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Courageous Solstice: Reconstructing Fairy Tales for a Black Youth Aesthetic

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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COURAGEOUS SOLSTICE: RECONSTRUCTING FAIRY TALES FOR A BLACK YOUTH AESTHETIC

By Tanya Yvette Boucicaut, B.A. The College of William and Mary, 2010
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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016

Chair: Dr. Noreen Barnes,
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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the historical, philosophical, and existential implications of the Black Arts Movement and its major artists on the recurring themes of social injustice, Western hegemony, and the fight for aesthetic authenticity to reimagine fairy tales for the youth Black Aesthetic. As a personal reflection and foundational document for a larger project, this work weaves these implications through the practical application of the varied stages of program development for youth artists. This project also is a handbook that encompasses scholarly research, reflective analysis and anecdotal journal evidence. The subsequent chapters explore the theological and theatre pedagogical educational influences that informed the phases of inception through completion of the 2015 Courage Summer Workshop (a six-week devised theatre workshop for middle school students) to include its two-year program history, curriculum design, and weekly program overviews.

Introduction

This thesis interrogates the historical, philosophical, and existential implications of the Black Arts Movement and its major artists on the recurring themes of social injustice, Western hegemony, and the fight for aesthetic authenticity to reimagine fairy tales for the Black Aesthetic. As a personal reflection and foundational document for a larger project, this work weaves these implications through the practical application of the varied stages of program development for youth artists through a retrospective lens. This project uses a hermeneutical approach of examining the development of youth theatrical works of art. This interpretative approach examines a text from its literal meaning to figurative implication. This project also is a handbook that encompasses scholarly research, reflective analysis and anecdotal journal evidence.

As a twenty-something Black woman minister who came of age and is now awake to see the cruelty of this American society and as the granddaughter of sharecroppers and the fruition of third world ambitions, I could not un-see, un-know, or sit dormant. Action was necessary. Change was inevitable. A quest for a perfection that casts out fear was embarked. Thus Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre was born. This organization advocates for an aesthetic that serves middle school youth of color.

The subsequent chapters explore the theological and theatre pedagogical educational influences that informed the phases of inception through completion of the 2015 Courage Summer Workshop (a six-week devised theatre workshop for middle school students of color) and its parent company, Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre, to include its two-year history, curriculum design, and weekly program overviews. This summer workshop taught various

aspects of theatre (acting, writing, movement, and technical theatre) based on various English and Theatre Virginia Standards of Learning objectives. According to the Virginia Department of Education website, the Standards of Learning are defined as “the commonwealth's expectations for student learning and achievement in grades K-12 in English, mathematics, science, history/social science, technology, the fine arts, foreign language, health and physical education, and driver education” (Virginia Department of Education). Its program’s target goals for the past two years were: to provide youth with an opportunity to be involved in all aspects of the theatre production; to help youth develop a better understanding of the potential of theatre for fostering social development; to use theatre as a means of developing a sense of community while maintaining the individuality of self; and to provide mentorship in helping youth navigate life during this transitional period of growth from childhood to adolescence.

This summer, Richmond middle school students collaborated to write a one-act play rooted in a genre of cultural narratives: fairy tales. In this context cultural narratives are defined as stories that inform our morality and value system. Due to the nature of our American educational system that privileges western models, at the time, I had little prior knowledge of African folk tales to reconstruct for this program. Any fairy tales I knew about people of color just simply reconstructed from Western European or Disney fairy tales. This notion also is demonstrated with the 2014 Courage Summer’s first endeavor into reconstructing stories with Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. *Our Town* represents a small town in America with no people of color. While this would seem to be an unlikely choice for middle school students of color in an urban environment, the goal in using this play was to celebrate the beauty of the mundane. Our focus was a day in the life of a Richmond middle school student. This same perplexity can also be found when looking at an adaptation tool used in for Summer 2015 with the ABC television

show, *Once Upon a Time (OUAT)*. It is set in Maine, a place with little to no diversity. In the first season there is only one Black person, and his role is a newspaper reporter. In retrospect, as a Black woman whose identity exists at the intersection of marginality, it was difficult to confront my formal Western education heritage. Now I see, I should have chosen different stories. This marginality correlates with the Womanist perspective that speaks to intersectionality. Devon Carbado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Vickie M. Mays, and Barbara Tomlinson define intersectionality as “a term to address the marginalization of Black women within not only antidiscrimination law but also in feminist and antiracist theory and politics” (303). This intersectionality acknowledges not just the complexities of gender like Feminism, but it also addresses race and its complicated influence on every aspect of life in America to include a Western-centered educational system.

