reflect on the successes and pitfalls of my thesis festival. I then conclude with closing remarks about my project and how scholars and practitioners can further engage in a diaspora literacy.

CHAPTER 2
QUEERING BODIES OF COLOR IN *CON FLAMA*

Encountering Bridgforth's *blood pudding*

My initial encounter with Sharon Bridgforth was during the spring 2013 seminar course Multicultural Theater Practice¹⁸. Her piece *blood pudding* was on the reading list and a required performance event for the semester. Prior to reading her piece, I did not know what the theatrical jazz aesthetic was nor had I read a piece of theatre that resonated so strongly with me. *blood pudding* is an ancestral text that celebrates New Orleans rich, diverse culture and the people who live there. Set in Congo Square, Bridgforth's characters pray and honor various indigenous people who shaped the city of New Orleans. Her central character GreGre Gurl is a Griot and healer on a spiritual journey to find ancestral love. The piece is her call/prayer for her spiritual rebirth and the remaining characters move her forward in her journey. Docta Gombo is "a conjure man, Eleggua, Divine Trickster" who scats and sings his text (2). He is in conversation with Song--the Queen of Juju whose vocabulary consists of "blues/jazz/spirituals and work songs" and the band of three singers who "provide West African and indigenous rhythms" (2).

As a Black woman of Nigerian descent born and raised in the Deep South, I related to the celebration of cultural pride I found in *blood pudding*. Bridgforth's calling of the ancestral tribes throughout her piece spoke to the cultural *mélange* of the

¹⁸ Taught by Prof. Priscilla Page, this graduate seminar "emphasizes the practice and making of theatre by artists of color in the U.S. The course explores the multicultural theater literary canon, specific cultural contexts, production challenges and questions about audience development and sustainability" (MTP Syllabus).

American South of my childhood. While viewing the piece at Hampshire College, I was in awe of how many performers of color were in the space. Both a Latina and a South Asian woman took turns performing the role of GreGre Gurl, while an African American man played Docta Gombo and an African American female vocalist riffed as Song. I recalled the annual International Festival my school produced to celebrate the cultural diversity of its students from various cultural backgrounds. Several of my friends participated in the festival by wearing traditional attire, sharing international cuisine, and performing national dances. Bridgforth crosses ethnic and cultural boundaries by calling indigenous peoples from the Americas and West Africa—i.e. Choctaw, Chickasaw, Tunica, Houma, Ibo, Yoruba, and Wolof several times (4; 19; 28). With each call, she invokes the ancestors and their stories; thus, acknowledging the Diaspora and cultural mingling. By naming various indigenous groups, Bridgforth pays homage to the ancestors whose footsteps the living still follow.

Witnessing the staged reading of *blood pudding* at Hampshire fortified my sense of cultural pride and reverence for the ancestors who have come before me. At the time of the performance, I only had a handful of experiences watching a few performers of color on stage at UMass. I also had a disheartening experience as a Black woman from the South that shook my confidence while working on Marcus Gardley's *Hell in High Water*, which is set in the Mississippi Delta and examines race relations during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. During the rehearsal process, there were a few Black students and community performers who were not using the Southern dialect—the language Gardley wrote in his script. After several attempts to work with these performers, a

couple students revealed to me that they did not want to sound dumb while performing their characters. For some reason, they equated Black + Southern = caricature.

Then, one woman cornered me towards the end of one rehearsal and made me feel ashamed for my presence in the rehearsal process. She explained how her father loathed Mississippi, his birthplace, and did not tolerate his children speaking Black vernacular. Because I was a Southerner, my presence in rehearsals intimidated her and the rest of the cast. She recalled moments in which I flinched during scene work, but she failed to give me a specific example. She thought she was doing me a favor because no one else had the courage to tell me about my actions. This encounter was hurtful because I was trying to help a performer master a dialect, but her resistance to the South got in the way. Bridgforth's *blood pudding* came at the right time because I was ready to receive it. The text and the performance affirmed my experience as a woman of color from the South.

Because of my inspirational introduction to Bridgforth's material, I sought to learn more about her creative work and the theatrical jazz aesthetic in my thesis project. As an award-winning playwright and teaching artist, Bridgforth affirms her identity as a Black queer woman artist. She calls herself "an urban born southern/Spirited/Black/lesbian working-class-raised/activist/mother/two-Spirited/artist" (Jones, Bridgforth, and Moore 13). In her piece *con flama*, Bridgforth tells her family's migration story from the Mississippi Delta to Los Angeles. As a young girl, she rode the bus from her working class neighborhood in South Central L.A. to her school in Echo Park. Bridgforth depicts a Black family's Great Migration and a survivor of Japanese

American incarceration, while creating a kaleidoscope of various U.S. cities ablaze during the 1960s. The title *con flama* has a double meaning that speaks to Bridgforth's text. The first meaning comes from Black gay slang and connotes "confusion, frustration and drama," while the second meaning is Spanish for "with flame" (5). Bridgforth plays with tensions between urban and rural; working class and activist; and most importantly Black and queer identities. The jazz aesthetic offers Bridgforth opportunities to queer Blackness and play with non-linear storytelling and non-traditional form, which allow her to explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality in *con flama*. Ultimately, Bridgforth's piece addresses the goal of transnational feminism (i.e. cross cultural and national borders in feminist discourse) and engages with the Black/queer/diaspora project.

A Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic

The theatrical jazz aesthetic is an African American art form that fuses jazz, movement, ritual, song and non-linear storytelling. Its rooted connection to Blackness extends to the creed of the Combahee River Collective, which states that once Black women are free, everyone is free¹⁹. Notably, women of color have laid the foundation for the jazz aesthetic, which affirms Alice Walker's claim that Black mothers, grandmothers, and ancestors are artists in their own rights²⁰. Jazz aesthetic practitioners credit award-winning playwright Aishah Rahman with coining the phrase in the 1970s. In Sydne Mahone's anthology *Moon Marked and Touched by the Sun* (1994), Rahman defines the

¹⁹ See Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" and *Experiments in a Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic* p. 7

²⁰ See Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*

jazz aesthetic as "multiple ideas and experiences through language, movement, visual art and spirituality simultaneously" (283). Even though Rahman coined the phrase, legendary choreographer Dianne McIntyre is the foremother of the jazz aesthetic. McIntyre has choreographed for dance and theatre for over 40 years and her distinctive style conjures "cultural history, personal narrative and nuances in music and poetic text."²¹ Under her leadership, Harlem's Sounds in Motion Studio served as a creative space for artists and musicians like Ntozake Shange²², Laurie Carlos, Craig Harris²³, Sekou Sundiata²⁴, and Marlies Yearby²⁵.

One groundbreaking artist who worked with McIntyre and Shange is award-winning director, writer and performer Laurie Carlos. Carlos is "an elder and maverick" in the jazz aesthetic tradition who has worked closely with Bridgforth on several productions, including *blood pudding* and *con flama* (Jones 92). In an interview with jazz aesthetic scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones²⁶, Carlos states that the jazz aesthetic "is your very personal, deep spiritual journey through the work" (92). An example of this

²¹ See <http://www.diannemcintyre.com/>

²² Shange actually work shopped *for colored girls* in its early stages of development.

²³ Harris is a jazz trombonist, composer, conceptionalist, and educator who began his career in the late 1970s. He has collaborated with artists like Carlos, Sundiata, Shange, Yearby and Hip Hop artists like the Roots and Rakim. See <http://www.craigsharris.com/biography/>

²⁴ Sundiata (1948-2007) was a spoken word artist, educator and artist-activist who began his career during the Black Arts Movement. He was also a long-time collaborator with Harris. His creative work includes *Udu* (formerly known as *Elijah the Prophet*). He conceived and performed his last piece *51st (dream) state* as part of "the America Project," which centered on contemplations of American identity. See Sekou Revisited Timeline. <http://www.sekousundiata.org/mapp/web/timeline>

²⁵ Yearby is the award-winning artistic director of Movin' Spirits Dance Theater in New York and a former company member of Urban Bush Women. She earned a Tony award nomination for her choreography in the Pulitzer prize-winning Broadway musical *Rent*. See http://herbergerinstitute.asu.edu/news/press_release.php?id=225

²⁶ Jones is Director of the John L. Warfield Center for African American Studies and Associate Professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Texas Austin. She is also the leading scholar of theatrical jazz aesthetic and served as dramaturg and performer for both Carlos and Bridgforth.

“spiritual journey” is Bridgforth’s story about rewriting *con flama*²⁷. Bridgforth recalls meeting with Carlos and a couple of the cast members for dinner before the first rehearsal in 1998. Their lively conversation quickly turned when Carlos raised questions about *con flama*, inquiring about the main character’s voice and why Gurl was riding the bus alone. According to Bridgforth, she responded with tears because she knew she was shying away from Gurl’s voice out of fear, fear of dredging up old wounds. Carlos recognized that Bridgforth’s spiritual journey as a writer was missing from her initial draft of *con flama* and Gurl’s voice needed a larger presence. Ultimately, Bridgforth’s conversation with Carlos provided the breakthrough she needed and she rewrote her script for the following rehearsal. This particular story indicates that even for jazz aesthetic practitioners, experiencing their spiritual journeys in their work is a challenging process in itself.

As the leading scholar of the jazz aesthetic, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones has written several essays detailing the principles of the jazz aesthetic and the dismantling of Western theatre traditions. In her essay "Casting a Wide Net" (2005), Jones notes that the jazz aesthetic "borrows many elements from the musical world of jazz—improvisation, process over product, ensemble synthesis, solo virtuosity" (598). Significantly, the jazz aesthetic process puts what Carlos calls "the deep, spiritual journey" at the center of the work. Jones notes that humility is necessary because performers have to "find their own way" through the aesthetic (599). In addition, ensemble synthesis is the result of artists

²⁷ Bridgforth shared this story a couple times during her artist residency for BQDW Festival. Jones includes an e-mail Bridgforth wrote that talks about this experience more in depth in her essay "Making Language: The Jazz Aesthetic and Feminist Foundations" (2007).

collaborating and "trusting each other with their own creative impulses" (Jones 599). Then, solo virtuosity refers to "the distinctive gifts" each performer brings to the work and "rings forth through the characters" in performance (Jones 599).

In a later essay "Making Language: The Jazz Aesthetic and Feminist Foundations" (2007), Jones regards Western theatre traditions, including dramatic structure, casting, actor training and performance as the "master's tools"²⁸. For instance, Western dramatic structure emphasizes linear narratives and causal relationships between characters²⁹. Then, casting and actor training primarily exclude people of color and their aesthetic practices because mainstream theatre typically produces works by White male playwrights from the Western canon. Performances from the canon tend to situate audiences as passive spectators through the fourth wall. Essentially, the jazz aesthetic disrupts Western traditions by presenting non-linear narratives with "a memory-laden sense of time and place"³⁰; ensembles of color who perform in a Black aesthetic; and performances that embody the "visual/physical/imagistic aspects"³¹ of the writer's work and multivocalic, polyrhythmic, musically-driven language" (Jones 91-92). A jazz aesthetic performance challenges audience members as spectators and requires them to

²⁸ Reference to Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984).

²⁹ See Jones' "Cast a Wide Net" p. 599

³⁰ In "Cast a Wide Net," Jones notes that time and space are fluid in the jazz aesthetic. For instance, "Ancestors and deities and nature and humans float, sing, spin, and make worlds together, aware or unaware of each other's presence" (600). In correlation, Black theatre scholar Paul Carter Harrison states that the African diaspora has a "cyclical view of experience...[this] experience depends on the inextricable relationship between the worlds of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn" (xxvi).

³¹ Jones also spends more time describing the visual and physical aspects of the jazz aesthetic in "Casting a Wide Net." She writes the jazz aesthetic employs "gestural language as counterpoint to the verbal text. This gestural language is a blend of modern dance, contemporary dance, popular idioms, and everyday physical references like washing dishes, getting dressed, or chasing a ball" (599).

pay close attention as “active witnesses”³² (Jones 600). Evidently, the embodiment of the text goes hand in hand with a jazz aesthetic performance.

Voices of Color in *con flama*

Stylistically, Bridgforth employs font to denote her speakers instead of attaching character names to specific passages in her work. In *con flama*, she designates the text of *GURL* (who is "sometimes a wo'mn/exists in different time periods/ages and places") in *bold italics*; then, **GRANDMOTHER** (a matriarch "from the Delta South") has **bold** text, while *MOTHER* ("a Southerner who moved West") has *italicized* text (4). Then, Bridgforth signifies the Chorus, "a community of voices who appear throughout the piece/in the life and memory of *GURL*," in plain font (4). Although the central story of *con flama* is Gurl's story, Bridgforth encourages performers to play multiple roles and interact with various periods, ages and places like Gurl. To perform her piece in the jazz aesthetic, Bridgforth acknowledges, "movement/layering song and choral telling are essential" in telling Gurl's story (4).

Bridgforth also identifies language as a vehicle in *con flama* that "*explores the culture landscapes of American life/within the context of [her] family's migration*" (emphasis in original, 4). She writes her Chorus as two or more performers who are "bi-lingual" and "multi-lingual" singers, tasking them with finding passages to translate (4). The languages that already exist in the piece include Gurl's poetic voice, Southern Black vernacular (spoken by Grandmother and Mother) and Spanish (spoken by the Chorus), which makes *con flama* a multilingual text. Yet, the language Bridgforth writes on the

³² Jones credits Bridgforth for using this term.

page serves as a blueprint for the performance of her work. Ultimately, the layering of verbal and non-verbal language is central to a production of Bridgforth's *con flama*.

