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SEARCHING FOR THE WOMANIST WITHIN

by

CARMELA L. PATTILLO

Under the Direction of Layli Phillips

ABSTRACT

Searching for the Womanist Within is a play about self identity and the daily experience of African-American women who are at the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class. The unique life perspective of Afican-American women is explored through the retelling of stories from the writer's life as well as the lives of other black women. In Feminist, Black Feminist, Afrocentric and Womanist drama it is common to steer away from conventional theatrical structures, Solo drama, a less conventional structure, was selected for this play. In addition to the play is an essay about the writing process, as well as a literature review and a statement of significance about this creative thesis.

INDEX WORDS: Womanist theatre, Womanism, Solo drama, Black feminist theatre, Feminist theatre, Afrocentric theatre

SEARCHING FOR THE WOMANIST WITHIN

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CARMELA L. PATTILLO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2009

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2009

SEARCHING FOR THE WOMANIST WITHIN

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August 2009

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my sons Holden Pattillo and Darrin Griffin, my mother Delcina Allen and the memory of my cousin Darrin Snell. And I would also like to dedicate this work to hip-hop.

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I would like to thank my entire Thesis Committee: Dr. Layli Phillips, Dr. Shirlene Holmes and Dr. Gayle Austin. I would also like to thank one of my best friends Natasha Stark who talked me down on many occasions. Without all of you incredible, supportive, intelligent, creative women I would not have made it here. Thank you.

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SIGNIFICANCE OF PROJECT

Womanist ideology in African-American theatre has a long history, however, the solo dramatist in Womanist Theatre is still a relatively new idea.[1] Solo drama itself is not extremely old. Womanist solo drama is an unconventional form of theatre. There is a limited pool of research on womanism in theatre and film. This research branched out to film sources to supplement the limited amount of material on womanist theatre alone, also some research on black feminist film and theatre was used for the same reason.

Womanist perspective has been ignored for many years, even though it has always been present.[2] In the African-American community womanism has a long history of everyday, the practical application the academy has limited knowledge and understanding of it. [3] As more black women move into academia and the arts exposure to womanist ideals is becoming more wide spread and acknowledged. Over the course of time a few voices have been heard in theatre such as Whoopi Goldberg in her one woman shows. There are others as well, the common thread in all of these voices being that they express the womanist sensibility but they're often targeting white audiences. These shows also tend to be a platform to address stereotypes about black womanhood. There are shows confronting the images of mammy that tell black women's truth, however more often than not the show is designed to force whites to see black women as they really are or at least not as they thought they were before.[4] The solo-drama I wrote before this one confronted stereotypes about black women in theatre particularly Mammy for example. This work has a lot about evolving identity, which is not new to any one group of women, but womanist perspective gives African-American women a specific position between historical racism against blacks in the United States and sexism experiences that are informed by both race and class.

My one woman show has some of these elements that challenge stereotypes but I attempted to focus on a primarily black audience. For example my show talks about confronting people on their ideas about black women directly. There is also a section where I address the issue of interracial dating and the subtle stereotype of the white woman being better than the black woman. It is my goal to add to the body of theatre work written by and for black women as well as help expand the pool of research on this subject. This piece is very personal but I feel it could work with another actor performing it, but, I would like to perform it at least once myself.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The questions being explored in this thesis were:

How was womanism and personal growth experienced and lived over the course of my lifetime?

How have I resisted the racism, and sexism that are impacting me in my life?

How have I embraced the courage of womanism and its basic themes of love for self, women centered identity and love of spirit and community in my everyday life?

How have I been courageous, 'womanish' and grown in pursuing a life for myself everyday regardless of the stereotypes about black women?

How have I grown, healed and evolved?

I was exploring my own thoughts and ideas as they came to me organically, I had to evaluate each experience and the ideas I had about womanism, identity and myself around each idea or experience. Once I decided on what I wanted to convey about each item, I just wrote about it, edited, added and revised as the drama dictated.

The original question evolved as I was writing the play into: "How have I grown through my subconscious to conscious Womanist perspective and how has that informed my daily life?" These questions are answered repeatedly by several defining moments of self discovery and understanding of others as well as community. Repeatedly I return to the idea of resistance from racism and sexism as a constant factor in womanist perspective.

METHODOLOGY

The method that was chosen for this thesis was Creative Project: Theatre-Solo Drama. I decided to write a solo drama for my thesis because the womanist perspective is significant in

my life, it is a part of my daily way of being, and I wanted to explore this in my research. My undergraduate studies degree was in theatre and I continue to use theatre as a tool in my studies.

Solo drama was particularly interesting to me as a format for my thesis because there is a great deal of freedom in this style of theatre-freedom to take chances that probably would not be effective in other forms of theatre or media. Michael Kearns explains this in his book The Solo Performer's Journey: From the Page to the Stage:

> The solo form has also given me the freedom to connect to stories-my own and others'-that is often not acceptable in other entertainment forms. Censorship is virtually nonexistent in this work, and I find I can bring to life and the stage the most intimate narratives and nuanced performances that might not fly elsewhere. [5]

Solo drama also lends itself to non-linear structure quite easily. The story doesn't have to be told chronologically; and often there is not an exact time line to follow in solo drama.[6] My solo drama was not chronological through out. There were some parts of the work that fit together because of the chronological closeness. During the first part of Act I, I talk about the circumstances around my conception, birth and early childhood. My story jumps around from different time periods in my life based on the topics fitting together, rather than the time periods. For example in Act II I talk about a guy I almost dated in college and then another guy I dated several years after college because I was talking about dating and perceptions about black women. I find solo drama to be liberating because there are so few rules. It is a very adaptable theatrical style. Solo drama is a non-traditional theatre style which also lends itself to working well with womanist themes as women's theatre often breaks away from traditional theatre structure.

Using a non-traditional theatre format is not uncommon in women focused theatre, "…feminist drama as a genre would undergo a reconstruction in form which would match content, reflecting profound differences in world view and the meaning of universality." [7] This is significant because traditionally theatre has had a male, Eurocentric perspective. Historically, the Poetics by Aristotle was adopted by the Europeans of the Renaissance Age as the corner stone of dramatic critical theory and structure. This book has been central to dramatic theory since the time of the Greeks.[8] One idea that lingered from the Poetics into modern theatre was the idea of universality. This idea of universality is from a male and European perspective.[9] Significantly, if you are not a white man from Europe these themes will most likely not seem universal to you because your perspective is different as someone outside of the perimeters of European males; this is the case for black women, who are outsiders to white, male perspective on what is universal. Womanist theatre is important because it gives a point of view of black women who have been a group that has been outside the dominant group that controls the canon in theatre and other areas such as art, literature and critical theory in general.

The article goes on to say how womanist theatre also "rejects much of the Western dramatic tradition."[10] After writing the play I re-visited some research articles and found that it flowed in the pattern of Afrocentric performance sensibilities. Often things are conveyed not through the script but through movement, ritual and "spiritual essense."[11] Harrison states:

> The Afrocentric tradition places primary value on the aural, visual, and rhythmic-language, spectacle, and music; the texture of the performance is as much or more a part of its meaning than whatever script there may be.[12]

This solo drama has an unintentional element of ritual and spiritual healing that adds meaning to the play. Another aspect of solo drama is the general absence of the fourth wall. The audience is

as much a part of the performance as the actor; it becomes more of an exchange, a communal event full of call and response, though it may be informal or implied.

My play is short because it takes a lot of energy for the audience to engage with one performer for over an hour, so it is recommended that you don't go over an hour and a half in a solo drama format. According to Kerns, even traditional plays are running for no more than ninety minutes as our attention spans have shortened over time.[13] The full-length play is about seventy-five minutes with no intermission. My play is divided into two sections. Each section covers a grouping of events or ideas about my life. The first act covers childhood, early college years, ancestry and enough of my personal history to help the audience understand who I am. The second act also includes adulthood, relationships, culture, art, and identity issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparing Black Feminism and Womanism

Black Feminism and Womanism are related but not identical. African-American Womanism has its historical roots in slavery and in ancient African society. The ancient societies that African-Americans came from honored women and valued them for their leadership. Many African women lead their countries to victories in wars, economics and social structure.[14] The historic foundation supports black feminism and womanism today.

Black Feminism and Womanism are related but not identical. There are similarities and differences between the two. Black women are at the center of both black feminism and womanism. However, womanism has not been canonized to the same extent as black feminism. Black feminism has its roots at the crossroads of sexism, racism, and classism and has grown more as an acceptable academic discourse. Womanism is more grassroots in how it is applied by everyday people of color. "Womanism is something that had been in existence for some time, functioning below the academic and activist radar and outside dominant histories of consciousness."[15] Black feminism has been ideologically defined, canonized and placed in a category. To its advantage is clearly stated and articulated, where as womanism is often absorbed into black feminism and its nuances lost in translations. Womanism "does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social –address categories like gender, race, or class to a level of equal concern and action." [16] Womanism has resisted being categorized, canonized and ideologically defined. It has maintained its "improvisational character."[17] Womanism is more accessible to the masses than black feminism because it has not become academic and still maintains its grassroots origins. Womanism is concerned with "livingkind" not only black women, black

men or placement of black community in the world, but well beyond that. "Taliba Sikudhami Olugbala has called "livingkind" (all living things-from humans, to animals, to plants, to microorganisms, as well as the "inaimate" components of Earth, the universe(s) beyond Earth, the spiritual world(s) and transcendental realm(s) encompassing the universe(s), and, ultimately, all of creation." [18] In addition to all these additional facets to womanism there is also the additional realm of spirituality. Womanis is spiritualized, recognizing a connection between humankind, the earth and the spiritual world. There are "five overarching characteristics" of womanism: "(1) it is antioppressionist, (2) it is vernacular, (3) it is nonideological, (4) it is communitarian, and (5) it is spiritualized." [19]Womanism is related to Black Feminism but it is not the same. It is a practice more than just an ideology. It is accessible to all people regardless of race. It is based on the ethnic and cultural background of the individual though it has grown out of the background of women of color. One thing that Phillips points out is that Womanism is in part what the individual makes it for themselves. "Womanist" is a term of avowal: once you claim it, it's yours, and you decide what it means and how to enact it. Each person decides whether s/he is in or out, and that decision, while subject to dialogue, debate, and negotiation, is essentially personal."[20]

Womanism more fully acknowledges that there are elements of resistance against racism and sexism in black women's everyday lives. It is not in opposition to Black feminism but working together with it. Black feminism has a middle class, academic base while womanism is not limited by class or education. Where black feminism has been slightly more accepted in academic settings over the course of the time it has been in existence, womanism though not as well documented, has more of a grassroots background and a longer history of existence though the terminology to express it have not been in place as long as the terminology of black

feminism. I equate middle class ideas with going to college and being a part of the academy. The academy is theoretical and analytical and when living a womanist life I don't think many women who are outside of the academy define their lives in that way: they are simply living the way that they feel is best for them to live a life that makes them feel good about themselves and battling oppression as it comes at them on a daily basis. By no means am I saying that black women in the community are less analytical then women in the academy, they are applying womanist ideas to daily life and not necessarily creating theory but creating practices of womanist ideas.I don't think that overcoming oppression was called anything except probably surviving until Alice Walker defined womanism.