This project helped me to confront this reality and discover ways to gain knowledge about my own context, that of the Black aesthetic. Nonetheless, this project and sheds light on the exclusionary manifestation of privilege as fairy tales morphed from oral to literary traditions. This is a multifaceted alarm for middle school students of color in the South as they try to navigate through life and form their identity. It was vital for us as a group to confront hegemony and affirm our identity in the best way I knew how; through written agency.

Fairy tales are some of the most notable stories in the collective consciousness. They harken to a place of childlike innocence and represent a wholesome didactic worldview, on the surface. They implore readers to suspend their disbelief long enough for the hero to journey through stages of mythic obstacles to find happiness. Noted scholar and playwright, Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tale as Myth* offers this description:

The classical fairy tale makes it appear that we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms, that we are all striving for the same happiness, that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable, that a particular type of behavior will produce guaranteed results like living happily ever after with lots of gold in a marvelous castle, our castle and fortress that will forever protect us from inimical and unpredictable forces of the outside world (5).

For middle school students, often on the liminal precipice of childhood and adulthood, fairy tales can serve as a means to navigate the terrain of adolescence. Their mythic nature aligns with the melodrama of adolescence where every social interaction is an epic event. The use of epic does not negate feelings of legitimacy for middle school students' experiences, rather epic elucidates the idea that this term can be a subjective qualifier. Generally, epic events are often cloaked under the guise of the mundane, only seen through hindsight. It is often in the retelling and reconstructing of the ordinary that we uncover new meanings.

Chapter 1: Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre's Company and Program History

This chapter explores the influence of theological education from the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University (STVU) and theatre pedagogical education from the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. This chapter charts my trajectory in establishing Perfect Youth Community Youth Theatre in 2014 and its primary program, the Courage Summer Workshop, from its beginning as a seminary ministry project idea to its fruition as a nonprofit youth theatre education organization.

Church Beginnings

This journey begins at church because if I had not been asked to participate in my church's Drama Ministry, I doubt my first would have ever been produced. I received the call to write plays as a teenager. One Sunday, at 17 years old in 2004, I began writing a script after church. In March of 2005, my pastor from New Hope Baptist Church in Virginia Beach appointed me as an executive member of the Drama Ministry. During the initial stages of the ministry, we needed a script and I offered the one I was working on. At that time, it was unfinished. The following week, I completed the script and titled it *What I Said I'd Never Do*. Its theological basis derived from Proverbs 18:21a "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

Like many budding playwrights, I wrote with an autobiographical component to it. The protagonist, Leah's character was a combination of my friends and my experiences during our first two years of high school in suburban Virginia Beach. The break in stasis began with her parents' divorce. Leah then had to move in with her grandmother. It was important for me to include an African Continuum archetype, griot, which is equivalent to a grandmother or sage-like character, due my close relationship with my maternal grandmother. As many didactic plays

went, her grandmother taught the value of hard work and she eventually learns, as life often teaches us, we all will experience circumstances we never imagined or anticipated. It was a coming of age tale about a spoiled teenager who learns how to persevere through adversity. Of course, due to the autobiographical nature the only adversity I experienced at the time, was my mother being laid off as a tax analyst during the winter of my 10th grade in 2003. This lack of exposure limited the play's scope as the only adversity Leah experienced was an economical shift.