Gurl and the Great Migration

Throughout *con flama*, Bridgforth returns to Gurl's relationship with her Mother and her Grandmother, depicting the Great Migration and its impact on Southern Black families. Between the 1920 and the 1970, almost six million Black Americans migrated from the American South to the urban North and West, an exodus called the Great Migration. Common historical reasons for Black Southerners moving to the North and West include better pay and more job opportunities; stressful social circumstances, such as lack of educational opportunities, racial violence and disenfranchisement; and natural disasters, particularly flooding and boll weevil infestation (Tolnay & Beck 348). The origins of Gurl's family migration story lie with family matriarch Grandmother and her migration from the South (Mississippi Delta) to the North (Chicago) and then out West (Los Angeles). Interestingly, there are multiple stories of her journey. The answers that emerge make for a perplexing explanation linked to the legacy of Black womanhood in the United States.

As a young child in Chicago, Gurl first learns of her Grandmother's migration to Chicago from her Mother. Her mother informs her, "*grandmother was 15 when she picked the chicago streets over her own child [Mother] who she sent back south to the home house*" (7). Judging from what she tells her daughter, Mother appears to understand that her mother was a child raising a child when she was born. Yet, she also hints at their strained relationship, stating that her kinfolk from raised her as a child

down South. Even as a child, Gurl notices her mother and grandmother's complicated relationship. For example, Grandmother "*drank up three months rent money*" without telling Mother, which resulted in their eviction from their Chicago residence (7). Gurl and her mother embark on their migration to Los Angeles, while Grandmother stands on the street waving goodbye and waiting for "*the next great-aunty car*" (8).

In spite of her mother's relationship with her grandmother, Gurl has a close, loving relationship with her Grandmother. She looks up to her Grandmother as an elder who responds to her relentless question, "*who are our Ancestors?*" (6-8). Gurl's refrain conjures more questions centered on her identity, such as Who am I? Where do I come from? Who are my people? Where do I belong? In the beginning, her Grandmother satisfies her curiosity with the answers "*kassa shaka mutu*" and "*kuta mato mo*," which name their ancestors (6-7). Yet, Grandmother's answers cease to have the same significance when she reveals that she lied and does not know their ancestors (8). Gurl finds this discovery unsettling because her sense of identity becomes unstable. What she thought was true about her family is now a mystery.

Unraveling part of this mystery, Grandmother cites the threat of racial violence as her impetus for migrating. Sociologists Steven E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck argue that the threat of racial violence, often listed as a secondary factor to job expansion, is a primary reason Black Southerners migrated. For instance, mob lynching was common punishment for Blacks "who committed criminal acts or simply violated the rules of acceptable behavior for their caste" (Tolnay & Beck 354). Gurl's Grandmother affirms this overwhelming threat of racial violence by addressing the presence of the Ku Klux

Klan. She does domestic work for the Milkwoods, a White family whose matriarch displays the fingers and toes of dead Blacks on her mantle (13). According to historian Robert Zangrando, Ku Klux Klan “mobs cut off black victims’ fingers, toes, ears, or genitalia as souvenirs” before disposing their bodies³³. Grandmother affirms the harsh reality of living in the Delta during the Jim Crow era. She explains:

**For any Coloured
what the white folks figured fancied
theyselves uppity you’d soon smell
burning.
[...]
a warning to us all not to ever think our lives were worth more than any
hog or cow that could be slaughtered at whim. (13)**

This warning compels Grandmother and her man Hadley to leave the South, especially since they have a child on the way. She wants to “**spare [her] baby of sucha knowing**” and be “**uppity**” (14). Both Hadley and Grandmother sneak out of the Delta, hitch a ride on the Santa Fe³⁴ and are then westbound. Once on the West Coast, Hadley and Grandmother quickly secure similar jobs as they had back home—Hadley finds work as a master carpenter, while Grandmother still does domestic work for White families—“for a little higher wage” (15). Ultimately, Grandmother takes pride in birthing and raising all her children in Los Angeles in the house Hadley built; however, she still misses her people back home, but declares, “**i ain’t never stepping foot in backayonda again**” (16).

Towards the end of the piece, Mother suggests a different reason for Grandmother leaving Mississippi: growing up as a Black girl in the Jim Crow South

³³ See excerpt of Zangrando’s article “About Lynching”
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lynching/lynching.htm.

³⁴ The “Sante Fe” was a nickname given to the railway train from Little Rock, AR to Los Angeles, CA.

stifled her creative voice. Mother remembers her own mother's dreams of singing and dancing at "*the home house down south*;" however, "*they said/ain't no Coloured gal gone ever make it in this world singing and dancing*" (65). Similar to Walker in her womanist prose, Mother lists several, successful Black women performers, including Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Josephine Baker, Lena Horne, Marian Anderson, Mahalia Jackson, Big Mama Thornton and Billie Holiday (65). Yet, the "they" Mother references in her passage are naysayers who continue to destabilize Grandmother's dreams by telling her "[she] *ain't good enough*" (65). "They" soon become Grandmother's family, friends and members of her community who recall the tale of Aunt Vera who had similar dreams of performing as Grandmother. Her family painfully remembers Vera's "*braid which lil tootie found bloody on the tracks last year*," which is a cautious reminder to Blacks of "*how dangerous it was for a Coloured girl to dream*" (65-66).

Noticeably, the women in Gurl's family participate in their own family separation that passes down two generations, from Grandmother to Mother and Mother to Gurl. Historically, the separation of Black families traces back to American slave auctions that ripped mothers away from their children. With the Great Migration, however, this pattern of separation was economic because many Black Southerners secured jobs and housing in the North before the rest of their families move in with them. Grandmother's migration story is rather elusive because there are two different accounts of when and where³⁵ she went after leaving the South. Her distant relationship with her daughter,

³⁵ Bridgforth does not clarify whether Grandmother was pregnant when she left the South or where she went first—up North or the West Coast. Her daughter implies that she was already born when her mother

however, is a result of their separation because Mother grew up in the home house.

When Mother has a daughter, she follows her mother's footsteps and sends Gurl to the South as she finished night school up North (8). Both Grandmother and Mother's stories reveal the complex herstories of Black women during the twentieth century. Their experiences with race, gender, sexuality and mortality shift each generation, but remain in the cultural memory. Grandmother's fear of racial violence and Mother's desire for better jobs and higher education are issues that concern Black women today.

The Incarceration of Tommy Nakamura

In juxtaposition to Gurl's family migration story, Bridgforth tells the story of Tommy Nakamura, a young Japanese American man who survived incarceration during World War II. With her depiction of Tommy, Bridgforth challenges the stereotype of the "hairless, sexless Asian male" and the false perception of "passive Japanese Americans obediently marching off to [internment] camps" (Hagedorn xxii). Instead, she portrays Tommy as an overly masculine character who wears "black shades black silk shirt black slacks shinny black ankle boots no jewelry" and does not smile (24). He interacts with Gurl on the bus and tells her his story, how the U.S. government held Japanese Americans captive against their will during World War II.

Since the late nineteenth century, Yellow Peril discourse, or anti-Asian sentiment, "positioned Asians as inherently inassimilable perpetual foreigners" (Maeda 1083). This prejudice permeated American immigration policies, which made citizenship difficult for Chinese and Japanese immigrants alike. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882

left the South for Chicago. Yet, Grandmother talks about raising her children away from the South because of the threat of racial violence, which suggests she was still with child when she left.

prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers, who came to the U.S. to work on the transcontinental railroad. Then, the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 between the U.S. and Japan limited Japanese immigration; however, the National Origins Act of 1924 ended Japanese immigration (Maeda 1083; Miksch & Ghere 212). Both Chinese and Japanese immigrants had difficulty becoming naturalized citizens in spite of "their interest in citizenship, length of residence, future commitments, or number of children they had in the United States" (Miksch & Ghere 212). In addition, West Coast states like Washington, Oregon and California enacted Alien Land Laws to prevent Japanese immigrants from buying land, an attempt to exclude them from the West Coast (Miksch & Ghere 212; Tateishi & Yoshino 10). Evidently, there is a longstanding history of discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans, which fueled Japanese American incarceration.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941³⁶, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 two months later. Executive Order 9066 gave the U.S. military the authority to "remove and imprison virtually the entire Japanese American population on the West Coast" (Tateishi & Yoshino 10). Legal scholars Karen Miksch and David Ghere report that 40, 000 Japanese immigrants and 77, 000 U.S. citizens of Japanese descent "relocated" to remote camps across the country; however, "there was no evidence of disloyalty, no review of individual cases and no appeal process" for them (212-13).

³⁶ On December 7, 1941, Japanese Imperial soldiers bombed Pearl Harbor, an American military base on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. Almost 3,000 Americans died and 1,000 were injured. This event compelled the U.S. to declare war and enter World War II.

Like many Japanese American children during World War II, Tommy spent his early childhood in an internment camp. His birthplace was Manzanar, a prison in which he "came screaming into the world" on May 16, 1942 (Bridforth 25). He describes Manzanar as a policed state landscaped with:

high barbed-wired fences with armed
soldiers and guard towers-strategically
located surrounding/504 barracks made of
quarter-inch boards over wooden frames covered
with tar paper /with batten boards (25).

Tommy's portrait eerily mirrors Nazi concentration camps in Europe. Contrary to "the voluntary evacuee", he views himself and other Japanese Americans as prisoners of war. They were not free to leave the camps because "the guns were pointed inside" towards them (26). Even though his parents were Nisei,— "american born/american raised/american educated/american loyal/u.s. american citizen"—they were refugees in their own country (26).

As a result, Tommy's reaction to the injustice of his people is anger, anger akin to the rage of Black rioters during the mid-1960s. His fiery angst stems from the fallacy of the so-called American dream for his people and he dreams of "burning his birth place to the ground" (26-27). Tommy admits that he came to L.A. because he "read that [Black people] were burning the place down" and he chanted "burn baby burn" along with them hoping to "release the scream inside" him (27). Tommy's anguish resembles that of Langston Hughes during World War I. Hughes' short poem "Refugee in America" exposes how the U.S. government denied Blacks civil liberties, particularly the exclusion

of Black men in the military. Similar to Hughes, Tommy acknowledges his status as a refugee in America, specifically a survivor of Japanese American incarceration.

Bridgforth's stories of Grandmother and Tommy honestly people of color as refugees throughout American history. For instance, Grandmother's artistic voice was stifled in the Jim Crow South. The threat of racial violence towards Black Southerners posed a danger to herself and her children and informed her decision to leave the South for the North and the West Coast. Then, Tommy and thousands of Japanese Americans experienced incarceration because of their Japanese ancestry. The U.S. government justified its actions by using the attack on Pearl Harbor as a way to segregate Japanese Americans from the public. By telling these stories, Bridgforth sheds light on moments of racism and discrimination in which people of color have similar circumstances.

City in Flames: Navigating Cultural Encounters in L.A.

In her piece, Bridgforth strategically locates *con flama* in Los Angeles from the 1940s to the 1970s. As a character, the city represents a West Coast metropolitan that has diverse ethnic neighborhoods segregated by geography. Bridgforth features the stories of Black, Latino, and Asian American characters and references the Great Migration, Japanese American incarceration and the Chicano labor movement. Through Gurl's cultural encounters on the bus, Bridgforth illustrates the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in L.A., which is representative of the U.S. *Con flama* depicts L.A. as a city literally ablaze with civil unrest, a counter reaction to the nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights era; thus, connecting to the Spanish translation of *con flama*: "with flame."

In Laura Pulido's book *the Black, Brown and Yellow Left*, she notes that L.A. defies the Black/white binary posed during the Civil Rights era. In fact, L.A. has "long histories of multiple racial/ethnic groups in the city," that trace back to when the Spanish founded the city in 1781 (Pulido 5). L.A. was part of Mexico until 1848 when California became part of the United States. As a result, many Mexicans lost their land to Whites and began working menial jobs with low wages. Then, the late nineteenth century saw an increase of Whites moving from the East Coast to L.A. because of the transcontinental railroad, which led to city congestion and new urban developments. Several Mexican families moved to the Eastside to areas like Boyle Heights, East L.A, and the San Gabriel Valley during the twentieth century. The twentieth century also saw the Great Migration, in which an influx of Black Southerners moved to the West. With racial segregation laws, Whites moved out of South Central L.A. to newer housing areas in the Westside³⁷ during the 1920s. Because of housing restrictions, South Central became a series of predominantly Black and impoverished neighborhoods.

As aforementioned, Japanese immigrants had a limited presence on the West Coast because of anti-Asian legislature in the early twentieth century. Because of Japanese American incarceration during WWII, former Japanese neighborhoods became available to several Black Southerners moving to California. The late Dr. Maya Angelou even noted this demographic shift in San Francisco's Nihonmachi³⁸ area: "Where the

³⁷ The Westside of L.A. is largely a White, upper middle class area in the city. Since the 1920s, Whites have lived here and rarely venture to East or South L.A. See "Ethnic Change and Enclaves in Los Angeles" <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wmc01>

³⁸ Nihonmachi loosely translates to "Japan Town," or "Japan Street." This name designates several Japanese American communities on the West Coast.

odors of tempura³⁹, raw fish and cha⁴⁰ had dominated, the aroma of chitlings⁴¹, greens and ham hocks now prevailed” (qtd in Maeda 1086). Upon their return, several Japanese Americans This shift in demographics enabled Japanese Americans (as well as other Asian Americans) and Blacks to cross paths in urban areas, like L.A. and San Francisco.

Notably, Bridgforth demonstrates how often interactions between Blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans occurred through Gurl’s encounters on the L.A. bus system. She deftly figures the characters of Tommy Nakamura and Ana Flores in relation to Gurl, the central character. For instance, Gurl learns about anti-Asian sentiment and Japanese American incarceration, a chapter in American history seldom taught, just by talking to Tommy on the bus. Bridgforth's depiction of Tommy is counter to the “model minority” status Asian Americans acquired during the 1960s⁴². Instead, Tommy represents some Asian American radicals who reject assimilation into White mainstream culture. Arguably, Tommy appropriates blackness to create his own identity as a Japanese American man. For instance, his "black shades black silk shirt black slacks/shinny black ankle boots" resemble the iconic attire worn by Black Panther Party members sans the black beret and machine gun.