The cleaning lady down the hall, for example, may be acting womanist according to Alice Walker's definition. She may indeed be "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."[21] Though Walker defined womanism, and that is academic, its core is far reaching in the black community even thought black women may not even know they are womanist, they often act in such a way by resisting racism and sexism and classism in their daily lives as a way of surviving. Patricia Hill Collins stated in her book Black Feminist Thought, "Rather than developing definitions and arguing over naming practices-for example, whether this thought should be called Black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, Africana womanism, and the like-a more useful approach lies in revisiting the reasons why Black feminist thought exists at all."[22] Womanism exists because black women exist and we have the issue of intersecting sexism, racism and classism to deal with in our families, communities, work places and in the academy. Everywhere we go we take our position as black women with us and we have to find ways to maneuver the world around us from that position.

Womanism

It wasn't until I began reading the Womanist Reader that I better understood why African-American women often affiliated themselves more fully with African and African-American social movements. Primarily, black women work with other black people because there is a deep desire to improve the whole community, not just ending racism but also ending poverty and sexism. Black women are struggling under the burden of multiple oppressions. Race generally stands at the forefront because of the marginal status of the people of the African Diaspora. Unlike white women whose primary concern is ending patriarchal oppression, black women want to end the oppression of racism, sexism and classism, which would significantly improve the position of the entire black community as well as others. So when white women describe their oppression as slavery they are unintentionally reducing the impact of the scope and complexity of African slavery in this country and that alienates black women.[23] Discussions like these take place throughout the book in every subject that I read. Womanism always goes back to a sense of overcoming oppressions through community.[24] It is a cornerstone of womanism: community among women and "commitment to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female."[25]

Womanism is also about healing. There is a strong spiritual context in womanism because it is so much about love. There is no spiritual healing without love, in particular, self-love. "Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*"[26] "This philosophy has a mandalic core: its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels."[27] Though the goal of the academy is not generally healing, the academy can and in some cases does benefit from Womanist theory and practice.

Womanist theory in the academy has grown over the years because more black women are in the academy and pursuing advanced degrees. Some African-American women are tenured

university faculty. Black women are in the building and we bring with us our perspective that informs our experiences in the academy and in our lives outside of the academy.[28] One point that was particularly interesting to me about the academy and how black women conduct research without making their subjects feel objectified in the research process. Womanist research praxis is quite humanizing. "From their notion of sisterhood, Black women have drawn models of research in which "subjects" are not "subjected" to objectification, anonymity, and power imbalance but, rather are elevated to esteemed research collaborators, named historical personages, and empowered citizens."[29] This style of research relationship alone is invaluable to creating more balanced research, which is one of the goals of the academy. Interestingly enough black women are still struggling to be recognized as intellectuals. Valerie Lee states, "Like our 19th century female ancestors, it is only through active resistance that we can claim our right to assert an intellectual presence."[30] However, Womanism continues regardless of the struggles to be fully recognized. Womanism is seen in many forms of African-American women's work from literature, theology, and historical research, to film and theatre.[31]

Black and Womanist Theatre

In "Methexis vs. Mimesis: Poetics of Feminist and Womanist Drama," Freda Scott Giles explores the Eurocentric roots of theatre, the male-centered depiction of women and the importance of feminist and womanist theatre as well as the changes to play structure in women-focused theatre. Giles states that, "The *Poetics* stood as a critical standard, and today it remains

the basis for most popular contemporary theatre and film criticism."[32] This is relevant because as a part of the canon it is part of what is deconstructed in Feminist and Womanist theatre.

> The deconstruction and reinterpretation of the *Poetics* is a necessary step in re-educating students of Western theatre, and in the case of feminist theatre it is the first of a three – step process which Austin describes as : 1. Working with the canon: examining images of women; 2. Expanding the canon: focusing on women writers; 3. Exploding the canon: questioning underlying assumptions of an entire field of study, including canon formation. Austin's model serves any community omitted from or underrepresented in the canon of a culture in which it exists as a minority. The canon controls language, the primary descriptor of reality.[33]

Womanist theatre writers and their writing are underrepresented in the canon as well as other places. There was no allegiance to the canon in my thesis project which I believe is the nature of womanism. We are our own canon, and we are not creating theatre from a place of false universality, but of authentic self. "...in order to shatter the false perspective of "objectivity" and "universality," feminist drama as a genre would undergo a reconstruction in form which would match content, reflecting profound differences in world view and the meaning of universality."[34] Additionally, "Womanist theatre tends to foreground the impact of racism on the African-American woman and to frame the narrative of her experience according to Afrocentric dramatic and rhetorical precepts. Like feminist drama and Afrocentric drama, Womanist drama rejects much of the Western dramatic tradition."[35] I do not believe you can write theatre for or about African-Americans without addressing racism in some way, it is a constant in the experience of Africans throughout the Diaspora; to ignore it would be to ignore a relevant section of the black experience. Racism is an unavoidable part of the "canon" of black images and experience in life

and in art. As I stated earlier this is part of why I selected a solo drama format for my work, I did not want to conform to traditions of Western dramatic structure. Furthermore, using the Afrocentric model that focuses on the "texture" of the piece than the script seemed natural to me in the writing.[36, 37]

Standpoint Theory

This is the 'lens' through which one views the world. A person's perspective on life varies based on lived experiences and the effects of oppressions in their experiences.[38] Black women have a different stand point view and differing ideals due to the marginalized social experiences of their daily lives. We have a specific group consciousness based on our standpoint. Alternate ideas about the reality of situations are open to us through our evolved consciousness which has empowered us. Necessity truly is the mother of all invention. We have become empowered by that standpoint and leveraged that into a social awareness we use to survive and thrive in our lives. The black feminist standpoint theory is similar to the Marxist theory which teaches that the socially oppressed classes have an access to knowledge which is unavailable to the socially privileged.[39] Black women also have the advantage of viewing the dominant group from 'unflattering angles.' This gave rise to the term 'bifurcated consciousness' which helps us to see things from the perspectives of both the dominant and the oppressed at the same time and compare the two. This reminds us of the slave's viewpoint. The slave is able to adjust and understand his owner's actions well which helps the slave manage his master. The master is not so interested in thinking in the same way about his slave and ignores the slave's point of view. Moreover women's views vary according to their social and economic status and the degree of marginalization they have experienced.[40] Collings speaks of Black women as having black feminist epistemology: the multiple oppressed as multiply epistemically privileged. Collings

believes that this has arisen from the personal experiences of the racism and sexism and in the cognitive styles of black women. This epistemology is believed to help black women resist negative images of themselves and be proud of who they are.[41]

Finding a Womanist Voice in Performance

Meta Carstarphen said it best in her article *Getting' Real Love Waiting to Exhale and Film Representations of Womanist Identity*: "Through it all, each woman, by the film's conclusion, grows to experience a final tenet of the Womanist creed, that she can learn to "love herself. Regardless."[42] This Womanist transition does not, of course, translate automatically into successful romantic liaisons. "It is not that the Womanist experience excludes males or an appreciation of them; rather it celebrates femaleness first."[43] In *Searching for the Womanist Within* there is a section that explores a friendship with two other women I was friends with and how we supported each other through our growth as young women into full adult identity. Cecilia and Cassie were a part of the "journey through female-centered, self-love." [44] Self-love is quite central to womanist theatre and film, probably the only thing that is more central is breaking the silence.

In Womanism in Film: Or Why the Technicolor Dream is Still in Black and White, Lisa Price states that "It means that if anyone—including African American women themselves-is to be able to even approach understanding what African American women experience, African American women are going to have to tell the story themselves."[45] I agree, though others may not fully understand the black women's experience in this country, no one else can tell the story except black women, who are living it every day. Womanism takes a position to voice black women's experience regardless of who may or may not be listening. The silence has to be broken:

> And I want to talk today with and about the silenced voice of the woman of color. That voice has been silenced for centuries, breaking forth sporadically, choked and gasping for air. It has been silenced by the obvious foot on the throat and the subtle whispering thought. It has been silenced as part and parcel of the corruption of the ancient matriarchy. The depiction and perception of African-American woman in this country through stereotypes has garbled her voice and distorted her image. The real tragedy is that the African-American woman herself has too frequently bought that distortion.[46]

It seems to me that Dickerson thinks we black women need to listen to our own voices and avoid buying into stereotypical images of ourselves. I agree. In fact this is one of the organic results of womanism, we speak for and to ourselves, so it is logical that we would listen to ourselves about ourselves. One place where I see the need for a stronger womanist voice is in Hip-Hop music and culture. Over the course of time Hip-Hop has become more commercial and the images of African-Americans have become progressively more negative and less realistic representations of the black community. "Normalizing this hip-hop image of black life through the medium of mainstream film is highly problematic because it ultimately makes false claims for black authenticity and propagates negative stereotypes. This not only negates the existence of black suffering inauthentic-but also promotes a crass individualism that undermines a progressive sense of collective political and economic struggle."[47] Andre Willis makes this statement in the article A *Womanist Turn on the Hip-Hop Theme.* Willis also notes that in these commercial, Hollywood films black women's experiences are generally ignored, the only exception to this rule being films made by black female film-makers; The point that black women have to speak up for themselves or they will not be heard or someone else will interpret the black female experience and most likely incorrectly. The major example of womanism in the

hip-hop theme that is discussed in this article is about a character named Chantel in *Just Another Girl on the IRT* by filmmaker Leslie Harris.[48] This film is narrated by Chantel, so it is the young hip-hop womanist perspective that is the filter for this film. There aren't too many films like this, that are addressing issues of contemporary, young, black women that are created by young black women. "Harris is responding to media misrepresentation and subconscious prejudices in her reinterpretive portrait of black womanhood; moreover, it marks a conscious strategy and attempt to assert control over perceptions of black womanhood."[49] Womanism is clearly at work in Harris' film and others.

