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Culminating Experience: Reflection

Culminating Experience Project:

My culminating experience project, entitled “Color Me Joy” was a concept album and performance project of seven compositions in which each song addressed a different issue that young women, especially women of color have to struggle through and overcome. The purpose of this project was to look beyond the terms *racism* and *sexism*, and address the underlying issues within both subjects, such as identity, body image issues, sexual assault and harassment, the fetishization and objectification of women of color, and how all of these issues negatively affect mental health. I wanted to write music that was uplifting, empowering and joyful, but also reflective, cathartic, and healing. I wanted to discuss the intersectionality of being female and a person of color, and the silencing that so many women like myself feel and have been fighting against for hundreds of years. To enhance this goal further, I wrote spoken word poetry for each composition to be presented between songs along with free improvisation. I wrote this material from the perspective of a biracial woman living in America, because that is what I am, but I wanted all women, especially women of color to be able to relate to this project in some way.

Results and Plan of Action:

Going into this project, I planned to have it in three parts: 1.) an outreach/workshop portion where I would go to middle schools and high schools and talk about the issues the project discussed, and find ways to talk about them musically. My vision was to derived inspiration for the material from the community; 2.) the recording portion, which was executed as planned; 3.) the fundraising concert for Freedom School Connexion. I decided instead to attempt to have the

performance itself be an educational/interdisciplinary experience as well as a musical one. Once I decided I wanted the performance to be more than just music, I realized I wanted to have many performances of this project, so I decided to put my energy towards preparing the performance like a suite, which I presented for the first time at my recital on June 26th, 2018. All in all, my project did not change that significantly. The vision for the music, which was the core of the project, never changed and was executed as planned. What changed was the performance aspect. I still plan to do a fundraising concert for Freedom Connection in October, but I wanted to have at least one performance of the project before scheduling a venue and charging people to see it.

Next Steps:

I plan to continue this project by performing this music along with the spoken word and free improvisation as a suite. I am going to continue to mix and master the tracks and release them sometime in the spring. I also plan to expand my initial idea of the outreach portion of the project into the project I will be completing for my Fellowship year.

During the first week of Performance Pedagogy with Marco, we were asked to present a grant proposal for a music program we would like to create. My vision was an after-school African American Roots Vocal Ensemble, which would meet two hours, twice per week to learn traditional songs using only voice and body percussion. This program would be intended for middle school students in Roxbury, MA who are interested in deepening their knowledge of African American Roots music and music of the African Diaspora. As I began to plan and develop this idea, it transformed from a theoretical blueprint into an ambition that I plan to make a reality.

For my Post-Graduate Fellowship year, I plan to write a songbook and curriculum for an African American Roots Vocal Ensemble that would consist of a capella vocal arrangements of African American spirituals, blues songs, call and response songs, Great American Songbook tunes, shape note music, and contemporary music by current Black artists. I would compile all of these arrangements into a book that would be copywritten and distributed to other teachers who could use it as a guide to teach their own students or start their own programs.

In this program, students would have the opportunity to learn to read music, learn to read shape notes, learn music by ear, improvise, and compose and arrange alongside their peers. If I were in middle school, I would have loved to have the opportunity to participate in this program and I think many other students would as well. I studied jazz at a performing arts high school and never had the opportunity to collaborate with other Black musicians, learn from a teacher of color, or had exposure to any other Black American music. When I arrived at New England Conservatory, I enrolled in a gospel ensemble with Nedelka Prescod and it transformed the way I sing and how I hear and think about music. I was a member of gospel ensemble for the following seven semesters.

I am passionate about this project because I have fallen in love with African American Roots music. In my own composing and arranging, I have gained an immense amount of inspiration from it, and I think that this music is a vital part of American history and American legacy. Early blues, jazz, R&B, hip-hop, rock, rap, and pop artists from Duke Ellington to Kendrick Lamar have created some of the richest art this country has ever known. Unfortunately, a growing number of American schools are losing funding for music education, especially in jazz and contemporary music. It's important for young Black people to see themselves and Black

culture beyond the oppression and injustice people of color have faced in this country. I believe I have the power to foster that change as a musician and as an educator.

Contribution to the Discipline or Profession:

I believe we as musicians and performers have a responsibility to speak our truth, shed light on important social and political issues that matter to us personally, and encourage others to do the same through our art. This is what I am trying to do with these projects, and I believe that contributes to professional music. I also believe that art is about pushing boundaries, and jazz epitomizes this ideal. For this reason, pushing the boundaries of my mind, my skill level, of what I know and what I think I know is paramount to me, and I think that outlook contributes to the discipline of jazz music.

Personal Impact:

The personal impact of this project has been significant for me. I've learned that I have a lot of trouble composing without any inspiration. I need to feel sincerely inspired to write anything I think is worth developing. There were a couple of tunes I wrote this year that started off as a small idea that I hated (Phenomenal Woman melody, Change), but was forced to settle with because there were deadlines to meet. I had to force myself to develop these ideas into something I liked that inspired me further, and I was able to do it. It felt much like the exercise we did in Danilo's workshop where he asked us to choose songs we hated and then play them in different ways until we found a seed of something we enjoyed.

For me, inspiration has been necessary because it clouds judgement. I have a very difficult time not judging myself and my ideas at every moment. I've truly never done anything that I thought was good enough, and this year has challenged that within me. This program and

this project specifically, have caused me to have an acute awareness of my ego, realizing that it's not always about how good something sounds, but rather the effect it has on both you as a performer and the audience as listeners. I have learned that when you write or perform something and decide it's bad and that you don't want to give it 100 percent or throw yourself into it completely, you're taking away from what someone else could experience through your music. This year, I began to gain inspiration from the thought of inspiring others alone.