Similar to Tommy, Ana Flores has a strong sense of her cultural identity and family history. Her mother is "pura Indian," and her father is "totalmente Mexicano;" she

³⁹ Tempura is a batter for deep-frying vegetables, seafood, etc.

⁴⁰ *Cha* refers to Japanese teas. See <http://japanese.about.com/od/japanesecultur1/a/ocha.htm>

⁴¹ Chitlings (also called chitterlings or chitlins) are pig intestines typically prepared during the holiday season.

⁴² In a 1966 issue of *New York Times Magazine*, conservative critics praised Asian Americans as “model minorities” who assimilated quite well into American society similar to white ethnics who “climbed out of the slums.” See Maeda p. 1083

is an “original Mestiza⁴³ goddess/gurl not to be messed with or taken for granted,” while her older sister identifies as “a full blooded Chicana” (29, 30). Gurl crosses cultural borders by visiting Ana on Saturdays and taking a two-hour bus ride to East L.A., the other side of town. She gains some understanding of Ana's Chicana background, recognizing similarities between her family and Ana's family. For instance, Ana's home smells like “homemade tortillas arroz con pollo⁴⁴ and frijoles⁴⁵ cooking” (30), while the smell of “smothered pork chops yams collard greens and cornbread” permeates Gurl's home (31). Then, her relatives discuss “Black power business⁴⁶ in comparison to Ana's siblings who wear “pressed brown on brown with berets dark glasses [for] Brown power business⁴⁷” (31-32). The major difference between Gurl and Ana lies in their race and ethnicity—Gurl is Black, while Ana is Chicana. Attached to their race is their immersion in a specific ethnic culture. Both of their families cook good food and are concerned with similar social, political issues; however, their “gumbo be spiced just a little different” (32).

Clearly, Bridgforth establishes the dialectical relationships between Black, Brown, and Yellow people of color through her characters Gurl, Tommy and Ana. She further explores the cultural boundaries and frustrations of people of color during the section

⁴³ According to scholar Ian Haney López, the term *Mestizaje* refers to the identities of Chicanos who have racially mixed ancestry. For instance, *mestiza* connotes “a woman of white, Mexican and Indian descent” (Aigner-Varoz 47). In her seminal text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, feminist of color Gloria Anzaldúa redefines the term *Mestizaje* through what she calls a “mestiza consciousness,” in which Chicana women acknowledge their struggle and fluid positions in contemporary society. Anzaldúa notes that the new *mestiza* “learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She juggles cultures” (79).

⁴⁴ Arroz con pollo is chicken with rice.

⁴⁵ Frijoles are beans.

⁴⁶ This phrase alludes to the Black Power Movement, specifically the Black Panther Party.

⁴⁷ This phrase refers to the Chicano movement, particularly the Brown Berets, a political group led by David Sanchez. In his book *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice*, Ian Haney López credits the Brown Berets with helping form the Chicano identity. See Mahoney p.869.

titled "ghetto transfers," which depicts the race riots in major U.S. cities and the Dominican Republic revolution in the mid-late 1960s. In terms of the riots and protests, Bridgforth captures the Detroit riot of July 1967⁴⁸; the Chicago riot in August 1968⁴⁹; the Crystal City revolt of 1963⁵⁰ and the Watts riots in August 1965⁵¹. The connective tissue of these riots is the anger and frustration people of color felt over issues surrounding race, class, and representation in America, the so-called "land of the free." Arguably, at the heart of these riots was the attempt to shed light on the social injustices and poor living conditions that many people of color face. What resulted, however, was a rampage of violence involving people of color, police officers and ultimately the U.S. military.

Overwhelmingly, the 1960s was "a decade of bloody summers"⁵² as Bridgforth refrains (35). Within this same decade, Black political thinker Frantz Fanon wrote his book *The Wretched of the Earth* as a witness to the Algerian revolution and struggle for

⁴⁸ For five days in July 1967, there was a riot resulting from a police raid of an after-hours club. Twelve hours into the riot, Governor George Romney calls in the Michigan National Guard who shoot at will and mistakenly shoot out the streetlights. There are almost 4,000 arrests in the first two days of mainly young, Black people. See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepize/story/13_detroit.html

⁴⁹ During August 1968, a riot ensued during the Democratic National Convention. For five days and five nights, demonstrators fought the Chicago police and the National Guard as a split Democratic Party struggled to pick a presidential nominee. See Ron Grossman's article "For five days and nights, Chicago was a war zone" on *the Chicago Tribune* online.

⁵⁰ In the year 1963, Mexican Americans living in Crystal City, TX organized against a predominantly White city hall and public school system. As a result, there was an electoral victory for Chicanos since 1910; however, this victory came with a price. Several Chicano workers were fired for wearing campaign buttons supporting Chicano representatives, while some Chicanos sought the protection of the Texas Rangers. To prevent their workers from working, agricultural leaders doubled hourly wage and went into overtime production. See <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/wmc01>

⁵¹ The Watts riots raged for six days and resulted in more than forty million dollars worth of property damage. The riot spurred from an incident on August 11, 1965 when a white California Highway Patrolman pulled over and arrested Marquette Frye, a young Black driver, for suspicion of driving while intoxicated. For several days, rioters overturned and burned automobiles and looted and damaged grocery stores, liquor stores, department stores, and pawnshops. See http://crdl.usg.edu/events/watts_riots/?Welcome&Welcome

⁵² In his article "'Burn, Baby, Burn': Small Business in the Urban Riots of the 1960s," Bean notes, "Between 1965 and 1968, more than three hundred riots occurred, resulting in two hundred deaths and the destruction of several thousand businesses" (165).

independence. Fanon believed that violence was necessary in staging a revolution. In order for the oppressed to liberate themselves, they have to fight and give their lives to the cause. Only by eradicating the oppressive colonizer, can the oppressed begin to build a new nation-state from the ground up. Fanon's theory of violence parallels with the rationale of rioters fed up with the institution of racism in the States. Black radicals, including Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panther Party, viewed the riots as "uprisings" because the nonviolent strategies of the Civil Rights movement "failed to produce real economic gain for the inner-city poor" (Bean 166). Many Black rioters looted material goods from white-owned businesses and burned these buildings to the ground; thus, affirming the "gouging merchant" stereotype was a reality⁵³.

Queering Bodies of Color in Performance

With her work in the jazz aesthetic, Bridgforth creates a performance text that serves as a kaleidoscope capturing multiple voices of color often stifled by dominant society. As an art form, the jazz aesthetic queers and disrupts the boundaries between Western practices and diasporic performance. Bridgforth's style in the aesthetic speaks to the cyclical worldview prevalent in the African diaspora. In other words, time and space are fluid, allowing the ancestors to walk among the living. She also queers the notion of fixed identity categories by illuminating the intersectional experiences of characters confronted with issues surrounding their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationality. As a Black queer woman artist, she gives voice to women and people of color,

⁵³ According to a nationwide poll taken in August 1967, half of the black respondents agreed "the stores looted [during the riots] charged Negroes exorbitant prices" (Erskine qtd in Bean 170).

but more specifically to queer people of color by advocating their presence in the creative process and performance of her work.

CHAPTER 3

QUEERING BLACK HAIR POLITICS IN '*DA KINK IN MY HAIR*

One Black Woman's Hair Journey

Growing up as a Black girl, I was "tender-headed" because of my thick, coarse hair texture and sensitive scalp. I found it hard to sit still as my mother raked my hair with a comb two weeks before my relaxer appointment. I have painful memories of getting my hair done at several beauty shops. I remember how the relaxer burned my scalp in what felt like seconds after it touched my hair. Beauticians accused me of scratching my hair minutes before I walked in their doors for my appointment. They also censured me for not "taking the heat" because if I really wanted my hair straight, I could take it. No one believed me when I said the last time I scratched my scalp was three days before my appointment. I dreaded going to the shop for my hair appointment not because of the wait, but because of the beauticians' attitudes and lack of care. As soon as they touched my hair, I could sense their warm energy turn to disdain. One African beautician remarked that I had "nigga hair" shortly after my father left to run errands. Overwhelmingly, I did not feel that beauticians cared about me, or the health of my hair. The only time they smiled at me was when I paid them and walked out the door.

Both my salon experiences and my hair breakage informed my decision to go natural and I wore my last relaxer for my high school graduation in May 2007. During my undergraduate years, I learned more about the natural hair movement and its origins in the Black Power and Black Arts movements. These movements discussed the need of Black pride and beauty, instilling the idea that Black is beautiful. I discovered the natural

hair community on the Internet through social media, such as forums, blogs and YouTube. On YouTube, there are thousands of Black women across the diaspora uploading tutorials on hair styling, hair care regimens, product reviews, and more. From this community of women, I learned how to take care of my hair and take pride in my decision to be natural. I also learned that my experiences with my hair in its various states, from relaxed to transitioning to natural, is part of my hair journey. Undoubtedly, lifestyle factors like food, health, stress, and environment will affect the quality of my hair; however, I have access to a network of resources on how to restore and repair my hair.

Ironically, I resonated with Anthony's depiction of the Black hair salon and her characters in *da Kink in my Hair*. She chronicles the stories of eight contemporary Black women at a Caribbean hair salon in Toronto. Novelette (warmly nicknamed "Letty") is a Caribbean hair stylist and owner of the salon who serves as the narrative glue of the piece. Her distinct perspective on Black women's hair is the catalyst for voicing the stories of Black Canadian women. In the opening scene, she states:

If you want to know about a woman, a black woman that is. Touch her hair. Cause our hair carries our journey. 'Cause that's where we carry all our hopes, all our dreams, our hurt, our disappointments they're all in our hair. (5)

Letty's statement alludes to the relationship of the hair stylist and her client, a relationship that scholar and playwright Djanet Sears acknowledges in her "Foreword" to *da Kink*. She writes, "the [Black] hairdresser is the closest thing to a head doctor we ever (voluntarily) encounter" because she will not only style your hair, but also "listen with the attention of a first-rate therapist to your countless joys and all of your woes" (iv). What

strengthens this relationship is the care a hair stylist provides his/her client; the discussion of the health and maintenance of the client's hair; and the execution of the desired hairstyle—often enhanced by the stylist's personal flair. The client reciprocates by paying for services rendered, returning on a regular basis and recommending her stylist to others, which supports the stylist's reputation and provides her with steady business.

In addition, the sisterhood created among the women in the piece resembles my encounters with the online natural hair community. Anthony creates a safe space for her women characters to voice their individual stories and support each other through the storytelling process. I think *da Kink* directly represents one of Alice Walker's definitions of “womanist”:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/ or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. (xi)

Through her cast of characters, Anthony depicts the intersectionality of Black women's experiences and makes their stories heard. She voices the stories of a working class domestic worker who experiences a painful break up, a mother who grieves the murder of her son, and an overworked businesswoman who quietly deals with racism and sexism at the workplace. Anthony also juxtaposes the voice of an elderly woman in a budding relationship with an aspiring actor struggling with her mother's disdain for her lesbian identity. Furthermore, Anthony tells the stories of a young immigrant woman traumatized by sexual abuse and a wife/mother angered by her family's tradition of colorism on the eve of her mother's funeral.

“Kinky, curly, wavy or straight”: A Queer Aesthetic of Black Hair

From international sellers boasting their stock of Brazilian, Malaysian, and Indian hair weaves to the latest natural hair products, the quality and texture of Black hair is important. Comedian Chris Rock’s documentary *Good Hair* (2009) shines light on the Black hair industry and the women who keep this business running. The documentary’s title *Good Hair* refers to the “good” hair vs. “bad” hair debate that has passed down from generation to generation of Black women in the Diaspora. The phrase “good hair” typically refers to long, straight hair or wavy hair with loose curl patterns that is easy to comb without tearing or tangling. In contrast, “bad hair” signifies coarse, kinky, and coily hair that has tighter curl patterns; nevertheless, this type of hair is harder to comb because it tangles easily and breaks fine teeth combs. In terms of race, good hair signifies people not of African descent and those with mixed heritage, while bad hair reveals people of African descent. Problematically, the concept of good hair vs. bad hair is part of a racial discourse within Black communities that privileges straighter hair types over kinkier hair types. This privilege echoes the refrain of Eurocentric sentiment that blackness is inferior and whiteness is desirable.

According to Performance Studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood, blackness has a troubling presence in contemporary visual culture because of “captivity and capitalism discourses attached to the black body itself” (18). Fleetwood alludes to the institution of slavery and scientific racism, discursive systems that reified the dichotomous relationship between Black and white bodies. These Eurocentric ideologies deemed Black slaves as “primitive,” and “less than human,” while dictating their lives as chattel. White slave

masters treated Black slaves as disposable commodities; thus, making them vulnerable to racial and sexually violent acts. Masters justified raping Black female slaves by projecting promiscuity onto their bodies; therefore, using their bodies against them. As a result, Black women's sexuality became antithetical to "European sexual mores and beauty" (Hammonds 95). Although their bodies read as hypersexual, Black women's voices remained silenced.

On one hand, the overt sexualization of Black women's bodies and their silence implies their complicity; however, Black women were not always in a position to voice their concerns about representation nor did they have control of it. Critical Race scholar Evelyn Hammonds points to the proliferated image of Sarah Baartman and traces the social construction of Black women's sexuality from the nineteenth century. Widely known as "the Hottentot Venus," Baartman was a South African woman displayed across Europe in human zoos⁵⁴ during the early 19th century. Period advertisements and political cartoons exaggerated her features, depicting a Black woman with a large buttocks⁵⁵ hardly wearing any clothing; therefore, marking her a sexualized oddity in Western society. Baartman's story is speculative fiction because her perspective is largely missing from discourse centered on her. There are very few recorded moments when

⁵⁴ The tradition of human zoos stems from European explorers and their discoveries of "new worlds" and its peoples. Consequently, their findings and descriptions of indigenous people pitted the so-called natives as "savage" and "primitive." The desire to show the "savage" sparked a Western tradition of taking various indigenous people from their homes and displaying them for profit.