Melissa Thackway's book *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in sub-SaharanFranophone African Film* has a chapter on Womanist film. In this chapter she talks about a few films but most particularly about *Taafe Fanga.* This film recounts a Dogon legend about when the women took over authority from the men and treated them as the men had been treating them.[50] Eventually, Timbe, the woman who is leading the women realizes that things will not change if they treat the men the way they had been treated by them. The women needed to create a new social model so that men and women had more equitable relationships.[51] All the women of this village are resisting sexism as well as oppressive models of existence, even for the way they treat the men when their roles can just simply be reversed. They are restructuring for their own good as well as the good of the whole community, which falls in line with Alice Walker's definition of a womanist, in supporting wholeness for the whole community and not just themselves.[52]

Solo Drama

There exists a long history of womanist ideology in the African American theatre and those new ideas match well with an unconventional theatre format like solo drama.[53] In

traditional drama the women's perspective has often been ignored.[54] Exposure of arts to the womanist ideology was extending widely. Soon, women artists like Whoopi Goldberg blossomed and shared this new perspective with the world. Solo drama has enabled many actors to come forward with incredible work because of the free format nature of solo drama.[55] Another advantage is that there is no censorship in solo drama. Continuity is not required. A series of incident can b presented which have time gaps. The liberated state of solo drama has few conventional rules to govern the actor. Womanist themese are thereby quite suitable for solo drama. Differences in world view and the meaing of universality allow the feminist drama and women's theatre to assume a non-traditional format.[56] Striking out away from the Western tradition of dramatic theory of Aristotle's so called universality was the next step for black theatre because it is a different and unrepresented perspective. Womanist theatre has been able to deliver the opinions and ideas of black women were never a dominant group in the theatre movement. Black theatre began to place importance on the African centered practices of movement of a ritual and spiritual nature.[57] The black theatre tradition has a strong focus on the aural, visual, and rhythmic-language, spectacle, and music. Some even believe that there is ritual healing in solo dramas. The actor was accepted with great communal response. Notably, most solo drama lasted just about ninety minutes at the most as people are not tolerant of longer ones.

CREATIVE PROCESS: EXPECTATIONS & ACTUALITIES

During the writing process of this solo drama, I expected to create a work that was entirely factual and autobiographical. I thought that I would be able to complete this work relatively quickly, as I did with the previous solo drama I had written. I expected to be slightly uncomfortable with the autobiographical aspects of my work. More than all of this it was supposed to be comprised of three alter-egos I had created to tell my story. That is not what happened.

After an initial meeting with my Thesis Chair, I met with Dr. Shirlene Holmes, a faculty member who is a solo dramatist and playwright; to work on some background research for my project over the summer. I read articles and books on solo drama, womanism, black feminism and feminist theatre, in order to ensure that my work was authentic and to study the range of work that has been done in solo drama as part of my background research. In order to better

understand how other artists created in this style of theatre, I also viewed numerous solo and stand up performances. Some of the performers I reviewed include: John Leguizamo, Whoopi Goldberg, Margret Cho, Sarah Bernhart, Richard Pryor and Lillian Thomlin.

Kerns discusses playing various roles as a way to "arrive at our authentic selves," he goes on to say that stand-up comics work from a place of authenticity that allows them to play many roles.[58] In solo drama one person plays every role and portrays every idea of that piece of work. The work has to be honest to succeed with the audience. Honesty in the writing is the truth of the writer and the actor when creating for their audience; that honesty is the authenticity of self that we can arrive at in solo drama. I made a significant attempt to arrive at that authenticity through the characters in the play. There were more characters in the first act than the second however there was just as much authenticity in the second act.

I also kept a journal and wrote over fifty pages of thoughts about my identity and life experiences. I talked with other black women, friends and relatives; I asked questions about their perspectives on life, their experiences and ideas. It turns out that many of the women I talked to had very similar experiences to my own on a number of different subjects including dating and relationships, family structure, education, social background and a number of other details. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that all of my experiences were womanist because I live a womanist perspective every day. Most of this play comes from those notes in my journal. I selected the topics that felt good to me. Many of the topics that felt best to me intuitively were what Alice Walker referred to as "womanish or grown."[59] I felt those topics were the best examples of womanism because they were adult, serious things that I wanted to say and I felt that other black women can identify with in their ideas and experiences. After selecting the topics that had the most authentic truth to share I began writing a scenario for the

play. In my original scenario the play was written in three waves, with three alter-egos telling the stories in each section. I started out thinking I would reference each wave of feminism in the play. That didn't work so I omitted all of that from the play. At the time I started writing it didn't seem to flow well with those three additional characters so I eliminated them and used "Me" as the primary character in each section along with many other characters throughout the play. "Me" evolves through the piece and eventually arrives in the very end of the play as the authentic self, the writer Carmela. If another actor performs the piece they could use their own name to make it more personal themselves and the audience. I intentionally remained unnamed in this play until the end. I wanted to tell the stories as an evolution of the self. It made sense to name myself when I found my authenticity at the end of the play.

While I was writing in this solo drama project I was also collaborating on a choreopoem called The MAAFA 2007: A Lamentation, about the middle passages of the African slave trade. I often found myself writing in my thesis journal questions that came to me about my ancestors and their experience of the middle passage through the Jim Crow era. One idea from the journal that didn't fully materialize in the play was the idea that slave owners who viewed blacks as three-fifths of a person would still use them for child care, sex and preparing food that the slave owners would eat. I could not understanding using people for human relationships but then not viewing them as human simultaneously. I analyzed the idea repeatedly, though it made sense to me as an idea and it still does, because this play's target audience is black women I didn't feel that I needed to include a whole piece about this idea about black people. It is briefly mentioned in the first act of the play. It is a topic that needed to be explored with an interracial audience to help other races understand the trauma of not having your full humanity recognized as a race or a gender. I may write another play about that idea in the future.

The section I did write about slavery was about a relative and was almost completely created from parts of other people's stories and some family history as well as some imagined events. With that piece I wanted to depict Grandma Babe's strength, courage, intelligence and her unwillingness to accept mistreatment without resistance, even though she did it in an indirect way with the accidental door swinging around to hit the little boy.

I felt more comfortable with this material than I thought I would because I spent so much time with the work on MAAFA. It was very emotionally uncomfortable, but it helped me prepare for my own reactions as I worked through the intimate things in this solo drama.

It took three semesters to write this play. The first semester I spent a good bit of time researching womanist theatre and womanism in general. I wrote the essay portion of my thesis project in the second semester of this process. And in the third semester I completed additional revisions for the whole project.

FUTURE OF PROJECT

I may revise of *Searching for the Womanist Within* by adding other ideas from my journals. If that is the case I will take some things out to keep the length of the show at about one hour. After I complete at least two revisions of the show I would like to do a reading of my work. At some point when the resources are available I would like to do a full production of the show for at least a weekend run. It may even be possible to combine some of the monologues from my previous one woman show, *Removing the Mask,* which is about breaking down stereotypes of black women in entertainment.

It is certain that this work will be revisited in some form in the future. For me it is another opportunity for black women to tell our truth to ourselves and anyone who would like to listen. I look upon this as one of my greatest attempts at affecting change by revealing myself, being "serious" and "womanish," being womanist.

SEARCHING FOR THE WOMANIST WITHIN

Act I

(The houselights go down. There is a projection screen upstage, center for projecting images. The song "I'm a Woman" *by Joi begins to play. There are still photos of me taken in rehearsals. Each photo captures an emotion from that moment in the play: anger, hurt, joy, satisfaction. Then Alice Walker's definition of a womanism is projected on the screen:*

*"**Womanist***

1. *From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.*
2. *Also: 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. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as*

in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black? Ans: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."

3. *Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.*

   Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.")

(Lights up. Me walks out wearing dark-blue jeans, and a red Ohio State University T-shirt and black flats. My hair is pulled back into a ponytail. Me playfully throws a couple of punches and a big smile to the audience as the music stops and Me begins to speak to the audience.)

Me:

My momma always said I was grown. Imagine the nerve I must have to write down things that I think shaped who I have evolved into being so far; then the additional nerve to share what I wrote down on stage with strangers, womanish in deed. How are *you* doing? I'm glad you're here with me. I want to share some of my life with you. Is that cool? I wanted to share my personal womanisms with you. I know some of you know but for those that may not, womanism is black women who are feminist, black women that love women centered… Wait a minute, Alice Walker said it best. That is why it is up here with me. *(Pointing to words on the screen.)* You can read it for yourself. I'll wait. *(Waiting quietly for ten seconds.)* I spent a lot of time thinking about what womanism meant to me in my day-to-day existence how was it enacted by me? How was it created around me? What about me and my life spoke to womanism? The word resist came to mind for me. When I looked at Alice Walker's definitions I saw the words strength, survival, wholeness, and my favorite "courageous and willful behavior." According to

Webster's Dictionary the word resist means: "To oppose actively: strive against. To withstand." The two themes fit together. In order to strive against circumstances of race and gender I have had to be courageous and willful in my behavior on more than a few occasions. Resisting is part of how I have survived and it is apart of how black women have survived so far. But let me start at the beginning. The day I was born.