⁵⁵ Baartman had *steatopygia*, a large accumulation of fat on the buttocks.

Baartman actually talked about herself⁵⁶. Ultimately, her position as a Black woman in 19th century Europe exposed her body, while muting her voice.

In addition, Black women's silence on sexuality has a political function, which Hammonds traces to the Victorian era. Denied inclusion in the cult of true womanhood⁵⁷, Black middle class women performed a public silence to promote "Victorian morality [and] demonstrate the false image of the sexually immoral black woman" (97). Even with this public silence, Black women are like "beached whales"⁵⁸—hypervisible and silent. Following Hammonds' footsteps, Fleetwood regards how Black women artists and cultural producers perform the legacy of hypervisibility, or what she calls "excess flesh." She notes, "The black female body functions as a site of excess in dominant visual culture and the public sphere at large" (109). Contemporary renderings of Black women as the asexual Mammy⁵⁹, the racially ambiguous mixed woman⁶⁰, or the wanton Jezebel⁶¹ reproduce Black women "in excess of idealized white femininity" (Fleetwood 111).

⁵⁶ There is one record of a legitimate interview of Baartman when she was on trial. While in England, English abolitionists suspected her keeper of owning Baartman and displaying her against her free will. Since England had abolished the slave trade, the court at the King's Bench held a trial. A court official interviewed Baartman and questioned whether she was in England by force or her own free will. Problematically, Baartman stated the latter. Speculatively, her position as a woman of color during the nineteenth century suggests coercion by her keeper at the time.

⁵⁷ The cult of true womanhood, also known as the cult of domesticity, was a set of ideals that linked womanhood to the domestic sphere of home and family. See Jane Boydston's "Cult of True Womanhood" <http://www.pbs.org/stantonanthony/resources/index.html?body=culthood.html>

⁵⁸ Hortense Spillers calls Black women "the beached whales of the Earth" because their bodies are widely exposed, but their voices seldom heard. Channeling Spillers, Renee Cox (a Jamaican visual artist) photographed herself while pregnant lying on the beach, titling her portrait "The Beached" (1992).

⁵⁹ Mammy is a caricature of an asexual, matronly Black woman that traces back to Reconstruction era following the American Civil War. A lingering depiction of Mammy is Aunt Jemima, an arbiter of breakfast food.

⁶⁰ The mixed woman, or the "tragic mulatto," references a woman of mixed heritage (White and Black) who can pass for either race. Within African American literature, novels like *Passing* Nella Larsen and *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset depict the trope of passing.

When thinking of the in/visibility of Black bodies, Black hair is a missing part of the discourse on race, gender, and sexuality. In her essay “Coming Out Natural: Dredded Desire, Sex Roles and Cornrows,” Gender studies scholar L.H. Stallings investigates this discourse by analyzing the etymology of “kinky,” a term originally associated with Blackness and hair texture during mid-nineteenth century. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the term kinky not only referenced Black hair texture, but also “queer” and “unconventional sexual behavior.”⁶² Queer scholar Siobhan Summerville makes a similar observation in her book *Queering the Color Line: Race and Sexuality in American Culture* (2000). She contends that the emergence of the “homosexual body” in the late nineteenth century links to the dichotomous relationship between “Black” and “white bodies (3). In other words, racial and scientific discourses formed the foundation for sexology⁶³ and modeled how to classify sexuality.

Given the entangled history of blackness and sexuality in Western culture, Stallings calls for a queer aesthetic that analyzes how race, gender and sexuality influence social constructions of Black hair. She writes, “The expressive language about black hair becomes coded around distinctive models of sexuality ...the discourse of race influences the discourse of sexuality from head to toe” (364). From its strands to its limbs, the Black body is symbolically oppositional to the Eurocentric body and its conservative ideals.

⁶¹ Jezebel is a stereotype that figures Black women as overtly promiscuous. This stereotype references the biblical character Jezebel, often vilified as a murderer and prostitute. Within the Black American church, the term refers to women who have or are suspect of loose morals.

⁶² See the etymology of “kinky” at OED.com

⁶³ Sexology is the study of sexuality and sexual health, which examines the functional issues of sexuality within social, cultural and political contexts. See “About the Field of Sexology” at <http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/resources/abtsexology.html>

Notably, the social construction of Black hair conjures racial and sexual discourse centered on Black women's bodies. Attached to their bodies are the various hair types of Black hair, which is queer by nature. The dichotomous relationship between good hair and bad hair merely qualifies two hair types, straight hair and kinky hair, without acknowledging the spectrum of hair textures in between. Yet, there is social history of Black women "putting heat" to their hair to straighten their natural tresses. One opinion is that internalized racism, which occurs when an individual consents to the dominant society's views, stereotypes and biases of his/her racial identity, is one suggestion why some Black women straighten their natural hair. According to Dr. Mariame Kaba, however, the internalized racism argument is for mere shock value. Although Western standards of beauty like straight hair and fair skin are part of the fabric of mainstream culture, not all Black women suffer from self-hatred. Kaba believes that more Black women straighten their hair because they associate whiteness with power. They desire "access to [economic and social] resources traditionally reserved for white men and women" (104). In other words, the closer a Black woman is to whiteness the better her chances of achieving her desired status.

With the increasing acceptance of the natural hair, however, more Black women are leaning towards wearing their hair natural. One tool for determining natural hair pattern is the hair typing system. This system grades hair textures on a scale of one to four, type one signifies straight hair; type 2 hair indicates loose waves; type 3 denotes Z-shaped curls; and type 4 stands for kinky, coily hair. With the onset of the natural hair movement, Black women have become more aware of how to care for the hair that grows

out of their head. Whether relaxed, natural, or transitioning, the versatility of Black hair provides Black women with options on how to wear and style their hair. If a Black woman wants straight hair, she can get her hair relaxed; pressed with a hot comb or flat iron; or have a sewn-in weave installed. If another Black woman wears her hair natural, she has an array of hairstyles to choose from, including afros, twists, braids, and dreadlocks. Both women have the option of buying a straight or curly wig at their local Beauty Supply store. An important thing to note is that there are women with relaxed hair who wear braids to grow out their hair and women with natural hair who wear weaves; thus, there is variety in which hairstyles individual Black women wear. Ultimately, the diversity of Black hairstyles queers race and gender politics by giving Black women numerous ways to wear their hair.

Towards a "Kinky" Realism: Departing from Realism in *da Kink*

Within contemporary theatre, realism has a substantial influence on playwrighting and performance. Realism is a style of theatre that developed in the mid to late nineteenth century, which depicts social issues affecting real people in their everyday lives. Realism began as a counter movement to popular performances, such as melodramas and comic operas that catered to the status quo by championing the wealthy. Ironically, realism has become conventional and reinforced by mainstream theatre's production of realist plays from the Western canon. Realist playwrights like Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov and George Bernard Shaw depicted the lives of white Europeans and contemporary productions of their plays often perpetuate a tradition of excluding people of color on stage. There is a body of contemporary playwrights of color,

however, who stray from realist traditions and challenge how mainstream audiences view performance on Western stages.

When regarding Anthony's *da Kink*, Canadian theatre scholars Marc Maufort and Harvey Young claim she adheres to versions of realism, but breaks away from realist conventions. In other words, she presents the stories of Black Canadian women from various backgrounds, while incorporating non-linear storytelling and blurring the fourth wall in her piece. For example, the singular story of a protagonist does not drive Anthony's plot. Her plot moves forward because of the voices of Black women who are the protagonists of their own stories. Paired with Anthony's stage directions, Letty's narration and the women's monologues read as direct addresses to the audience, which breaks down the invisible boundary between the audience and the performers. Through their dialogue and presence onstage, the women interact with one another through movement, sound and call-and-response. One example of this interaction is Anthony's opening sequence for *da Kink*. She writes:

The Griot enters, she then calls the Goddess who enters proudly she blesses the stage. The Griot then calls the dancers/community who enter. They dance, this is a celebratory dance. Suddenly there is an urgent beat on the drum and the dancers stop. They reach for the coil which is sitting at the edge of the stage, which is abruptly pulled apart, and a frightful sound occurs as the dancers stop and they reenact the sizzling, frying, pain, agony and torture that black hair is subjected too. The drums beat faster and angry. It becomes a desperate frenzy of cries and moans and then there is a final beat of the drum and women take the afro pies and place them on the edge of the stage. (3)

The lead Griot initiates the call, an invocation that blesses the performance. In response, the women dance onstage and engage with percussionists, who begin a musical call and response. The symbolic "coil" represents Black hair in its natural state, its

original kinky texture. A single strand of natural black hair forms a perfect circle, while multiple strands form an entangled ball. Yet, the pulling apart of the hair strand unravels its circular nature and indicates the alteration of its texture. Metaphorically, the women embody Black hair as it experiences harsh chemicals and excessive heat. The drumming heightens the emotional response of the women, who ultimately vocalize the response of damaged hair. The women end this sequence by offering their picks, which hold strands of their hair, to the audience. This offering invites audience members to join the women in their hair journeys and listen to their stories.

According to Maufort, Anthony's opening sequence sets the tone for the performance of *da Kink* by residing within the realm of magic realism, which rejects Western reality by fusing "irreconcilable objects, ideas, or situations" (5). The opening sequence is "irreconcilable" by Western standards because the women embody Black hair and employ diasporic performance techniques (i.e. the presence of griots, call-and-response, and drumming) to tell a story about Black hair. Then, the "irreconcilable" situation in *da Kink* is Letty's ability to know a Black woman's story by touching her hair. With the image of "Black women touching hands to hair," Anthony emphasizes the spiritual connection between the hair stylist, client and salon (Prince 260). Black Canadian theatre scholar George Elliott Clarke notes the act of "laying hands" in Letty's hair resembles Black Christian expressions of "testifying, or bearing witness" (4). In addition, this act references traditional West African hair braiding practices. Scholars Tracey Lewis-Elligan, Ayana Byrd, and Lori Tharps note that these practices strengthened interpersonal relationships between girls, women, and elders. The role of

the hair braider was to advise and transmit of knowledge to other women. Essentially, the Black hair stylist performs a similar role to the traditional hair braider, but the hair stylist profits from doing Black hair.

In comparison, Young claims Anthony's goals in *da Kink* are "to display the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or to others" and "to affect by sympathy rather than imitation," which makes her piece an example of affective realism (Burke 332; Young 59). She frames her piece through Letty's extrasensory perception of "touch." As Letty touches her hair, time stands still as each character tells her story in an abstract dimension outside of the salon. Lighting transitions spotlight each character, turning the audience's focus to the woman and herstory. Young notes, "The act of laying a hand on hair [is] analogous to a religious rite of healing [and] bridges the stylist and the person being styled... the metaphorical kinks in their lives are revealed in monologue form" (55). By making Black Canadian women visible on stage, Anthony voices the everyday concerns of Black Canadian women; thus, "displaying" what is on their minds to those who do not see them. *Da Kink* also brings a Black hair salon to mainstream audiences, exposing them to "black folk who speak frankly about the intersectional experience of being black and female living in contemporary Canada" (Young 59). Touring productions of *da Kink* not only introduce mainstream audiences to Black Canadian women, but also Black Canadian audiences to mainstream theatres like the Theatre Passe Muraille and the Princess Wales Theatre. For Black Canadians, pieces like *da Kink* "concern them" and give them an opportunity to witness their stories and make their presence known in a traditionally white space.

Arguably, Anthony combats the “politics of silence” that plagues Black women with her piece. She specifically gives voice to Black Canadian women by depicting their encounters with race, gender, class, sexuality and nationality. By employing the central metaphor of Black hair, Anthony strives towards a "kinky" realism that entangles magic realism and affective realism to dismantle Western conventions of realism. *Da Kink* represents how hair directly and indirectly affects Black women’s lives. Anthony's characters are part of a discourse on Black women's hair that interfaces more than just "good hair" and "bad hair." Their kinky, curly, wavy and straight textures reflect their experiences as professionals, laborers, "sistahs," lovers, mothers and daughters. Anthony renders contemporary Black women who are on the periphery and warrants them a safe space to share their stories and be. In essence, *da Kink* provides ample material for Black women in the diaspora to discuss the politics of Black hair and their intersectional experiences within their own communities.

Voices of Black Canadian Women

Throughout *da Kink*, hair stylist Letty guides audiences through the daily operations of her hair salon. She is a professional woman in the business of making women beautiful and her hectic schedule indicates her high demand. Her clientele includes domestic workers, stay-at-home moms, businesswomen, performers, and children who benefit from her “touch.” Letty’s touch is a gift passed down from generations of women in her family, connecting her to a lineage of African hair rituals. Her salon is a space where women gather and share the latest news, ranging from their personal stories to juicy gossip. Letty’s salon is also a transformative space where women

renew and restore themselves. Time is an essential part of the salon experience because of the care that goes into doing Black hair. As a hair stylist, she nurtures both her client's hair and spirit by listening to their stories and understanding their needs. Anthony makes a choice to de-emphasize the financial transaction between Letty and her clients. This choice values Letty's relationship with her clients by signifying her concern for the well-being of her fellow sisters.