Come with me back to my 38th birthday when my mom acts out the day I was born, which she has been doing since I was about 16 years old. My mom, Delcina Pattillo tells this story to me every birthday. 'The re-enactment of the day I was born.'

*(The title 'The Re-enactment of the day I was born' flashes on the screen. The song "*Dear Momma*" by Tupac plays. I walk to stage right and lean back on a preset cube in a spot light, where Me goes into labor. Music fades.)*

Me:

(As an aside, not in labor.) My mom always does this part standing up though.

Mom:

*(In labor.)*About 6 p.m. time on a Thursday at Timken Mercy Hospital on August 22, 1968 to my home town, Canton, Ohio. .

(Panting, grunting, in pain.)

Mom:

I had the most horrible pain of my life!

(Scream, pant. Very calmly and in a conversational voice.)

Mom:

That is why you are my only child.

(Holding stomach, panting, pushing.)

Mom:

After twelve hours of hard labor, with your grandmother talking all manner of shit…

Me:

(As an aside, not in labor.) My father, Limmie Snell Jr., was not there at my birth and my grandma Pecola Pattillo felt the need to 'share'*(Parentheses fingers.)* her strong opinions about my father's character while I was being born.

Granny:

(Shrill tone of voice.): I told you he wasn't no good!

Me:

I don't remember meeting Limmie, he left Canton when I was about two. For most of my childhood all I knew about him was that he was a singer and he lived in London, England. And my mom says that he carried me home from a child-support hearing at the court house when I was two.

(Photo of Limmie and Family Cooking comes up on screen.)

Me:

When I was a grown woman, I did some research and found that my father was pretty famous in the 1970's and into the early 80's in Europe. He had two bands: Limmie and Family Cooking and later Limmie LTD. He played the piano, guitar, bass and drums and wrote all his own material. There are tribute bands in Europe performing my father's material to this day. I found this all unbelievable until I saw the photos myself. Now, I get it. Now, it makes sense. See, what seventeen year old girl would not have found my father irresistible? He was so cool, with his stylish clothes, those dimples, the smile, and the eyes-just like mine. And on top of all of that

he could sing like an angel, or at least I am told. I have never heard him sing. The only record still in print by Limmie and Family Cooking; It was their number 1 # in the UK single "You Can Do Magic" and he wasn't singing lead. The only occasion on which I saw my father was at his wake in May 1986. He looked small and wasted away, nothing like that lively, vital guy in the picture. All the years of drinking, partying and irresponsibility for his numerous children caught up with Limmie when he was 38 years old. He died of liver failure on May the 16th, 1986. He was that we know of, the father of eight children by five different women. I think every woman has met one man that wasn't good, but she just couldn't resist the temptation of hoping he might be; my father was that man to many women.

(Sigh.)

Grandma:

(Thinking out loud to herself. Frowning.) I never liked Limmie. His family is too *trashy* for my baby. All them kids that woman got?! It is a wonder she can keep up with all seven of them. They smell funny to me. That Limmie, chasing behind every girl in the county. Won't go to school. He already got one baby and another besides this one on the way. The nerve. Just trifflin.' That is why I tried to keep him away from my baby. I knew he wasn't gonna do *no* better by her than he did them other girls. She is too pretty and smart for this to have happened. How could I have not known sooner? Young girls, just think they grown! She is gon' find out about being grown now.

Me:

I guess mom being young and willful, saw something good in Limmie. But at the same time my grandma being older and more experienced could see the bad in him. She just didn't see it before I was on my way into the world.

(Returning to labor.)

Granny:

(Rolling eyes.) Well push, we can't wait all day.

(Mom looks toward Granny in amazement. Scream, panting, pushing. Baby crying is heard. Mom, reaches to take new baby.)

Mom:

You were born, perfectly beautiful, healthy, 7 and a half pounds, 19 inches long, a pretty-little-black-girl.

Mom:

(Smiling, talking to baby.) I meant to give you the best of everything; (*To herself.)* I will show your father how to raise a child well.

(Three pictures of Me flash one after the other of me on the screen as a baby, a toddler, a 7 year old child.)

Me:

(Sitting, leaning in to talk to audience.) And she did raise me well. I had everything: Private school, music lessons, etiquette classes, choir, a dog, and two cats. The only things I didn't have was a pony and my birth father. I always felt that because my mother refused to live her life like she had lost anything by being a single mother that I had a great example of resisting low expectations. She went to college in Columbus, Ohio when I was eight and got her associate's degree so that she could provide a better life for both of us. She finished her bachelors the year

after I graduated from high school. I know it wasn't easy for her. It wasn't easy for me either. I lived with my grandparents while she was away at school. She came home every weekend to spend time with me. She drove two hours each way and still found time to do her homework and help me with mine. She kept some dreams for herself, finishing college was one of them, and she went out in the world and made it happen for herself. What did Alice say? Outrageous behavior, was it? It was at the very least truly brave. I'm really proud of my mom, her strength rubbed off on me as a child. Thou I'm not entirely fearless, I ain't scared of too much of nothing. She gave me that. Thanks mom.

(Cross to center stage. Lights come up center stage.)

Me:

Mom also gave me Frank Allen, my step-father when I was eleven. I had a great step dad. I loved to go shopping with him.

Frank:

(Reluctantly.) Yes, you can have the bike. How much is this gonna cost me, Kid? *(Laughing. Paying for the bike.)*

Me:

(Excited.) Come on let's go put it together. Oooo, dad there's Dress Barn; can we stop in there?

Frank:

No, no, I'm not buying anything else.

Me:

But daaaad, it won't take long. I promise. Come on, dad!

(Pull Frank into the store. Start looking at the clothes on the young girls rack. Photo of my step-father and I comes up on the projection screen.)

Me:

I always wanted a dad and now I had one. I was thrilled. Frank was the kind of father that showed his love by doing for his children. He always bought us stuff. I say us because I had two step sisters and a step brother that came over from their mother's home on the weekends. I never felt like a step child with Frank. But the curiosity to know my birth father never went away. One of my favorite memories of Frank was when he bought me my first record player. I always loved music. I guess this was his way of encouraging my creativity. It was one of those white plastic boxes with the little turn-table inside; the kind that you play 45s on. You remember 45s? *(Laugh.)* If you don't remember 45s ask the person that chuckled to explain it to you. I'll wait. *(Waiting.)* OK, I still have a few 45s. Me and Michael Jackson, when it was the Jackson 5, then the Jacksons… *(Singing and dancing.)* "Stop! Na na na! You'd better save it! Stop, stop, stop, you'd better save it! Wooo! When we played tag in grade school you wanted to be It. But chasing boys was just a fad. You crossed your heart and you quit. When we grew up you trading, you promise for my ring. Now just like back to grade school, You're doing the same old thing! Stop! The love you save may be your own! Darling, take it slow or some day you'll be all alone. You'd better stop the love you save may be your own! Darling, look both ways before you cross me. You're headed for the danger zone." *(Laughing.)* Those 45s on my new child sized stereo were some of my favorite times with my dad. Their marriage didn't last as long as I would have liked, I pretty sure they feel the same way. Frank, like so many other people in our small town in Ohio, became a crack addict. He didn't become the "steeling from my momma's house crack head.' He was a functioning addict, still went to work, cooked dinner, ate with the family and all

the 'normal' things. He just became strange and emotionally disconnected from all of us. He would just get mad for no reason and argue with my mom. I would sit at the top of the stairs and listen to them fight about him staying out late.

Mom:

Frank, where have you been? Do you even know what time it is? I don't…

Frank:

(Interrupting her.) Woman, this is my house and I don't have to explain myself to you. I'm going to bed.

Mom:

(Determined.) No, you listen to me! I found this pipe in your pants when I was doing the wash yesterday, Frank! What is going on with you?! *(Pausing, for a reply that doesn't come.)* If this is what I think it is, we have a problem and you need to….

Frank:

I don't know what you are talking about! *(Snatching pipe and dashing off with it.)*

Me:

It was the beginning of the end for my parents' marriage. Things got so bad at home that I moved back in with my grandparents. I just decided to leave, because I couldn't live in that unpredictable environment. The arguments all the time, the tension was constant because you never knew if normal-sane Frank was coming home or crazy-junkie with a shot gun Frank. I can't go into it here that is its own play. Anyway, I decided that I had to do something. I came home from a weekend at my grandparents and just started packing. I didn't even say anything to my mother. I just packed up. Mom was frazzled and unsure about what to do next. Hell, I don't know how I knew what I needed at seventeen. I just knew I couldn't keep living in a house with

a crazy, crack-head for a dad. I was standing at my dresser packing my cassette tapes, perfume, jewelry, make up and personal things, deodorant that sort of thing.

(Packing.)

Me:

I have to tell you. My room had a dark red headboard with bookcases on a queen size bed, a full dresser with mirror and a tall dresser too. I even had my own television and phone. My mom had painted my room a pale sky blue and dad had put in new blue Berber carpet for me. My room was so nice…(sigh) I hated to leave my room, it had been my sanctuary for six years. Frank came to the door and knocked my glasses and everything else off the dresser.

Frank:

What the hell are you doing, Kid? You don't want to be here with your old dad anymore? Huh? Huh?

Me:

I had never been afraid of Frank until he started using that shit. It scared me to see him like that and it disgusted me. I was so angry with Frank, for taking our family on his little drug field trip. I knew I couldn't back down no matter what. *(To Frank.)* Yeah, dad, I'm leaving. I'm moving back to grandma's.

Frank:

Fine, just go! You don't love me like my real kids do anyway. Fuck you!