Coming from diverse backgrounds, the ensemble of Griots play the women who enter Letty's salon for their hair appointments. Each woman has her own experiences with race, gender and sexuality at the workplace and/or in her personal life. For example, the character Shawnette is a domestic worker who experiences a painful breakup that shakes her confidence and self-esteem. Her blackness, once desired by her lover, becomes undesirable in his quest to climb the social ladder. Next, Sherelle is a professional woman who works at a predominantly white firm where she deals with racism and sexism at the office, while serving as "the glue" that keeps her family together. However, she struggles with the strong black woman archetype and deals with her fractured mental health in private. Then, "Hollywood" actor Sharmaine copes with her estranged relationship with her mother who disapproves of her lesbian identity. Because of her "believable" performances as straight women, people call into question her authenticity as a Black woman because of her sexual orientation. On the eve of her mother's funeral, Nia reflects on her mother's attitude towards dark skin and its lingering effect on her life. Instead of following her mother's footsteps, Nia embraces her daughter's dark skin and teaches her self-love.

Shawnette's story is an example of how class intersects with race, gender, and sexuality. She begins her story as a sensual love song, in which she recalls her previous relationship with a Black man. Their love and attraction to one another was passionate and he loved the "kink" in her hair, her "roundness," and her "chocolate brown skin"—her blackness (9). When they faced economic hardships, they pretended a can of tuna was caviar and she became full on his dreams of being a doctor. Shawnette worked a couple jobs, including "cleaning offices," to support her partner through medical school (10). She ate "caviar" lunches believing that her investment of time, money and emotional support would guarantee a big return—marriage and children. Yet, her investment, her "education in love, trust and honesty" did not satisfy him (11). Embarrassed by Shawnette's lack of education, he lied to his colleagues about degrees she never earned, painting her as someone else. She resisted his efforts to erase her and change her into a completely different woman. As a result, he married a woman with a degree who has no "kink" in her hair, which suggests he married a white woman who is more than a stay-at-home mom (12). Ultimately, Shawnette and her former partner saw their own futures differently because class became a deciding factor in their relationship. Once he attached her identity as a domestic worker to her blackness, Shawnette no longer fit into his climb up the social ladder.

Unlike Shawnette, Sherelle is a single professional who is hypervisible, but invisible in her workplace and personal life. On the surface, she seems to have it all—a good job, a nice car, and financial success. Yet, she experiences racism and sexism at a predominantly white firm where she is the only woman of color. At board meetings, she

has to validate her ivy-league education or else she will be seen as “the hired help” (28). Then some of her white male colleagues see her as “an exotic lay” and assume she “slept her way to the top,” which renders her as sexually promiscuous Jezebel (28). As a result, Sherelle works twice as hard, “pulling sixteen hour days, skipping lunches” to prove that she deserves her job (28). She also has to be conscious of her actions and mannerisms because “acting too Black” would force her coworkers to “deal with her blackness every day” (28). Simultaneously, Sherelle struggles with balancing her work life with her family, which renders her overworked and isolated. She feels pressured to be “the glue” and the breadwinner of her family because of her business career and financial success, which her family seems to take for granted. She puts the demands of her job, the needs and wants of her family above her own. Yet, she does not know how to talk about her feelings of being overwhelmed at work and at home, her lack of a love life and self-care, or how tired and broken she is from stress. People expect her to be strong, not weak and vulnerable. She suffers from mental health issues alone and ultimately commits suicide by overdosing on pills (29).

In comparison, Shawnette and Sherelle adopt the persona of the strong black woman because they give so much of their time and energy to others, which leaves them with broken pieces to mend. Dr. Cheryl West notes that the strong black woman is a modern version of Mammy, the asexual Black matron. Problematically, the cartoonish figure of Aunt Jemima, an arbiter of the breakfast food, links Black women to working in the domestic sphere; however, the strong black woman is in the domestic sphere and the workplace. She is the single mother working two jobs; the Black businesswoman on the

fast-track to making partner at her company; and the Black women in between who juggle their career, financial success, and family. The strong black woman is a moniker passed down by Black grandmothers, mothers, and icons who faced harsher inequalities when it came to racism and sexism. For contemporary Black women like Shawnette and Sherelle, being a strong black woman means sacrificing themselves for the well-being of others and neglecting their self-care. By sacrificing too much of herself, Shawnette lost the man she wanted to marry, while Sherelle lost her battle with mental health.

Similar to Sherelle, Sharmaine is a successful Hollywood actor whose career is blossoming and she seems to have everything, except “a decent man in her life” (44). The truth, however, is that she is in a committed relationship with a woman named Jasmine, who she “memorizes like her favorite script” (45). She has an estranged relationship with her mother who disapproves of her sexual orientation. Sharmaine recalls the time her mother made her feel like a star when she had a small part in her first performance. Her mother also consoled her after countless rejections, telling her she was beautiful and giving her “ammunition to keep going” (45). Once she confided to her mother about Jasmine, her mother’s fervent support dissipated and their relationship became strained. When Sharmaine came out to them, her family and friends distanced themselves from her by “turning their backs” and not wanting her around their kids (45-46). Because she is a Black lesbian who plays straight characters, other Black people question her authenticity, associating lesbians with white women. Being a Hollywood star warrants looks and celebrity gossip, but Sharmaine has to deal with intolerance on a magnified level. People condemn her sexuality and deem her relationship with Jasmine as

“unnatural and wrong” (46). In a time when she needs her mother’s support the most, her mother performs her own politics of silence in regards to her daughter’s sexuality. What is heartbreaking is that her mother taught her to fight the naysayers, but she did not teach Sharmaine how to fight her.

Like Sharmaine, Nia has a strained relationship with her mother and copes with unresolved issues on the eve of her mother’s funeral. She remembers her mother’s attitudes towards light skin and dark skin, which manifested in her relationship with Nia and her sister Sandy. Their mother favored her Sandy because she had light skin and "good" hair in spite of her rebellious behavior, including skipping classes, dropping out of school and becoming a teenage mom. When she gave birth to a baby boy “who could pass for White,” Sandy was back in their mother’s good graces (55). In stark contrast, Nia’s dark skin and "bad" hair created tension in her relationship with her mother. She remembers the long afternoons when her mother pressed her hair, cursing her blackness and reinforcing the belief that her dark skin was inferior. When Nia had her daughter Tasha, her mother exclaimed “How many times do I have to tell you girls pick the men you lay with because anything too black is never good” (56). Her mother made little to no effort in getting to know her granddaughter Tasha. Unlike her mother, Nia celebrates her daughter’s dark skin because she wants her daughter to develop a positive self-image of herself.

Similarly, Sharmaine and Nia have estranged relationships with their mothers that reflect touchy topics within Black communities, including homophobia and colorism. For instance, Hammonds and Stallings note there is a growing, but faint

visibility of Black lesbian identities and Black queer sexualities across the diaspora. Black lesbian sexuality is often counter to white lesbian sexuality, which challenges the authenticity of Black lesbians and “delimits the fact that black lesbians share a history with other black women” (Hammonds 101). Prior to coming out, Sharmaine's relationship with her mother was about supporting her pursuit for acting. Yet, that changed when she revealed her same-sex desire to her mother, who treats her as a complete stranger. Then, colorism is an example of internalized racism, which occurs when an individual consents to dominant society's racist views, stereotypes, and biases of his/her race or ethnic group⁶⁴. Nia's mother performed colorism by treating her daughters according to their skin color. She praised Sandy for her light skin and perceivable whiteness, while censuring Nia for her dark skin and illuminating blackness. Both Sharmaine and Nia cope with their unresolved conversations with their mothers and their feelings of being unloved for who they are.

A Transnational Approach

From its early development to its current touring schedule, *da Kink* continually raises awareness about the everyday struggles of Black women and their relationship to hair. Clarke deems Anthony's piece as “*defensively* African Canadian,” which holds weight when *da Kink* tours in Canada (6). With productions in Atlanta, London, New York, and San Diego, however, *da Kink* transports international audiences to local Black hair salons in their communities. Anthony's central metaphor of Black hair resonates with women of African descent because the diaspora spreads far across the globe; thus,

⁶⁴ See Suzanne Lipsky and TAAR <http://www.div17.org/TAAR/media/topics/internalized-racism.php>.

rendering *da Kink* as transnational. The piece provides ample material for Black women in the diaspora to discuss the politics of Black hair and the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality and nationality within their own communities.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK/QUEER/DIASPORA/WOMYN FESTIVAL

Since my undergraduate days at the University of Southern Mississippi, I longed to produce a Black theatre festival that celebrated the works of living Black theatre artists and depicted a spectrum of Blackness. Due to my involvement in theatre productions, academic coursework, and lack of support, I did not pursue producing this Black theatre festival. Fast forward to the summer of 2013, I revisited my idea of producing a Black theatre festival while interning at Horizon Theatre in Atlanta, GA and reading Julia Cameron's *Walking in this World*⁶⁵. Cameron's writing exercises forced me to take a deeper look at my identity and my passion for art. I realized that I had multiple, intersecting identities as a Nigerian American, a straight Black woman, a Southern Baptist, a sista(h)⁶⁶ with natural hair, a Dramaturgy graduate student, etc. I also questioned my ideas surrounding art in relation to my intersecting identities: what kind of art moves me? Which artists make this type of art? Why should others take notice? How can I advocate the work of these artists?

While asking myself these questions, I came up with a list of Black theatre artists, which primarily comprised of Black women artists. I later narrowed my list to Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony, two Black queer women artists whose work and words spoke to navigating intersecting identities. My initial encounter with Sharon and the theatrical jazz aesthetic left an imprint on me, an imprint that I wanted to explore even

⁶⁵ *Walking in this World* is part of book series entitled *the Artist's Way*. This book was a gift from my chair, Priscilla Page.

⁶⁶ There are several definitions of the term "sista(h)," especially on [Urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com). Yet, a definition that resonates with me is Joi N. Payne's poem "The Definition of a Sistah," which can be found on her blog at <http://thesistahoodproject.blogspot.com/2013/02/the-definition-of-sistah.html>.

further. I found her piece *blood pudding* to be diasporic because of its reverence for ancestor worship and ritual. As a result, I was curious about the theatrical jazz aesthetic model, the diasporic sensibilities, and the central metaphor of Gurl's bus ride in *con flama*.

In contrast, my introduction to Trey Anthony was by word-of-mouth⁶⁷ and Google. I not only heard praises of her work and her professionalism, but also watched her inspiring TED Talk about how she made her artistic vision a reality. During summer 2013, I contacted Trey about my interest in her work and we made a couple attempts to meet at promotional events⁶⁸ for the Atlanta premiere of *da Kink*⁶⁹. I was unable to meet Trey in person due to my intern schedule, but I read multiple versions of her script⁷⁰ and even watched the first season of her television series *da Kink*. Similar to *con flama*, *da Kink* sparked my curiosity because of its diasporic setting and its metaphor of Black hair.

Ultimately, my goals for Black/Queer/Diaspora/Womyn (BQDW) Festival connect to my aforementioned questions: Why should others take notice of Black queer women artists? How can I advocate their work? Within the Pioneer Valley, there are few spaces and events geared towards people of color, especially queer people of color. When its

⁶⁷ During my internship at Horizon, S. Renee Clark, an award-winning music director based in Atlanta, told me about working with Anthony on *da Kink in my Hair*. She also e-mailed me an illegal copy of the current production script before I got my hands on published versions.

⁶⁸ During July 2013, Anthony had a screening of a documentary on *da Kink in My Hair*, followed by a talkback with the audience. There was also a staged reading of *da Kink in my Hair* featuring Angie Stone (an African American Neo-Soul artist based in Atlanta) and Melanie Fiona (a Guyanese Canadian R&B artist based in Toronto).

⁶⁹ As part of Atlanta's National Black Theatre Festival, *da Kink in my Hair* premiered at the Cobb Center for Performing Arts in early September 2013.

⁷⁰ I not only read the production script Clark e-mailed me, but also read the 2001 version of *da Kink* published in Djanet Sears' *Testifyin'* Volume Two (2003) and the 2005 version Anthony published through Playwright's Horizon of Canada.

doors were open, New WORLD Theater⁷¹ provided space for both artists and scholars of color to address issues surrounding identity and multiculturalism. Throughout my graduate school experience, I lived in the post-New WORLD Theater era at UMass and heard stories from former employees⁷² on how New WORLD filled a void—new work, art by people of color, conversations about the benefits and challenges of multiculturalism in the U.S.—in the Pioneer Valley community. To some degree, the stories about New WORLD influenced my decision to produce a festival as a component of my MFA thesis. However, placing Sharon and Trey at the center of BQDW Festival came from my desire to produce a Black theatre festival and the timing was right.

Envisioning the Festival: What is BQDW Festival?

Initially, the original name for BQDW Festival was the Queering Identity Festival; however, Priscilla and Judyie noted that the title of my festival was too vague and did not identify the artists featured in the festival or even mention the diaspora. Looking for inspiration, I re-read Jafari Allen's introduction to GLQ's special edition on the Black/queer/diaspora project. He pays close attention to the relationship between *black*, *queer* and *diaspora*, noting how the strokes "separate" and "conjoin" the terms, which "creates individual focus" (217). He also suggests that the strokes are "caresses shared between the terms" (217). Allen's warm, poetic framing of "black/queer/diaspora" inspired me to incorporate this writing style in the name of the festival.

⁷¹ New WORLD (1979-2009) was founded by Roberta Uno when she was a Directing graduate student at UMass.

⁷² There are several former employees of New WORLD, who are still working at UMass, such as Gilbert McCauley, Priscilla Page and Nicole M. Young.

Then, the spelling of *womyn* in the festival title spoke to the feminist and womanist traits of Sharon and Trey's work. There are other spellings of *womyn* (such as the traditional *women*, *wombman*⁷³, and *wimmin*⁷⁴), but this particular spelling "performatively asserts an independence from *men*" (Young 65). For inspiration, I looked to Trey's first published version of *da Kink*, which included the subtitle "*voices of black womyn*." Similar to Allen, George Elliott Clarke regards the tension between *black* and *womyn* in Anthony's subtitle. Clarke suggests that *black* "gestures toward a Pan-Africanist and even black cultural nationalist position," while *womyn* "evinces Anthony's feminist stance—an ideology apparent in the play" (4). Furthermore, the title *Black/Queer/Diaspora/Womyn Festival* laid claim to not only the artists featured in my thesis festival, but also the themes I investigated in my MFA thesis.