Me:

He stormed down the hall. I was, at that moment, completely convinced he had lost his mind. What he said didn't make sense to me at the time and I'm still not quite sure what all that was

about. But what I did learn was that there is no point in staying in a relationship with an addict, even a parent that you love with all your heart. My parents divorced in 1986, the same year my birth father died and I graduated from high school. It was a time of struggle for my family. It took many years but eventually, Frank got off the crack and recovered his relationships with his children. But by then nothing he said could get his wife back. To this day he is still trying to get my mom to take him back. But you can't always fix a situation once it's broken.

These early years of childhood gave me my foundation in womanism. The absent father, the mother struggling to raise a child alone and the step-dad that started out great but eventually faltered; they all gave me something I needed to survive. Limmie gave me some of the Snell family talent, my mom gave me intelligence and beauty and Frank gave me a father's love and the conviction to walk away from an unhealthy relationship. I discovered the things I hated: absence, drugs and confusion. And I discovered the things I loved: music, food, dancing and my folks. Not just my biological family but folk in general. There is just something about us black people. And I don't always understand us but I always love us.

(The scene from Roots where they are whipping Kunta Kente, and forcing him to accept his slave name of Toby is heard in the darkness. As the lights come up I am seated center stage looking into a light that is like the reflection from a TV. I flinch as I hear the whip coming from the TV.The film sounds fade. I begin to speak while still watching the TV.)

Me:

One day I was at my Grandparents' house watching Roots with my Grandma, I was about nine years old. We were sitting on the side of her bed, on her white bedspread with the lumpy, cottony design on it. This was the day I realized there was some sort of problem about being black that I

hadn't realized before. I didn't like the ideal much and I had questions that I didn't know I had. So I asked Grandma the only questions I was sure about.

Me:

(As child.) Grandma, why? Why white people hate us? Kunta hadn't done nothing wrong. Why they hate people that aren't bothering them?

Grandma:

(Resigned.) Suga' your Grandma, don't know. If I did, I could cure what is ailin' this world.

Me:

That opened my eyes and I began to see that my history book wasn't even telling it all. I wondered about that missing history and wanted to know more about it and why, and why and why about black folks. But I didn't know who to ask, where to look, not for a long time. But the desire to "know more and in greater depth than is good for one" is the womanism that was mine at nine. Then I made another discovery.

(The TV light fades and the whole stage is lit. I get down on the stage and begin to play marbles.)

Me:

(Pausing in marble game.) One day that summer after I saw Roots for the first, I was outside my grandparents house in my brown shorts and red sneakers with no shirt on, which was my common practice at that flat-chested time. My medium length afro bouncing around my ears. I was kneeling near the garage which was painted brick red with white trim, with two white garage doors and basketball hoop with no net in the between them. I was playing marbles on the sidewalk next to the gravel in the driveway.

(Continuing to play marbles.)

Me:

I looked over toward the hedge next to the garage and I saw a little white boy. He had blonde hair, big brown eyes and a smile. We were dressed identically except his shorts were denim. He had a basketball in his hands. He said to me.

Michael:

Hi, my name is Michael. Wanna to play?

Me:

Sure.

(Michael tosses me the ball and I Catch it and tossing it back to him.)

Me:

My name is Me.

(He catches the ball and tosses it back to me.)

Michael:

That's a funny name for a boy.

(Clucking. I catch the ball and toss it back to him)

Me:

That's 'cause I'm a girl.

(He doesn't catch the ball this time.)

Michael:

You can't be a girl! My mom says girls always have to wear shirts; you aren't wearing a shirt, so you're a boy.

Me:

(Indignant.) No, I'm not a boy. I'm a girl! And I don't have to wear a shirt if I don't want to!

Michael:

Ok, ok, don't get mad.

Me:

Yeah. Well, that was as close to bra burning as I ever came. But Michael and I became friends and remained friends for several years while his grandmother lived next to mine. But he didn't believe I was really a girl until we were going to go swim in my plastic, backyard pool. I came marching out to meet him with my flowered one-piece swim suite on and the debate was over. He got over the fact that I was a girl who wasn't going to follow all the rules for girls. I didn't start wearing a shirt in the summers until the next year when I was ten. That summer was the first time I realized that girls and women had rules that boys and men didn't have. I didn't like the idea so much. These two incidents in my childhood were pivotal. I think I was pretty womanish for a nine year old.

(The lights dim and the projection screen flashes photos of Me from middle school, high school graduation and college, ending with the picture of me on my undergraduate graduation day.)

Me:

I had resisted being boxed in as a child. I had questioned it all: race, gender, family. That was all I knew at the time. When I went to college I realized other people had more ideas about me and I might need to handle that if it came up. And I did handle it at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. During my sophomore year me and my 3 roommates, Beth, Pauline and Tina threw a party at our rented house to celebrate the end of the semester. I was the only black girl of the four of us. *(The song "*You Gotta Fight for Your Right to Party*" by the Beasty Boys plays, and*

the lights flash and strobe like we are at a wild house party. I dance for a minute, and down a drink. The music lowers but can still be heard playing softly.)

Me:

It was a great party, two kegs, fifty classmates and finals were over. We had a roomy house, separate living and dining room with a full kitchen. We had a beautiful living room with these dark grain wood fixtures and built in bookshelves. Our kitchen had the kind of cabinets with glass in wood frames on them so you could see the dishes, but no dishwasher. It was an older home. So, things were starting to wind down and we were taking turns doing the 'hostess pick up.' You know, when you are having a party and you are straightening up the small stuff as the masses depart so that you aren't up all night after they leave. I gathered up some red, plastic cups as I worked my way through the people in the living room, dining room and into the kitchen. I dropped the cups into the trash and was wiping up beer that had spilled on the kitchen counter when a slightly drunk, strawberry blonde, white girl asks me a question.

Drunk Girl:

Don't you feel like the maid cleaning up around here?

Me:

Do you feel like the maid when you clean up at your house?

Drunk Girl:

(Confused.) No, why would I?

Me:

Exactly.

Drunk Girl:

I just thought, since you were black...

(She realizes that she has made a racial remark and is unsure of how to correct it, laughs uncomfortably and takes a huge gulp of beer.)

Me:

You just thought what?

(Music fades out totally.)

Me:

She never answered my question; of course she didn't have an answer. For a long time after that I thought about who that girl thought I was as a black woman. I had questions; I tried to understand what made here think that about me. All black women aren't maids, right? Maybe she thought the black woman's total reason for existing was to help clean up? So because I was a black woman I wasn't equal to my roommates, who also made the rounds of the 'hostess pick up?' She didn't ask any of my roommates if they felt like the maid. Are black women here just to help clean up the messes, you know, the maid, the secretary, or the assistant, some sort of underling that is still a woman but just not as equal to white women? That experience made me wonder if my race and gender combined made other people think that I was less and that I deserved less. The last time I checked you didn't need a degree to do domestic work and none of my college friends had maids so we all did our own cleaning. So who was out of wack with reality here, me or her? I spent a lot of time resisting what I thought others thought about me as a black woman. I became knowledgeable about all sorts of thing that may not be considered of interest to black people. Like live theatre and I don't mean Medea; I'd go see the classic plays. Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller, a Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen, I just loved plays. The theatre was and still is one of my passions. I spent my spare time reading Shakespeare's plays among others, going to the opera, the symphony, art openings, attending plays and other creative

pursuits. I had great expectations for my life and no one was going to stop me from feeling good about that or doing the things that interested me. But no matter what I can't change what others may assume about me. I can't worry about it anymore. I can just keep making my dreams come true no matter who thinks what about me. I think that the perception is that black people are still servants. Let me give you another example. I was in the library pulling books for my graduate studies research and in the space of fifteen minutes two different white women came up to me and asked me if I worked there. I'm in the library doing the same thing they were doing. They didn't ask each other if they worked there. All the people working in the library weren't black so maybe it was an isolated incident? But no, it has happened to me in all kinds of stores, places it didn't even make sense to me. The airport! If I have a carry on with me, chances are I am not working at the newsstand on concourse D. But what can you do about what anybody else thinks? Be yourself. Once I realized it wasn't my job to make people accept me, I changed my mind about some other things too.

*("*I am Not My Hair"- *by India Arie plays and the lights come up on me, sitting center stage on a cube, looking into a pretend mirror at my hair. Pictures of me with a perm, curl, pressed, braided and locked are seen on the projection screen. Music fades.)*

Me:

I was resisting through re-creating my own identity and general rebelliousness. I had become quite serious by the time I transferred here to Georgia State University. I did what many college students do; I became philosophical about my life while smoking pot.

Me:

(Smoking invisible joint and speaking in the inhale voice.) Right, as a black woman it is ridiculous to try to emulate the image of women that don't look like us.

(Passing joint to Cassie and exhaling.)

Me:

It was me, Cassie and Cecilia smoking a blunt in Cassie's parents' basement, which was our near daily practice after classes and work.

(Taking the joint from Cecilia and toking.)

Me:

That is why I decided to start locking my hair.

(Toke.)

Me:

I refuse to try to look like anybody that doesn't look anything like me. And girl, I can't deal with high maintenance hair-dos.

(Exhaling.)

Me:

I'm serious. Being me is work intensive enough. My hair is nappy and I refuse to be ashamed of it anymore. All that crap about "good hair" and "bad hair," is just that crap, internalized, racism and sexism, total bullshit. We don't buy bullshit. It doesn't make sense for me to hate me because of who I naturally am. From now on when some one calls me nappy headed, I will be sure to thank them.

(Laughing.)

Me:

Cecilia was the plumpest of the 3 of us and she said…

Cecilia:

The same thing goes for fat! Like I don't know I'm fat? I'm fat, not blind, or stupid.

Me:

Damn, straight! No offense.

Cecilia:

None taken.

(We pause then laugh, the way stoned people do.)

Me:

Cecilia and I were going to see Lenny Kravitz in concert the next night. So armed with our weed enhanced enlightenment about fat we went shopping or outfits to swear to the show. We walked through the mall and stopped at Lane Bryant and as were cruising the clearance rack we decided on some things.