On Saturday, March 1st, 2014 BQDW Festival was in the Curtain Theater at UMass from 10 AM to 4 PM. A free luncheon for festival attendees and participants was in the Atrium of the Fine Arts Center. Envisioning the festival from start to finish was challenging because I had to determine how I wanted the festival to flow. I wanted both artists of my study at the center of the festival; thus, I decided to have staged readings of *con flama* and *da Kink*. I also wanted to invite Five College scholars to join the conversation on the implications of both artists' work in panel discussions. Because of the length of the festival, providing a meal for the artists, scholars, directors, performers, attendees and festival staff was important to me. I wanted people to eat and mingle,

⁷³ In use since the late 1980s and early 1990s, this particular spelling emphasizes that women have wombs, a biological factor that makes them different from men.

⁷⁴ Adopted by (by some people with a feminist viewpoint) as a preferred spelling because it does not contain the element *-men* (OED.com)

while reflecting on the performances. As a whole, I saw the festival as a holistic experience in which the readings, panels, and lunch were in constant conversation with one another.

When choosing the order of the festival, I decided to open the festival with a welcome and an invocation presented by Ms. Onawumi. Following the invocation was *con flama*, the first reading directed by Dean Djola Branner. Next, the first panel discussion was “Queering Blackness in the African Diaspora.” With this panel, I wanted to facilitate a conversation amongst the artists and scholars about their ideas on blackness and queer identities in relation to the Diaspora. For the artists, I was curious how they defined themselves as artists. What is their process for making art? How does their individual sense of self intersect with their creative process? I was also curious how the scholars read blackness in contemporary literature and society. In what ways do Black writers of the Diaspora challenge fixed ideas of blackness?

After the “Queering Blackness” panel, I scheduled the BQDW luncheon as the halfway mark of the festival to provide an opportunity for attendees and festival participants to eat and enjoy each other’s company. Next, the afternoon segment of the festival began with a reading of *da Kink* directed by Judyie Al-Bilali. Following this reading was the last panel, “The Survival of the Black Queer Woman Artist.” During this panel, I wanted both artists to talk more candidly about their careers. I was curious about their sustainability as Black queer women artists: how did they not only survive, but also thrive while on the periphery? What advice could Sharon and Trey offer the next generation of BQWAs?

Planning BQDW Festival

My journey of producing BQDW Festival began in early fall 2013. A significant part of my process was my weekly meetings with my Thesis Chair, Priscilla Page⁷⁵ and Judyie Al-Bilali⁷⁶, a mentor and collaborator for my thesis project. My meetings with Priscilla and Judyie served as both a check-in about my process and a space for me to ask questions and seek advice about producing. From the beginning, Priscilla and Judyie encouraged me to view myself as a producer, solidify my vision for BQDW festival and keep an open line of communication with the artists, scholars, and collaborators involved with the festival.

As creator and producer of BQDW Festival, my primary goal was to celebrate and advocate the work of Black queer women artists, an underrepresented group both in scholarship and in performance. I also wanted to facilitate conversations on how Sharon and Trey navigate the intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and nationality in their content and style. By executing the planning and production of my festival, I hoped to learn strategies for collaborating with Five College faculty, garnering my target audience, and making sure I took care of the artists, scholars, performers, and those directly involved in the festival.

Choosing the Festival's Venue

⁷⁵ Priscilla received her MFA in Dramaturgy from UMass Amherst and is currently a Senior Lecturer in Dramaturgy. She is now the head of the Multicultural Theatre certificate program in the Five Colleges. During her graduate experience, she produced, curated, and performed in events through New World Theater.

⁷⁶ Judyie received her MFA in Directing from UMass Amherst and is currently (the moniker she put on her letter). She has produced several festivals at Actors Theater of Louisville, including the Humana Festival.

When initially thinking about the venue, I wanted to have BQDW Festival outside of the Department because my target audience was students of color and queer-identified students. There is an overwhelming lack of diversity in arts-related majors not only at UMass, but also throughout the Five College Consortium. The reality is that many students of color and queer-identified students are in non-arts related majors. Yet, these same students are members of cultural Registered Student Organizations (RSOs); they attend and/or participate in performance events, such as spoken word poetry, dance performances and concerts. I did not want my target audience to *go* to the theatre; instead, I wanted to *bring* theatre to them. Because of my connection to the Department and my need for a venue, however, I looked at the Production Calendar⁷⁷ to cover my bases. I noticed there were several performances and rehearsals leading up to the first week of March, which supported my decision to host BQDW Festival elsewhere on campus.

At first, I considered utilizing the Fine Arts Atrium lobby because I knew the capabilities of the space since I produced *Sampling and Remixing Venus*⁷⁸ and watched a couple performances in that space. The Atrium was convenient for people travelling by bus and out of town because it is across from the Haigis Mall bus stop, has several parking spaces and is handicap accessible. I also explored Wilder Hall, the headquarters

⁷⁷ The Five College Opera's *Street Scene*, New Play Lab, and *Peter Pan* were productions in the spring 2014 season.

⁷⁸ In spring 2013, I produced and moderated a Hip Hop panel discussion and demonstration called *Sampling and Remixing Venus*. The event was in conjunction with the Department's production of *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks, directed by Judyie Al-Bilali, and focused on the connection between Sara Baartman (widely known as "the Hottentot Venus") and women of color in the Hip Hop industry. Special guests included Rosa Clemente, a Hip Hop activist pursuing her PhD in Afro-American Studies at UMass, and DJ Reborn, a freelance DJ and arts educator based in Brooklyn, NY.

for the Center for Multicultural Advancement of Student Success (CMASS)⁷⁹, and reached out to Shelly Perdomo, the Director of CMASS, based on Priscilla's recommendation. However, the spaces available at Wilder were smaller than what I had in mind for the festival. The third space I considered was the Events Room in the Commonwealth Honors College (CHC)⁸⁰ after a conversation about the festival's venue with Judyie. She suggested that I think about the location, the ambience of the space and New England weather considering when I scheduled my festival. She also reminded me that CHC is a residence hall with a substantial population of students of color⁸¹. I visited the Events Room again⁸² and took note of the warm, red walls, the flexibility of the space and its close proximity to the Roots Café, a 24-hour café. I concluded that the Events Room was the perfect space to hold my festival.

Although this venue was the ideal space for my festival, there was already an Honors College event scheduled in the space on the day of my festival. Therefore, I went back to my original idea of reserving the Atrium for my festival. During a conversation with Department Chair Penny Remsen and Production Manager Julie Fife, however, I discovered that the Curtain Theater was available⁸³. Based on my readings of *con flama*

⁷⁹ CMASS sponsors and hosts workshops and events geared towards students and faculty of color on the UMass campus.

⁸⁰ The Commonwealth Honors College is a new space. CHC opened its doors at the start of fall 2013.

⁸¹ In several residence halls at UMass, there are cultural floors in which students of color, LGBTQ and allies can live and socialize with one another.

⁸² Early in the semester, I went to an on-campus talk about diversity in the Events Room. I later learned that the event team only used half the space for the talk. Typically, a wall divider divides the space in half. The front half of the Events Room has an open, seating area of couches surrounded by windows. The other half of the room allows for lecture style seating and presentation set up.

⁸³ The online Production Calendar includes information regarding rehearsal times and spaces, performance runs, and special events pertaining to specific shows. When I originally looked at the calendar, I thought the Curtain was booked on the day of my festival. During our meeting, however, I learned that the Curtain was available before 6 PM on my festival date.

and *da Kink*, I knew the performers would need room to move in the space, but I also wanted the audience to experience the festival in an intimate space with raked seating. Since weather temperatures would be low the week of my festival, I did not want to have to worry about heat escaping from the Atrium whenever a door opened. Therefore, I reserved the Curtain for the bulk of my festival and the Atrium for the BQDW luncheon, which provided participants and attendees more elbow room to eat and move around.

Grant Writing and Collaboration

To raise money for BQDW Festival, I applied to the Five College Multicultural MOSAIC Artist Residency Grant (MOSAIC), the Lois Toko Fund⁸⁴ and the UMass Arts Council Single Project Events Grant (UAC)⁸⁵. MOSAIC was the first and largest funding source I applied to and had specific guidelines to follow. For instance, there had to be events held at least three out of five campuses of the Five College Consortium (FCC). This guideline allowed me to collaborate with Five College Faculty, an opportunity that I did not have in my previous producing experience. I collaborated with Professor Peter Lobdell (Amherst College) and Professors Will MacAdams and Talya Kingston (Hampshire College) to coordinate events in conjunction with the course material for their spring semester classes. For both staged readings, I also collaborated with Dean Djola Branner (Hampshire) to direct *con flama* and Judyie Al-Bilali to direct *da Kink*.

Both Peter and Will included Sharon's work in their curriculum and invited her to visit their Theatre classes. Peter's "Contemporary Performance" class examined

⁸⁴ The Lois Toko Fund is a College of Humanities and Fine Arts funding source that supports bringing women scholars and artists to the UMass Campus.

⁸⁵ The UAC Grant is a funding source of the Fine Arts Center, which supports Registered Student Organizations (RSOs) and co-sponsored art events on the UMass Campus.

innovative playwrights, performers, choreographers, designers, directors and theorists whose new ways of creating shaped art from the 19th century to the 21st century. During her visit to Amherst, Sharon shared videos and talked about her process in a lecture setting to students who were new to her work. Students in Will's "First Readings" class rehearsed and presented a series of staged readings ranging from classic texts to contemporary plays by visionary playwrights of diverse races, identities, and artistic styles. His class had a more hands-on approach to Sharon's material; they specifically wanted to work on choral techniques in *con flama*. Overall, I think Sharon's class visits were a nice contrast to another and allowed me to see her in both a lecture and workshop setting.

I also worked directly with Talya in organizing a Feminist Brunch centered on both artists' work. Talya co-taught a Feminist UNcourse with Professor Jill Lewis in which the goal of this UNcourse was to initiate a series of feminist happenings in unexpected spaces to inspire conversations about feminism and its intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, etc. Talya also included Sharon's *con flama* and Trey's *da Kink* as reading material for her "Feminist Theatre Practices" course, which was in conjunction with the Feminist UNcourse. Opening the Feminist Brunch, students from Talya's class introduced the artists. Then, Sharon and Trey discussed their background and their journey to being an artist. Interestingly enough, both artists have similar stories, which Trey herself brought up. For instance, both of their families moved around while they were young and they each had close relationships with their grandmothers.

They also have backgrounds in social work, particularly in their early years of creating art.

Following their herstories was the World Café model, in which the artists and attendees formed small groups and rotated to various areas in the space to discuss the following prompts⁸⁶:

- 1) How do you identify your lineage?
- 2) What are perceptions of beauty in your communities?
- 3) Where do you find ritual in your life?

At the start of World Café, each group designated a discussion leader who stayed behind to catch up the next group. At each station, a large sheet of paper was available for group members to write and/or draw their thoughts and observations pertaining to the conversation. What resulted from these small groups were meaningful conversations about identity, community and ritual. As an observer and participant, I noticed how others defined these terms for themselves and spoke about their own experiences candidly amongst strangers. I found the second prompt on perceptions of beauty difficult to talk about because my thinness is in conflict with my Blackness, especially down South; however, I was in a safe space and I was not alone. Because other participants revealed their personal experiences, I did not feel judged nor felt the need to judge anyone else.

After World Café, there was a final talkback to address some of the conversations sparked by the guest artists and the prompts. Before she left the event, Prof. Lewis made some positive remarks about the brunch and the importance of having open

⁸⁶ A couple weeks before the Feminist Brunch, Kingston and I followed up on the event and came up with these prompts for the World Café.

conversations about identity, community and experience, which is the purpose of the Feminist UNcourse. Then, a couple participants discussed their role as facilitator in the small groups and how staying behind forced them to remember key points from previous prompts. Next, Trey described her community as scattered and expressed feeling out of place. Looking at her background alone, she has ties to Jamaica (where her family is from); the United Kingdom (she grew up there for part of her childhood); Toronto, Ontario (where she went to high school and developed *da Kink*) and the States (she currently resides in Atlanta, GA). In response, Sharon noted that she appreciates her vast community; no matter where she goes, she knows she will have people to turn to for support. Overall, both artists applauded the Feminist Brunch and they saw the potential of the World Café model as a pedagogical tool for not only addressing issues, but also allowing multiple voices to speak.

For both staged readings in the festival, I collaborated with Five College faculty. I asked Dean Djola Branner (Hampshire) to direct a staged reading of an excerpt from Sharon's *con flama*. I knew he had a professional working relationship with her that dates back to the 1990s. During spring 2013, Djola worked with Priscilla to bring Sharon to the Five Colleges for an artist residency, from which I saw a performance of *blood pudding*. I also asked Judyie to direct an excerpt from Trey's *da Kink* because I had a wonderful experience working with her on Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* the previous spring. To support the directors, I scheduled rehearsal time for both readings leading up to the performance and a final dress in the Curtain prior to the festival. I also searched for

performers of color, particularly singers⁸⁷, to participate in the readings. Rehearsals for both readings began the week of the festival on Monday, February 24th, 2014; I served as both stage manager and dramaturg.

Sitting in both *con flama* and *da Kink* rehearsals was a rewarding experience because I heard the work out loud, in the mouths of the performers. Both casts consisted of students, faculty, and community performers of color, which spoke to the intergenerational stories present in both scripts. Yet, each cast had a different energy and working dynamic. For instance, a few members of the *con flama* cast had already worked together in *blood pudding* last spring. I think their familiarity with Sharon as an artist and the jazz aesthetic allowed them to work quickly on their feet. In contrast, most of *da Kink* cast met for the first time during their first rehearsal, but they became fast friends. Paired with the text, Judyie's theatre exercises helped to bring this group of women together as an ensemble. As a producer, I was impressed with the directors' casting choices given the challenge of finding performers of color in the Valley. Both casts respected the material and took care in performing their characters in rehearsal and during the festival.

For the "Queering Blackness in the African Diaspora" panel discussion, I invited Dr. Rachel Mordecai of the UMass English Department and Dr. Kevin Quashie from Smith College's Women and Gender Studies program. Dr. Mordecai has an extensive background on Caribbean literature and her latest book, *Citizenship under Pressure: The*

⁸⁷ About two weeks prior to the Festival, both Djola and Judyie asked me to help them find 1-2 women of color who sing for each reading. Djola eventually decided he no longer needed another performer, but I did find two women of color singers for Judyie before she began her rehearsals.

1970s in Jamaican Literature and Culture (2014), examines Jamaican citizenship, culture, politics and society between 1972 to 1980 through literature and other texts. In her last chapter, "Sexuality and the Jamaican Citizen," she focuses on the presence of the LGBTQ community in Jamaica and its influence on contemporary literature. Then, Dr. Quashie's background is cultural studies and theory with an emphasis on Black culture and feminisms since 1970. He had taught Sharon's work before and was teaching her performance novel *love/conjure blues* for a Special Topics seminar during spring 2014. The course examined queerness and love in contemporary African American literature. Based on my research and individual conversations with both scholars, I thought their backgrounds and perspectives would complement Sharon and Trey's discussion about their work during the panel.

Then, in the last panel "The Survival of the Black Queer Woman Artist", both artists made comments alluding to the importance of generational mothering for BQWAs. Amongst Black women writers across the Diaspora, mothering plays a significant role for these writers and their relationships with one another. The mothering I speak of centers on the nurturing and the passing down of knowledge and creative, cultural expression to the next generation, or what I like to call "generational mothering." Black feminists like Alice Walker, Bernice Reagan Johnson and Gay Wilentz acknowledge that Black women of the Diaspora are cultural producers and quiet progenitors of Black culture. Folklorist Beverly Stoeljte notes that "generational continuity" is present in relationships with Black women and this continuity focuses on "looking back through [Black] mothers" (Wilentz 389). Both in their work and in person,

Sharon and Trey are mothers in their own right. Listening to their herstories during the Feminist Brunch and encouraging comments during the festival affirmed this for me.

Looking at Sharon's journey, she had an extensive working background in social work prior to making her living as an artist. She disclaimed that living as a working artist has its challenges. In fact, several contemporary artists doubt they can make a living as an artist; they are unsure of which channels to go through. In the past twenty years, funding for the arts has dwindled significantly. Even with various arts grants available, the pool of funding is smaller than what it has been previously, which makes grant writing highly competitive. Several artists often find themselves grappling for the same funding sources. Notably, Sharon has not only survived, but has also thrived as a teaching artist. Her position as a teaching artist enables her to not only practice, but also teach her creative process. She has taught at several academic institutions, including DePaul University, Northwestern University and the University of Iowa. She has also taught writing workshops that empower community writers; served as an Anchor Artist for the Austin Project (tAP); and acted as Artistic Director for a queer people of color organization in Austin. She ultimately believes it is possible for artists to make a living off their work; they just have to be aware of their resources.

Similarly, Trey had roots in social work and acknowledged her struggle living as an artist early in her career. When developing *da Kink*, she sought to write characters she wanted to perform, roles that depicted the complexity of Black women's experiences. She did not think her piece sell out seats in Canada's largest theatre or become a hit TV show. I think Anthony's success with *da Kink* in both theatre and broadcast television provides

her with a platform to engage Black Canadian audiences. She engages in speaking tours and workshops at colleges and universities, while producing her work and the work of other artists of color with her production company. By having a presence in whichever community she lives, Trey inspires the next generation of artists as a mentor. One piece of advice she gave during the BQDW Festival is that BQWAs should not have to produce their work alone.

The final piece of my festival puzzle was inviting Ms. Onawumi Jean Moss⁸⁸, a local storyteller and Professor Emeritus at Amherst College, to give the Invocation for the Festival. In my earlier conversations with Priscilla and Judyie during fall 2013, we discussed the element of ritual and invoking the ancestors as an important quality in diasporic performance. I thought of Moss when we had this conversation because I heard her speak at both a talkback and an informal gathering. Her wisdom paired with her fiery personality made her a perfect candidate for the Invocation; however, I had a hard time gauging if I would have enough funding because I did not have all my funding during the fall. In the spring, I applied to the UAC grant, which was the last funding I received. I wanted to make sure I had enough room in my budget to cover my unpaid expenses first before seeking Onawumi as a speaker. Fortunately, the UAC grant gave me flexibility within my budget to secure Moss for my festival.

In essence, I found the grant writing and planning process rewarding because I worked extremely hard to collaborate and communicate with Five College faculty, the

⁸⁸ I first met Miss Onawumi during fall 2011 at a talk back for Department's production of *Hell in High Water* by Marcus Gardley, which depicts the moment leading and following the 1927 Great Mississippi Flood. I served as Assistant Dramaturg and performed the role of Rena, a blues singer. As an audience member, Miss Onawumi made a powerful statement about the need for including the

artists, and the Department. I had a close working relationship with Willow Cohen, the Department Business Manager. She was a tremendous help to me when it came to budgeting; booking airfare, transportation and accommodations for the artists; contracts and honorariums for the artists, scholars, and Onawumi; ordering catering from Black Sheep; and renting tables and chairs for the BQDW luncheon. Then, Melissa Cleary from the Fine Arts Center also helped in reserving the Atrium and obtaining a food waiver⁸⁹ for the luncheon. Thankfully, I received 100% of my requested budget. MOSAIC awarded me with \$3, 500, the Toko Fund awarded me \$1, 500 and the UAC awarded me \$750 towards my project (a full breakdown of my festival budget is included in Appendix A).

In terms of grant writing, one lesson I learned is to apply for all my funding at the beginning of my process. Even though I had 90% of my funding by the end of fall 2013, I had to wait for the remaining ten percent during spring 2014. If I had all my funding in the fall, I would not have hesitated to secure Onawumi for my festival's invocation. I also could have applied for additional funding in the spring to cover expenses that increased, particularly food expenses. Looking at my final budget now, I spent more money on the catered luncheon than I had originally intended. Even though Black Sheep gave me a discount, choosing an on-campus venue close to affordable food options would have decreased my food expenses and given me more money to use in other areas of my budget, such as artist fees.

⁸⁹ UMass Amherst has a strict policy when it comes to catering on campus, in which Departments and RSOs have to employ Catering Services for meals connected to campus events. If a Department or RSO wants to support an off-campus catering service, UMass must approve a food waiver for a scheduled event a month in advance.

Publicity and Support

Towards the end of fall 2013 and beginning of spring 2014, I contacted several Five College professors teaching classes that connected to the themes of my festival. Because they included Bridgforth and Anthony's work in their syllabi, MacAdams, Kingston, Lobdell, and Quashie included BQDW Festival as a required event for their students. Then, Priscilla and Judyie, who both teach multicultural theatre curriculum⁹⁰, included BQDW Festival as a required event for their classes. In addition, Professors Rachael Goren-Watts (Mount Holyoke) and Chris Tinson (Hampshire) not only listed the festival as a required event, but also invited me to talk more in-depth about what inspired me to produce BQDW Festival. Prof. Goren-Watts invited me to give a guest lecture to her Body Image and Identity seminar⁹¹, while Prof. Tinson⁹² invited me as a guest on TRGGRadio, a grassroots Hip Hop radio station he hosts at WMUA on Fridays from 6PM to 8PM. Clearly, I expected a substantial number of Five College student and faculty attendees; however, my goal was to spread the word about BQDW Festival to both my target audience and community members.

In terms of other publicity strategies, I created a Facebook Events page with the festival details, which I updated periodically until the day of the festival. I then wrote a press release for the event and the Department's Public Relations coordinator Anna-

⁹⁰ Each semester, Priscilla teaches TH 130 Contemporary Playwrights of Color, a course that examines the social context and style of artists of color. Judyie teaches a 2-semester theatre course called Brown Paper Studio, which utilizes a devising method she developed while working in South Africa.

⁹¹ This Psychology seminar explores the relationship between body image, identity and sense of self with special attention to intersections of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class, size, age, and physical ability (Goren-Watts 1).

⁹² Tinson teaches an African Diaspora class that examines diasporic practices and critical debates over the meaning of African culture in the New World.

Maria Goosens shared her contacts, which included Five College student newspapers and local newspapers like *the Valley Advocate*⁹³. I sought help from undergraduate Jing Huang (Mount Holyoke) and fellow graduate student Nicole M. Young (UMass English) in developing an electronic flyer to send to Department listservs and RSOs⁹⁴ throughout the Five Colleges. I also recorded a public service announcement (PSA) with Glenn Siegel of WMUA to promote my festival to a wider audience. Due to limited seating, I managed a RSVP line for festival attendees.

For the day of the festival, I sought volunteers from Priscilla's TH 130 class, for which I was a Teaching Assistant. Six students responded to my call and informed me of their availability on the day of the festival. During the week of my festival, I organized a volunteer meeting to review the festival schedule and duties. I assigned my volunteers to pick up the artists; assist with set up and break down; and record the festival. As my Chair, Priscilla agreed to supervise my festival from start to finish. Then, Julie secured two student volunteers from the Department to help with Front of House and set up, while second-year Dramaturg Paul Adolphsen offered his during the festival. Additional support came from Melissa and Glenn Proud, a second-year Director, who helped with the BQDW luncheon in the FAC Atrium.

Reflecting on BQDW Festival

While producing BQDW Festival, there were several institutional challenges that directly and indirectly affected my process. For instance, UMass is part of the Five

⁹³ *The Valley Advocate* contacted me directly to get more information about my festival. During the week of my festival, the Advocate featured BQDW Festival on their Events page.

⁹⁴ With the RSOs, I targeted student of colors, women and queer-identified organizations.

College Consortium and located in the Pioneer Valley, a predominantly white area in New England. Although there are a substantial number of people of color in this community, their presence is scattered throughout the Valley, especially in the arts. In addition, many of the cultural registered student organizations (RSOs) cater to undergraduate students of color, while few RSOs address the needs of graduate students, let alone graduate students of color. Moreover, I found balancing my responsibilities as a teaching assistant, graduate student, and production dramaturg overwhelming as I worked on my thesis festival. As a first-time producer, BQDW Festival was part of my thesis and I was learning through trial and error. Overall, I learned lessons from both the challenging factors and rewarding moments, which gave me "new muscle."

One of my early concerns while producing my festival was seeking support from students of color at UMass, a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Valley. Based on early conversations with Priscilla and Judyie, I knew that having a team of students of color would benefit my process leading up to and the day of the festival. However, I only knew a handful of students of color in the Department, some who I rarely see. Although I taught several students of color as a teaching assistant for TH 100 and TH 130, many of these students were non-majors and upper classmen who already graduated. During fall 2013 and well into spring 2014, I made a conscious effort to attend as many cultural events on-campus my schedule allowed to network with undergrads and connect with more graduate students. Although I made some new contacts, the reality was that my network was too small. Prior to my third year, I had not fully navigated the spaces where

people of color meet in the Valley due to my busy schedule and responsibilities as a graduate student.

In hindsight, knowing more students involved in cultural RSOs and attending more on-campus events throughout my graduate school experience would have worked to my advantage. I could have co-produced my event with an RSO, which would have cut costs in my budget. For instance, UMass allots several grants for RSOs to produce special events, which could have led to more funding. Then, UMass Auxiliary Services rents event spaces in the Student Union and the Campus Center at a discounted price specifically for RSOs. Both the Student Union and the Campus Center have venues that accommodate performances and are close to affordable food options; hence, many on-campus events occur here. Ultimately, collaborating with a cultural RSO would have provided me with a team of students of color, volunteers, and a portion of my target audience.

One challenge I underestimated while producing my thesis festival was how much the Department's spring season would affect my process. In my early conversations with Julie Fife during the fall, she gave me a detailed list of what support the Department would offer for my festival, including rehearsal space; an event coordinator/stage manager for the week of the festival; and a House Manager and four Front-of-House ushers. By the end of the fall, we agreed to keep in touch and continue our conversations in the spring. When spring came, however, our flow of communication became slower and the initial list grew smaller as the season progressed. Up until spring 2014, Julie had a graduate Production Assistant responsible for updating calendars and

managing space requests in the Department. Unfortunately, she did not have a replacement, which meant that she had to take on these responsibilities during a season with two large-scale productions. Consequently, my thesis festival took a back seat in terms of Department priorities and I had to learn how to negotiate these factors and put my festival at the top of the priority list.

When it came to the needs of the directors, it was my responsibility to secure rehearsal space and time for both casts. At the end of the fall, I secured the Curtain for a final dress the night before and the day of the festival. In the beginning of spring semester, I submitted my rehearsal requests after learning what dates and times the directors wanted to rehearse. I was aware the Department has a handful of rehearsal spaces (i.e. FAC 201, FAC 204, the Upper Rand Lobby, the Curtain and the Rand). Since *Street Scene* had performances during the last week of February, the Upper Rand lobby was off limits; thus, I thought I would get the Curtain or 204. I did not anticipate not getting one of my choices, which became my reality. In hopes of getting 204, I tried negotiating with third-year director Brianna Sloane because I knew she was rehearsing for *Peter Pan*, the last show in the season. According to the production calendar, *Peter Pan* rehearsals were in multiple rehearsal sites, which Brianna confirmed. Therefore, I had to accept the space I had for rehearsals. In retrospect, I would have requested rehearsal space during the fall and found alternate rehearsal spaces on campus.