Cecilia:

I don't like most of this stuff; it is too big and baggy. I'm sexy why should I dress like a frump?

Me:

C., you are so right. We need something that is going to make a statement. *(Looking around the store)* I have an idea. So I marched over to the lingerie section of the store and pulled a sparkly full slip off a hanger. I turned to Cecilia and said, "how about this?" *(Holding up slip against myself).*

Cecilia:

That is hot! Let me see if I can find one that I like. Try it on and see how it looks.

Me:

I went into the dressing room and tried it on. It was pretty cute. Spaghetti straps, mid- thigh, A-line slip, but it was sparkly with no lace so it looked more like a short dress.

Cecilia:

How about this? (Holding up slip)

Me:

Cecila had done even better than I had. She found a slip that was cocoa brown satin with a cinched waist and lace across the top and the hem, but it didn't look like a slip. It fit perfectly, hugging her full, curvy body. Cec, you are gorgeous in that dress. We need shoes…

Cecilia:
I think you are right, girl. Let's hit the Rackroom.

Me:
And that is just what we did. We went to Rackroom shoes and got a pair of heels for each of us. She got brown satin and I got gold. And we went home and got cleaned up for the show that night. Cecilia called me that night a couple of hours before the show.

Cecilia:
(On phone) Hey girl. You ready yet?

Me:
Just putting on my earrings and I will be out the door. Got the tickets?

Cecilia:
In my purse, see you in half an hour.

Me:
Cool

Cecilia:
Cool

Me:
When Cecilia came to pick me up we went to the concert and we felt like who we were: two beautiful, full-size women rocking two killer outfits that we would have never had the nerve to wear before then. Body confident for sure, which was huge for two recent college graduates in the 90s. I felt so victorious that night. I still have that dress and I wear it now and then too. Oh, and we danced all night long.

(Are You Gonna Go My Way by Lenny Kravitz plays and I dance)

Me:

After that talk, I cared so much less what I didn't possess what white girls did because I noticed that what I had was just fine with me and I also noticed that white girls spent a lot of time, energy and cash trying to get some of what I had.

(Laugh.)

Me:

Sun tan lotion, lip and ass injections, breast augmentation and on and on.

(Extinguishing joint.)

Me:

I remember once an ex-lover of mine came to town for a visit, no doubt hoping to rekindle this old flame. Ken, he was handsome, tall, green eyes, brunette, I always thought he sorta looked like John Travolta. And yes, Ken was white. So he was here in the A and we went downtown to Underground Atlanta just so he could see some of the touristy stuff in town. We were walking by the kiosks of specialty popcorn, cell phone accessories, souvenirs and other over priced items. We were with a couple of friends of mine, Matt and Marge. While we were walking in Underground we ran into one of Marge's friends, a petite, pretty blonde woman. She took one look at Ken and her jaw dropped just a little bit. Ladies, you know the look, the 'damnnnn he is finnnne and I know my girl has a man and he may be single…' Then she looked down and noticed Ken was holding my hand and her eyes traveled up my buttery brown arm all the way to my smug little 'that's right, he's with me' smile. Her jaw dropped again, but this time because she was disappointed. He was not only taken, but even if he was looking he wasn't looking for her. That was a confirmation for me. When we left her to go to the baseball game at the stadium Ken said good bye and it was like he didn't really see her because he just wanted to see me. After that, I never took a man seriously if he spent too much of his time looking at other women when we were together. I'm enough for me and I'm damn sure enough for any man that is with me. And no I don't need a man to approve of who I am. But it is nice to know he agrees with me about how beautiful and lovable I am, regardless of anything else. So to the Ladies, and this is for all of us. Make peace with your own beauty, we are all different and different is good. What also probably brought on these revelations about black beauty in particular was that we

each, Cecilia, Cassie and I, had all taken trips to West Africa. I went to Senegal and Gambia on my first trip to Africa.

(The lights change, and you hear the sounds of the air port in Dakar. Standing, looking around the airport.)

Me:

I will always remember the smell of the air in Dakar, Senegal.

(Inhaling deeply)

Me:

It was pungent and sweet, heavy and warm; the air was ripe and juicy like mango dripping between your fingers. Ummm! And it was good, just like that drippin' mango. And it was mixed with the smell of musty travelers and spicy incense; I mean it was an airport, after all. I felt powerful just walking around seeing people of every possible shade of black.

(Photos of busy people at the airport in Dakar are seen on the projection screen.)

Me:

I had no idea what most of the people were saying but I didn't care, because I was there actually in Africa, some part of me that had all my life gone unacknowledged was now completely recognized. One thing in Senegal was that everybody was black, EVERYBODY. It dawned on me that, this is what it must feel like to be in the majority and not the minority. I didn't feel like I was standing out because of my race. And I don't think I have seen more beautiful women before; women who looked like me. Sistahs in every shade from: Albino white, ivory-tan, sweat-tea brown, coffee-bean bronze, and blackberry black. Every size and every shape: tall,

tiny, thick, and thin. Any kind of sistah you like-is like an African sistah. Beautiful. I saw myself in those women and I fell in love with myself all over again.

(I pick up the mirror and examine myself. The sounds of an airplane landing are heard followed by an announcement of 'Welcome to JFK' and busy American airport sounds.)

Me:

When I got home, I was glad to be home, and I was changed. I knew more about where my ancestors had come from. And I knew we weren't too black, too fat, too proud, too nappy, too grown or too anything else anymore. We were just what we were born to be: strong, beautiful, black women. But I still wanted to know more about where I came from, about my ancestors here in the States.

(The song "Simply Beautiful" *by Al Green plays. Several pictures of me from my first trip to Africa are shown on the projection screen. The last slide is of my great-great grandmother Babe. The song fades.)*

Me:

I asked my grandma to tell me all the old family stories she could remember and later I also asked my fraternal grandmother to do the same thing. I always liked this particular story about my great-great-great grandmother on my mother's side of the family, named Grandma Babe. That is the only name I know her by, I'm sure my mom can tell you what her real name was but I can't. The way it came to me was she was eight years old when slavery ended and she became a free person. She died in the early nineteen-fifties from what I heard; she was in her nineties when she passed away. She was gone way before I was born. I look at this picture sometimes

and I wonder: How could any one say she was 3/5th of a person? Does she look like 3/5th of a person to you?

(I turn and look at picture; picture dims into background but doesn't fade totally.)

Me:

I didn't think so either. But this is one story about her and I wanted grandma to tell it to you.

Grandma:

The master on that plantation only had a few slaves and only a few slave children on the place. The old Masta's children played with the slave children and Babe was one of them. Old Masta's son was about 10 and he loved to taunt Babe all the time about how old Masta' had sold off her momma and little sister; sold the little sista' off for looking too white. The talk was that old Missus' made him sell that woman and her child; because she knew he was messing around with Babe's momma and ignoring her. She was right, of course. So Pete, that was old Masta's son, start runnin' round the barn chanting

Pete:

"Babe's sista' sold off, and gone as she can be, Babe sista' sold off, 'cause she look like me!"

Grandma:

Babe was fuming mad. And it was all she could do not to go upside that boy's head. She was inside the barn getting the hay for the horses. Well just before Pete came round again, Babe cracked the top of the gate open, not the whole thing just the top. It was one of those gates that had a gate that was split into upper and lower parts. Pete was really getting into now, singin' his

mean little song just to get on her nerves because he knew she just had to take what ever he was dishin' out.

Pete:

"Babe's sista' old off, and gone as she can be, Babe sista' sold off 'cause she look like… *(BAM! She swings the top half of the door out and hitting the boy in the head.)*

Grandma:

Old Masta' wouldn't let them whoop Babe about that. But Old Missus sure did get a switch to Pete about that song. I guess she just never wanted to be reminded of nothing about that baby her husband had. After that Pete never did tease Babe no more at all. About a year and a half after that slavery ended and Babe was free to go. And she did. Babe walked from Cleo, Alabama to Charlotte, North Carolina with some other ex-slaves looking for her mother and sister.

(There is a projection on the screen of a map with the line from one city to the other city so the audience can see the distance between the four states.)

Grandma:

And when she found them, they all eventually, came back to Cleo until Babe moved to Ohio many years later.

Me:

I always loved to hear that story because Grandma Babe even as a child did not take any mess. She risked the whipping from the slave owner's wife to prove her point. That was definitely some outrageous and willful behavior. And what kind of person *walks* across four states to find their mother at the age of eight? Hell, Babe was a woman at eight and she was a brave one too. She was defiantly womanish and grown. Sometimes, when I think about my cushy life, 'cause I

know I ain't walking no further than from here to the parking deck…I think of her and her strength, her will to get her family back together. Without her strength, her courage, he womanish ways, I wouldn't have the comparatively cushy life that I do. Then when I feel I can't go another step in my life, not even to the parking deck; when I can't face another bill, another hurdle, another failure, I can't write another page; I stop and ask myself what would have happened to my family if she had given up and stopped walking?

(Pause in contemplation)

Me:

That is usually when I find the strength to push on or let it go, work a little longer and make whatever decision needs to be made and do the work that needs to be done, cause baby I'm just whining in comparison. I know if someone in my family had that kind of love and strength in them then I have it too and that makes my back just a little straighter, and I stand a little taller. Sometimes, that is the only thing that keeps me going, the strength, courage and passion of my ancestors.

(Exit stage right)

Act II

(Lights remain as they were at the end of Act I. I enter from the left and stand in a pool of light on the left side of the stage.)

Me:

Now, you know a little bit about my beginnings, my history, my firsts, my awakenings as a baby womanist; discovering who I was in the world. What I've learned is that experiences of racism and sexism combined are a part of life for black women. And if I had to be up in here dealing

with that, I didn't have to take it lying down. I had to resist. Make a stand for myself in order to create change for myself. I had to stand up.

(Stand up by Ludacris begins to play at the bridge to the 3rd verse.)