In terms of workload, I would have benefited from the support of an event coordinator and/or stage manager for the rehearsals and the festival itself. Julie gave me the names of a couple Theater students who could assist me; however, they made

commitments to other projects in the Department. I then sought help from my undergraduate and graduate contacts at a few cultural RSOs. A few students responded to my call and expressed an interest in helping me. Because the BQDW Festival residency was during the last week of February, however, I lost a couple students of color to Black History events and the rest to scheduling conflicts for other projects. Therefore, I assumed the role of stage manager/event coordinator because BQDW Festival was my thesis project and I had put so much work into producing the event.

When it came to securing a House Manager and ushers for my festival, scheduling conflicts were also an issue. I was unclear until the day before my festival how many Front of House people I would actually have. I found this frustrating because I had to rethink volunteer responsibilities at the last minute. Even though I sent a group e-mail to my volunteers informing them of shifting responsibilities, I do not think they had enough time to review these changes prior to showing up to the festival. On the day of the festival though, two Theater undergrads performed Front of House duties and assisted my volunteers with set up. Fortunately, I had enough volunteers to rotate as greeters in lieu of ushers, but I was disappointed in how much my support shrunk when I needed it. I would have liked more Theater majors involved in my festival because they had an opportunity to witness the work and meet living artists of color, which is rare in the Department. In spite of my disappointment, I have to give credit to the people who did show up, such as TH 130 volunteers, the Theater undergrads, Paul, Priscilla, Melissa and Glenn. They served as my team for the day and helped me pull off my event.

Overwhelmingly, I found the day of BQDW Festival taxing because I hosted the festival; acted as stage manager/event coordinator; and moderated the panels. I knew before hand that I would be in work mode throughout the festival; thus, I made plans for Priscilla and a couple volunteers to take care of the artists and scholars. Even with the support of my volunteers and colleagues in the Department, I was unprepared for wearing so many hats. Switching back and forth from host to coordinator to moderator was disorienting and I felt disconnected from the entire event. I wish I had more time to interact with the artists, scholars and audience members throughout the festival to get their feedback of the event. For example, a couple audience members approached me during the festival to discuss their reactions; however, I had to cut our conversations short because I was juggling so many responsibilities. For future events, I want to be more accessible as a producer and give myself more time to interact with the participants and attendees.

When thinking about the panel discussions, I was underprepared to moderate the discussions. I could have introduced the panelists in a more formal way so that the audience would know who was speaking and why. For instance, I could have recited brief biographies of the artists and scholars, or I could have let them introduce themselves. Then, the format of the panels leaned towards the traditional and questions from the audience came towards the end. Launching into the panels after the performances short-circuited audience members' initial response to the material. I could have facilitated the discussion by giving attendees time to process their reactions and ask questions about the work itself since the festival focused on Bridgforth and Anthony. Audience input could

have had a positive impact on the direction of the panels and encouraged other audience members to do more than witness. Based on this experience, I would make a couple changes to how I dealt with the panels. For instance, I would consider having someone else moderate both panel discussions. If I had more time with the artists, I would schedule a meet and greet in which they met the moderator, Mordecai and Quashie. This meet and greet would allow me to talk in-depth about my intentions and goals for each panel. The panelists would have an opportunity to talk without the pressure of speaking in front of an audience.

A major success in the BQDW Festival was the audience turnout. During the early stages of my festival, I knew that attracting my ideal audience would be a challenge because I was producing my festival in the Valley. Looking out at the festival audience, however, I saw a diverse group of students, faculty and community members from various backgrounds, including race, gender, sexuality and age. My strategies of creating an online presence for the festival; collaborating with Five College faculty for the BQDW residency; and word of mouth brought people to the morning and afternoon segments of my festival. I think I met my goal of reaching my target audience, which I count as a victory.

Overall, I think my position as a Black woman and a graduate student at a PWI affected my role as producer. I was the only graduate student of color in the Department for three years and I felt pressure to work twice as hard to prove my value and the validity of my work. I internalized this pressure while working on my thesis and adopted

the strong black woman syndrome. I wanted to execute my festival to not only advocate the work of two artists I admire, but also to expose people to their work by any means necessary. Because of my leadership role, my responsibilities for the festival were across the board and I found myself overcompensating in areas where I did not have enough support. From this experience, I learned that juggling so many responsibilities while producing is stressful, exhausting and frustrating. Although I had limitations when it came to gathering a team, I managed to find a group of people who did support me and contribute to the success of my festival. My experiences as a Theater graduate student of color at UMass taught me that building a reliable network of people and resources is necessary when producing any kind of work. Building a network does not happen overnight; instead, it takes time and effort. I think finding the time to attend community events and working in some capacity with the groups who host these events is something I want to work on for my future endeavors.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Engaging in a Diaspora Literacy

Inspired by scholar Gay Wilentz, I sought to cross-examine Bridgforth and Anthony's creative work to advocate a diaspora literacy that specifically celebrates and juxtaposes their work as artists. I wanted to provide a platform for Bridgforth and Anthony to not only discuss their work, but also provide a New England audience an opportunity to experience their work. Significantly, Black women artists of the Diaspora are cultural producers and quiet progenitors of Black culture. Yet, the histories of Black lesbians and Black queer identities pale in comparison to their White counterparts (Anderson 95). As Black queer women artists of the Diaspora, Sharon Bridgforth and Trey Anthony are contributors to the dramatic work and herstories on Black queer women. Overwhelmingly, there is a need for more scholarship and practice focused on this particular group of artists and their work. Works like *con flama* and *da Kink* place the voices of women of color, who are typically on the periphery, at the center of conversations surrounding race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationality.

Because of my dual role as a scholar and a theatre practitioner on this project, I have three wishes for further study and practice. My first wish is that art scholars working on projects similar to mine continue to point out discrepancies within their fields and actively seek solutions to fill in these gaps. Although scholarship has come a long way, there is still a long way to go when it comes to the production of knowledge and cultural representation. My second wish is that scholars and art practitioners find

more ways to collaborate across disciplines. Both theatre and Transnational Feminist studies value collaboration, which was an important factor in the planning, execution and success of my thesis festival. Furthermore, my last wish is that I continue to discover new ways on how to better engage in a diaspora literacy. Based on my research and my festival, I can easily imagine a theatre season of works by BQWAs chockfull of lectures, panels, workshops, and fully mounted productions. One thing that is important to me as a practitioner is finding new ways to educate diverse communities through dialogue. I feel the conversations about the intersectional experiences of people of color often happen in private because there are very few safe spaces to have these conversations in public. With my future endeavors, I aim to produce art and create more safe spaces for these dialogues to happen.

APPENDIX A

FINAL BQDW FESTIVAL BUDGET

EXPENSES	EXPENSE DESCRIPTION	TOTAL PROJECT EXPENSES
	ARTIST FEES	
	Sharon Bridgforth	\$1,000
	Trey Anthony	\$1,000
	HONORARIA	
	Dr. Rachel Mordecai	\$ 150
	Dr. Kevin Quashie	\$ 150
	Onawumi Jean Moss	\$ 200
	PROMOTION/PUBLICITY	
	Cost of image for electronic flyer. Publicity was electronic and therefore did not attribute additional costs to project.	\$ 27.45
	TRANSPORTATION & HOSPITALITY	
	This cost accounts for airfare and hotel accommodations for both artists.	\$1,844.83
	VENUE	
	Rental of the Fine Arts Center Atrium	\$ 139.50
	MISCELLANEOUS	
	Rental of Tables/Chairs from Taylor Rental	\$ 332.76
	UMass & Black Sheep Catering; and additional supplies for BQDW Luncheon	\$1,126.45
	TOTAL ALL EXPENSES	\$5,970.99
INCOME	INCOME DESCRIPTION	TOTAL PROJECT INCOME
	Five College MOSAIC Grant	\$3,500
	Lois Toko Fund	\$1,500
	Arts Council Grant	\$ 750
	Personal Contribution	\$ 220.99
	TOTAL ALL INCOME	\$5,970.99

APPENDIX B

BQDW ARTIST RESIDENCY ITINERARY

Monday, February 24th, 2014

Evening/Night

6 PM to 9:30 PM Judyie Al-Bilali's *da Kink in my Hair* rehearsal, FAC 206

Wednesday, February 26th, 2014

Evening/Night

6 PM to 10 PM Djola Branner's *con flama* rehearsal, FAC 206

Sharon Bridgforth arrives at Bradley at 11:27 PM

Valley Transporter picks up Sharon

Sharon checks-in to UMass Campus Center Hotel

Thursday, February 27th, 2014

Morning

11:00 AM Adewunmi picks up Sharon from Campus Center for class visits

11:30 AM to 12:30 PM Visit "Sources of Contemporary Performance" taught by Peter

Lobdell at Amherst College, Webster Hall 217

Course Description: The status quo says, "We do it the way it's always been done." The artist replies, "I have an idea, let's try it another way." This course explores several seminal theatrical events and the artists who created them. These innovations changed the course of theater and dance in the 20th century, thereby preparing those who follow to make the new art of the 21st. The course will look at playwrights, performers, choreographers, designers, directors and theorists whose ideas opened up new ways of looking at the craft of making those space-time objects we struggle to categorize as plays, dances, operas, performances and events. Particular attention will fall on work that is difficult to correctly place in a single category.

Afternoon

12:35 PM Adewunmi takes Sharon to Hampshire College

1PM to 3:20 PM Visit “First Readings” taught by Will McAdams, Emily Dickinson Hall
Studio Black Box

Course Description: This course will replicate the dynamic, collaborative spirit of a theater ensemble at the beginning of a rehearsal process. During the course of the semester, students will rehearse and present staged readings of a series of plays, including classical texts and contemporary plays from visionary playwrights of diverse races, identities, and artistic styles. Students will rotate through various production roles, and will make presentations as if they were at the beginning of the rehearsal process: a director will present their vision for the piece, a designer will present a design response, dramaturgs will present dramaturgical approaches, etc. As a class, we will explore the complex questions of identity and casting and how they resonate at Hampshire and beyond. The course is designed to broaden students' repertoire of plays, to encourage students to make strong initial choices and to develop students' capacities to talk about and through their work.

3:25 PM Adewunmi takes Sharon back to Campus Center Hotel and/or pit stop

Evening/Night

Trey Anthony flies into Bradley at 11:09 PM

Valley Transporter picks up Trey

Trey checks into Campus Center Hotel

Friday, February 28th, 2014

Morning

9:30 AM Adewunmi picks up Sharon and Trey from Campus Center Hotel and take to
Hampshire College

10 AM to 12 PM noon Open brunch event within the experimental *UNCourse "Feminist Matters"* initiative - linked to Talya Kingston's "Feminist Theatre Practices" class, Jill Lewis' "Creative practices, the arts, social justice, social change" seminar - and invited guests at the Hampshire College Art Gallery Space (downstairs in the Library building)

The **UNCourse** gatherings will take inspiration from 'kitchen table' politics fostered by the Women's Movement. We want to activate new, informal social interactions and feminist social justice conversations about things that affect the gendered lives, attitudes, social realities and concerns of different students – intersecting with different 'political/ issues/academic priorities e.g. environment, spirituality, sustainability, racial/cultural contexts, international, heterosexual navigations, gender concern - life generally - where issues addressed by feminism really matter!

ORDER OF EVENTS

1) Karyn Warren-Gregory (TA for the feminist theatre practices class) will introduce Sharon Bridgforth & Trey Anthony and welcome them to Hampshire.

2) Sharon & Trey will get 20-30 minutes to speak about and/or perform their work to answer the central question: How does your identity influence the work you create?

3) We will break into evolving groups of 5 - mixing guests, faculty and students - to discuss some of the questions raised in the "world cafe" model. (30 minutes)

4) We will come back to a more traditional space to bring some of the questions raised in small groups into a talk-back with Sharon Bridgforth & Trey Anthony. (15 minutes)

Evening/Night

3 PM to 6 PM Djola's *con flama* rehearsal, the Curtain Theater/Upper Rand

5 PM Dinner with guest artists, Penny Remsen (Chair), and Priscilla (Thesis Chair) at the
Monkey Bar; Priscilla will pick up the guest artists

4:30 PM to 8 PM Judyie and *da Kink* rehearsal, the Curtain Theater lobby/Curtain
Theater

Saturday, March 1st, 2014 (BQDW Festival from 10 AM to 4:30 PM)

Morning

8 AM to 9:45 AM Volunteers set up with Adewunmi

9:20 AM Volunteer picks up Sharon and Trey from Campus Center Hotel and escorts
them to the Curtain Theater

9:45 AM Both artists arrive at the Theater

10 AM to 10:30 AM Welcome and Invocation

10:30 to 11:15 AM Excerpt of Bridgforth's *con flama* directed by Djola Branner

11:15 to 11:25 AM Break

11:30 AM to 1 PM "Queering Blackness in the Diaspora"

Kevin Quashie (Smith College)

Sharon Bridgforth

Rachel Mordecai (UMass)

Trey Anthony

Afternoon

1PM to 2 PM Meal Break in the FAC Atrium Lobby

2 to 2:45 PM Excerpt of Anthony's *da Kink in my Hair* directed by Judyie Al-Bilali

2:45 to 2:55 PM Break

3 to 4:00 PM "the Survival of the Black Queer Woman Artist" panel

Trey Anthony

Sharon Bridgforth

4:15 to 4:30 PM Closing Remarks

4:30 to 5:30 PM Volunteers break down and clean up with Adewunmi

Sunday, March 2nd, 2014

Morning/Afternoon

Bridgforth and Anthony check out of Campus Center

Valley Transporter picks up Sharon and Trey for their flights at Bradley International

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