Me:

So I have always managed to be some parts of myself, not fully myself, but always evolving, changing, growing and yes, resisting oppression, everyday. When I thought people didn't like me I tried to change myself to suite their specifications. With the men I love I was even worse, twisting and turning myself to meet some unwritten expectation. There were timesI was torturing myself, it is impossible to operate from a place of courage and be true to your resistant, womanish ways when you are twisted into knots, people pleasing. I had to look at the pain I had caused myself by blaming others. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying some brothers haven't done some things, because that would be a lie. But a wise womanist once told me that your lovers are a reflection of you. Not a mirror image, mind you, but they are showing you something that is in you, so pay attention. Learn the lessons that the person has come to teach you. I thought she was crazy at first. But when I thought about it, she was right. After that, I began to look back over my relationships, crushes, lovers and one of the reflections of me was "White Woman Ideology." That's when a brother feels the need to justify why he only dates white women to me or another black woman. Generally, he gives a justification of blame, meaning some how it is all black women's "fault" that he likes white women. *(pause)* No I'm serious. My first exposure to W.W. I. was Chris. We were friends in college. He was fine, tall, brown skinned with perfect teeth, reminded me of a slimmer version of Morris Chesnut. All the

ladies liked him because he was nice in addition to being fine. One day we were talking after acting classes.

Chris:

Hey You, what's up?

Me:

Nothing much,Chris, just memorizing some lines. What's up with you?

Chris:

Nothing much.

Me:

(To the audience) Then as we sat chatting in the lounge, Chris told me about the love of his life, Rebecca.

Chris:

She was the first woman I ever loved I was 17 and she was 17 and we dated for almost two years. She had pretty, smooth skin like no other woman I had ever met. And when she talked to me it was like no one else was in the room. I have to admit, I fell for her pretty hard. She was the love of my life and then that scheming slut dumped me for Robert, who had been a friend of mine, because he had a car. That rat! I gave her the best 18 months of my life before I came to college. After that I decided I would never love another black woman again as long as I lived!

Me:

Really? Oh, I had wanted to ask you to go to the cast party for Tommy Flowers next weekend, but…

Chris:

Well, I don't have a date or anything so I guess we can go together.

Me:

Cool. So that next Saturday we are at the party, *(sitting on the floor)* sitting on the floor, eating our hors d'oeuvres and drinking Guinness. I was thinking he would see that I was fabulous and it didn't matter what color I was, right? I felt like I had a point to prove, and if I just kept shining eventually he would see me and not just that I was black.

Chris:

(Sigh, curt tone) You want something else to drink?

Me:

(be as cheery as possible) Yes, thank you, Chris. *(Taking beer from Chris)* Hey you want to get into the next game of Spades, someone has to beat Craig and Annie?

Chris:

No…I just don't feel…

Me:

Then Terri comes sashaying over. About my size, brown hair and eyes. She has a crush on Chris, too.

Terri:

Chris, be my partner for a few hands of Spades?

Chris:

Sure, Terri! *(Smiling)*

Me:

(watching Chris get up and leave) I couldn't believe it. He jumped up and went to play Spades with *her*. They started dating shortly after that and she dumped him for another guy, with a car, after about six months, just like Rebecca. But you know, he didn't stop dating white women because she dumped him, he just got over it and got a new white girl to date. That just blew my mind. So what was it? She wasn't prettier, smarter, thinner or anything-*er* than I was, she was just white. That's all. I felt like for him I wasn't good enough because I was black, I had never done anything wrong to him. Don't get it twisted, I ain't hating. I could have understood just no, I'm not interested in you as more than a friend, but he had to play the race/gender card and blame all of black womanhood for one sister's fuck up? So, I was locked out of the running because of her whiteness and his belief that our blackness, both mine and his, were inferior to it, but I still expected to win. That was crazy on my part. You know it would have made more sense to me to just say "I like white women, period" rather than blaming the sistahs. Is it the apple's fault if I like oranges? No of course not. But it still hurt. I tried not to take it too personal, because really it wasn't about me at all. We all have to own our own stuff. What I learned from that was I can't change who I am to make anyone else happy. Either you love me like I am or you don't. And that was part of finding the courage to love myself too.

Me:

Sometimes you just have to be a little grown to be happy. For example: I was dating this guy, a potter, you know he made pottery. He was twenty-two, damn near anorexic, mousy brown hair, plain, be speckled, white man but what he had was the most incredible *hands*. I used to call him that Hands. He was so sexy to me, even though he was as white as Wonder Bread, I didn't care. I loved to watch him work the clay and though it was messy he just made it look like such fun. That is how I actually hooked up with him. I was friends with his brother's girlfriend, a

photographer, Etta. And we were at his art studio where he lived and worked and she used part of the space for photographing and developing film. So we were letting her boyfriend take pictures of us and Hands was working on some new pottery. *(Posing for camera, lights flash like a camera, camera sound affect)* So while Etta was helping Nick reload a new roll of film, I wentover to see what Hands was making. *(To Hands)* What you making?

Hands:

(sitting at potter's wheel, kicking the wheel and molding pot) It's just a little pot; I'm really just messing around. You want to give it a shot?

Me:

Sure. He gave me a smock and gave me his seat at the kick wheel…That's the wheel with the little table on top that spins around while you for the clay into shapes, just in case you don't speak pottery.

Hands:

This is how you kick so the wheel will spin.

Me:

And he kicked until I got the hang of it and could kick myself.

Hands:

Now, squeeze the water from this sponge on to the clay. *(squeezing sponge)* Good, now just cup the clay, press down a little and let it sort of round out to start making a cup. Don't forget to kick. *(laughing)*

Me:

He leaned in over my shoulder and put his hands over my hands to sort of show me how to work the clay and I was done.

Hands:

If you work it around sort of like…this…

Me:

He showed me a couple of pottery moves while smiling into my eyes

Hands:

It really makes it sturdy; you don't want the walls of the cup too thin in this type of clay.

Me:

Oh, ok. *(Continuing to work the clay)* Well, as the evening went on and we talked and he taught me more about how to make pottery after Etta and I finished our photo session. I needed some new headshots as actors do from time to time. Etta and Nick were always game to help out a fellow artist with high quality work that was dirt cheap. Anyway, I was just about to pack it in to go home and he stopped me.

Hands:

Hey, if you want you can come back some time and finish painting the cup you started. I'll fire it for you, so you can drink out of it. You know make it usable.

Me:

That's pottery talk for I'll show you how to use special paint that is safe to drink out of and bake it so it will be solid and safe to use. So I said, "I'd like that." And so it began, and no, I never did finish the damn cup because I dropped it when I went back to work on it again. But honestly, it was the hands, once I saw how he touched that clay and the beautiful things he created with his hands, I was wide open. That is what made him such a good lover, his touch was divine and of course he had the soul of an artist. We would spend hours pouring over books, laughing at silly jokes, drinking wine and making love.

(The lights change to amber and soft jazz begins to play)

Me:

One night I was going to hear a mutual friend of ours sing at a club and Hands was supposed to meet me there. Baby, I was looking absolutely yummy. I had on a green and tan halter dress, sexy as hell, but I ain't bragging. There were mostly black patrons at the club that night, in Marietta. And as I sat there waiting for Hands to arrive, a few brothers walked by and gave me the "she's cute but, nawh" look. Which was fine with me, I had a date. The looks went from "nawh" to "no she didn't" when Hands slipped into the chair next to me and kissed me hello and proceeded to order a round of drinks for the table. Oh the indignation. *(Chuckles)* A brother was acting like he could barely say hello when I was sitting alone, but then he catch's a case about my man cause he's white? And for the record, I have no justification except I liked his narrow ass a lot. I would have still liked him if he had been black, yellow, it didn't matter. And me liking him didn't take anything away from the brothers. They were and still are fly to me as they ever have been, don't get it twisted, Boo-Boo. But there was just something about how he used his hands that worried the hell out of me and I wasn't going to let color keep me from getting touched by him if I wanted to have him touching me. I still have an adorable little pot with a lid he gave me, blue and yellow with a little raw hide string for a lid handle. *(Smiling)*

Me:

After that I began to think that I was not very strong but more than strong, I was invincible. I didn't need a man, and no one else for that matter. But what I found out was I was hurting and you can't outrun your own pain, and even though I was strong, maybe even unbreakable but I could definitely be bent just like a palm tree in a hurricane. That was the beginning of a new change in my resistance, in my life, in me. After all my self-righteou*u*s attitude and action I had

come up against one person besides God that I had to answer to before I could move on to the next big thing in my life. Me. I had to face myself. And it was hard. I had to find truth in myself in order to find it in my resistance. So I had to let go of that whole super woman attitude and become comfortable with my own vulnerablity. I was unfolding new parts of myself and who I thought I was as a young black woman and a first generation Hip-Hop head. As part of Hip-Hop, a music movement, an attitude, a vibe I had some ideas about it past and present.

(Lights dim, not a black out)

(Keep Your Head Up-Tupac plays softly in the background, spot light comes up on Me, writing a letter)

Me:

Dear Hip-Hop,

How you been? We've lost touch over time, haven't we? Isn't it funny how you hook up with something and it becomes a signifivant part of who you are? You and I are like that. Strands woven into the fabric of my life: Gospel, jazz, blues, country, rock, soul, funk, pop, rap and her now deformed, sub- culture-building,baby-brother Hip-Hop. You used to run so smooth. "We on Award Tour with Muhammad my man *(Look up)* Goin' each and every place with the mic' in their hand." Hip-hop dressed so fly, just so dapper cause "ain't nobody dope as me, I'm just so fresh and clean." *(Sigh)* Yeah, Hip-Hop, I remember when we was really down, in the day. Slick Rick, Doug E. Fresh, Run- DMC, Whodini, Grand Master Flash and the furious five, you remember dat? I remember dat. That New Jack Swing sound was nice too, "Groove me, baby, tonight." *(laugh)* Only thing was that New Jack City vibe was real, just like the crack, it got you too. Hooked on the crack, ghetto and the bling eventually caught up with you. Funny thing is you didn't even notice until recently that you were limping. It's just a good thing your producer

got you a wheel chair before it was too late. Maybe the therapy will help the record sales too. I know Missy Elliott has been talking to you about a return to originality, that would be good, yeah Kanye told me that him and Queen Latifah had been talking to you about elegance as a legitimate option. Wearing a belt for starters, it's cool. I heard Jermaine Dupris came by and brought you some paper, strawberry short cake and some encouragement-good looking out. Jay-Z said he would call, back on tour again, so much for retirement. You know it really is true, you do see the good and the bad when you're in therapy; The UNITY and the Queen Bee being a little raunchy. Nope, it definitely ain't all Ludacris or runaway love, is it? Maybe once you regain some more equilibrium you'll get your soul back, then street cred will mean more than you been shot or to jail, it will mean you have artistic integrity, some truth in your art. You know I saw Chuck D the other day, that brotha is still strong, serving the community, doing his thing. He told me he was wondering how you were doing. He sends his best. Big ups to Hip-Hop; something was so authentic about you then, we miss that about you now. Call me when the industry gives you your cell phone back so we can go hang out on the block. You remember the old neighborhood don't you? Yeah man, a lot has changed. I'm glad Rap let me know how to get at you, we need to keep in touch. Come on by when you feel up to it. I'll cook you something, nobody likes hospital food, then we'll have time to catch up. Play some cards, laugh a little then run on to the next level. Maybe we can even hook up a little party,Walk it out, leanin' and rockin,' getting than wit it. Celebrating a new direction for us, that would be real nice. I'm pretty sure we are done making the same old mistakes, I know I am. Well, I got to keep it moving, Baby. Take care of yourself. You a modern classic Hip-Hop, just remember you got to keep your head up. *(throw up the dueces, a sign similar to the peace sign only sideways, it means talk to you later or "peace, I'm out")* Love, Me.

(Lights change to blue and green)

Me:

Have you ever been to one of those performance art shows, where everyone is dressed in black and very political? When I was a kid I hated those shows. All this talk about resisting what ever the issue of the moment was. Stop people from wearing leather gym shoe strings. Down with holidays, lets embrace the holiday season. But even if I don't agree with the topic of protest, I have to admit that art is resistance. Why? Well, think about it. In a world that values only money, just money, just money. Not the earth, not the children, the grown people or the animals we stop to create something that is about humanity and not money. Of course there is protest art, about wars, misogyny, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia and all sorts of other things. We need money to survive but baby we need art to live. Now, I don't hate the tree hugging, protest plays, I am one. There are things about me that are just African. I like that. There are things about ne that are American. I like that too. *(Pause)* I look for myself every day, not that I'm missing. Especially, when things are going crazy in my life; too many bills, projects, homework, children cutting up, just life happening. I hate that shaken up soda feeling, you just don't know how many more shakes you can stand before you explode. Its like, "Damn, what else can go wrong today?" That is when I really seek that spot, the warm, the cozy, the comfort-food-of-yourself spot. I never find that part of myself where I think I'll be. Sometimes I find myself in an old gospel song, just holding on. *(Singing)* "I'm just holding on, I'm just holding on, holding on and I won't let go my faith, let go my faith." I remember that from when I was a little girl. It is still good and true, too. That is one of the best ways I have kept on resisting is through faith. I simply refuse, I REFUSE, I R-E-F-U-S-E to be defeated. Sugar, when I die I will go to the grave with nuggets of life under my fingernails! I'm gonna live on,

I'm gonna thrive as a matter of fact. I'm gonna continue to thrive because trials only make you stronger. I believe there is freedom in that sort of strength of faith that strength to hold on just a little while longer. It can be hard to do. Some days, even I, the eternal optimist obscure, feel like giving up. Just get in my car and ride away, get on a plane and disappear. Then I remember that this too will pass if I can just hang on a little while longer-things always get better too. I have found that I really find myself in well, myself and love. And I usually end up having a little fun too. Can you believe that? The grace. *(Winkie's Theme by Queen Latifah plays,lights return to amber,music fades)*

Me:

Tea Cake, *(um,um)* Tea Cake *(laugh)* sho' is good to be sweet like dat! Have mercy. *(To audience)* Their Eyes Were Watching God, you ever read it, at least seem the movie on tv? When you get a chance, you might like reading it. Hate to tell folk what to do. It took Janie Starks about 39 years to fufill her satisfied love. That love that inspite of every challenge continues to grow and evolve and have meaning. I won't ruin the book for you but I just have to tell this so you can get an understanding. This book stirs the soul because it is about many kinds of love. Family love, how your family loves you. Love you from the cradle most times, they love you with *hope*. Hope for who you will grow up to be in life, or maybe with unfulfilled dreams they had for themselves. The excitement of possibility. If you have children you know what I mean. *(Holding baby)* "What you gonna be when you grows up, lil' man?" *(Pass baby on to person next to me)* I'm seeding and watering a veterinarian and a minister at my house. Sometimes it works out and some times it don't. But kin folk have a way of swallowing their disappointment but not they love. Then there is the friendship love. That love born of what we have in common and what secrets we share. We have all kinds of friends, our work friends,

movie buddies, hang out pals, old friends, new friends, best friends forever friends and we love them all. Friendship love is full of give and take and support, if they a real friend you can count on them. Now, there is love relationships love but it is NOT all the same. Some got conditions to it, some just for a little while and some is real special. Now that special love is that satisfied love; It is more than friendship, it can turn into family, but it is real intimate because it knows you like it know itself and good, or bad it accepts all of you. If you got all that with your man or your woman, then you got the right one. I don't think most people get that these days. It's like you are just fine with how they just are, she gained ten pounds, well that is just more to love. He started smoking, *(pause)* again. Well, he fell off the wagon; I just have to help him get back on when he's ready. There is one particular line in the book that strikes me. It's when Janie and Tea Cake are talking during the storm and she says how happy and fulfilled she is with their relationship. And Tea Cake says, "I never knew you was so satisfied with me like that." And I thought, that is it, when it is right you feel satisfied. You not looking to see who else may be around to please you, you are already as fulfilled as you care to be. It is a rare gift a satisfied love. See most folk ain't satisfied, they just settling for an almost satisfied love, close but not quite all the way. Eventually, a not quite satisfied love chips away at your freedom. You feel like a slave to that love you must comply, like airport security. Love is liberating, so you not supposed to feel constrained with it. None of that "if you do this I'll do that." There is no vengeance in a satisfied love, no manipulation, games, or ultimatums. I'm sure of that; too many of the wrong compromises kills the spirit of love, what is the point in that? A satisfied love is definitely revolutionary, because it is free like the wind through the trees. The wind blows threw the leaves, the grass, flowers and everything. It doesn't change what those things are, it may bend it, break it, uproot it but even a tree blown down in a hurricane is still a tree, ain't it? Two

people who are satisfied with each other like that don't spend a lot of time criticizing or trying to change each other. They spend their time in the ebb and flow of life, loving themselves and each other. The only thing I want to know is does it last? I think it can. Sugar, I got to meet me a Tea Cake. Love that feeds you both and adds richness to your already good life has to be the right thing to have everyday. But you got to find it for yourself, cause what's satisfied love that keeps my soul feeling free as a breeze may feel like a prisoner in a cell to you. And love sho' ain't no prison. *(pause)*

Me:

Soon as I'm done in the bedroom, I'ma throw all this old baggage out of this closet and into the trash, so I can make room for something I can really use. *(Pulling bags out, looking through them, walking to the trash can and throwing things away)* I've already started. I know I want to change my experiences in life, have new experiences from what I been having. So I have to create a void to make room for the new. Daddy baggage, don't need that anymore. Letting go of the past and the pain of it is healing, but not always simple. I'll probably find a carry on of the Daddy baggage in the attic, but I can only work on one room at a time. One thing I am not resisting is change. Don't need this broken heart anymore. *(Holding it up)* Send it to the repair shop. *(Set it to the side)* I'm not sure of the details but it don't matter. I'll know when I get there. *(Continuing to pull thing from closet)* Bad attitude! *(Opens and sniffing it)* Oooo, definitely gone bad. *(Slaps lid back on and run to trash can and toss it in)* *(Opening another container)* Old grudges, debts and resentment, gone. *(takes to trash and dumps)* I'm going to be the wind and the leaves it blows. *(opening large box)* Lies people told me but I believed. Where is the shredder? It doesn't matter . (*dragging box to sit next to trash can)* This freedom to BE regardless of who you think I am. (pulling out two more boxed) Imperfections, stress and self-

loathing, no need to keep any of this old junk. *(Kicking box and scooting each box over to the trash can)* In spite of my own imperfection…*(opens one more medium size box) (looking into box and digging around)* Self-love, beauty, family, self-esteem, and African centered identity. Here is the box I have been looking for forever, let me get this out so I can spread this all out. *(putting box next to broken heart for safe keeping)* Appreciating my own beauty and way of being *(closing closet, and dusting off)* What a relief. *(Thank you for letting me be myself again by Sly and the Family Stone begins to play, wiping forehead, scoop up my box of good stuff and my heart and carry them off stage as the lights are fading)*

Me:

(Spot light center stage) You know in the end there is just God and me. I think Anne Frank was right: "Inspite of everything, I still believe people are good at heart" more or less. Some people just won't be where I am with me. Black, female, fat, nappy and I am proud of who I am, I accept that I am not perfect, but I am still worthwhile and that is the best resistance for me every day in a world that is often sending messages that could lead me to feel like I'm just wrong to exist. But if that was the case, I would not exist. I can't even worry about what you think of me, I'm too busy enjoying my daily victories over small mindedness, mine-not yours-that's your own business. Sometimes it is hard and I don't know what is down this road or around that corner but like Miss Celie say "Dear God, I',m here, I am here." Carmela, you are here. *(Wave goodbye, Living my life like it's golden begins to play, lights return to preset)*

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