Seminary Experience

Most of this journey began as a seminary student at STVU. Seminary expanded my horizon for ministry, spiritually and vocationally. Seminary showed me the various aspects of the human condition and the need to handle people with care as we all navigate life's major and mundane moments. Through this educational experience and ministry training, now I feel better equipped to answer questions raised in everyday encounters about God's identity. My course of study since answering "the call" to ministry was to fuse theology and theatre. The call can be described as the confirmation of a person's life purpose, often demonstrated through an encounter with the Spirit of God. Initially, I struggled with the school curriculum's emphasis on preaching – three preaching classes are required to graduate. Frankly, I resisted every opportunity to learn the material and method in my first preaching class. I did not see the correlation with preaching and my call. After taking the required preaching classes and sharing my purpose for attending seminary with my professors, they helped me discover ways to apply this same discourse to theatre. They helped build upon my English foundation through exegetical research. To exegete a text is to look at a passage of Scripture from its literal meaning to its philosophical or metaphorical meaning, similar to hermeneutics. Now, I see sermons in a new

way. A sermon by my definition is a message that God has created through prayer and study for the preacher to share with people. Sermonic discourse is not regulated to standing behind a pulpit in the traditional sense; it can be spoken, written, performed, or sung. The purpose of a sermon is to create new beginning, a seed of transformation.

Beyond preaching courses, one of the most beneficial courses was Christian Education. I learned that Christian Education is the metaphoric heartbeat of the church because its focus is centered on committee work and involves every ministry. This course had a pedagogical focus that included theological education lesson planning and execution, ministry construction, and group dynamics. This course taught me how to function effectively in groups as we all encounter group work in life. In order for a group to be successful, communication and compromise are key elements. This is also true for theatre.

Our final project was to imagine our ideal ministry – my ministry was a sacred theatre ministry. It would draw from Scriptural reference and illustrate thematic elements, similar to sermonic discourse. The ministry would consist of three dimensions: a production workshop, playwriting workshop, and theatre troupe creation. This is for churches looking to move in a different direction to spread the gospel in a different way, to incorporate sacred theatre as a regular part of worship. This ministry will produce two distinctive plays; plays for the larger community and plays specifically for the congregational context. This project was inspired by my first playwriting experience at the age of 17 at my church in Virginia Beach and my first directorial experience as a junior undergraduate student at the College of William and Mary for the course *Sex and Race in Plays and Films*.

Sacred Theatre Ministry Project

Objectives

The objectives of the theatre troupe call for each person to identify which area of production best suits their interest by looking at job descriptions. During the production process each person will participate in one aspect of the production, not all members of the troupe will be actors, some will be stage hands, lighting and set crew to enhance ministry, outreach, and evangelism. Each person will be able to see how drama fits into the new direction of the church. The goals are to internally help each other become better disciples through discipline and commitment, skilled in their gifts, and public speakers.

The objectives for the playwriting workshop are to write a 20 minute 10-page one-act play and to learn how to exegete scripture at the most basic level to extract themes and character archetypes. This script will be designed to fit into a worship service or a part of a larger program. The goals are for each person to gain an appreciation for writing, become better writers, and look at scripture from a new lens.

The objectives for the production workshop are to find a venue, put on a show within a 12 to 16-week time frame, cast actors, recruit a crew, advertise and market, and set rehearsal days and times. The goals are developing time management skills, public speaking, cooperation, and an appreciation for theatre.

Production Workshop

The first dimension will be a production workshop. This will last approximately three weeks, meeting once a week for two hours. This class will focus on theatre administration. This class is best for people who have a passion for administration, most likely the director of theatre

or drama ministry. The first class will focus on building a production team that will include a director, assistant director, and stage manager. Each role will be defined and job descriptions will be determined. The second class will focus on rehearsal time and space. A realistic timeline and calendar will be created during this class. The calendar will consist of which scenes will be of the focus of on a particular day and the production schedule. For example, the following questions should be addressed: when should the actors be have their lines memorized or when will the set design be completed? The final class will focus on finding out what types of plays will work for individual churches. This will be done through talking about the demographics and theology of each church and pastor. For example, if a play is done for a youth ministry the theme will be different than a singles ministry. The key in this process is learning how to produce a play for each congregation. This class will emphasize that each play does not have to be grandiose; it can be small and intimate for particular audiences.

Production Roles

The first dimension, the troupe will begin with the playwright/director. One or two people can fulfill these roles (either combined or separately). Ideally, a strong creative team will be formed to include an assistant director, stage manager, lighting director, props master/set designer, costume designer, and two advisors (a seasoned minister and theatre professor). In reality, most churches do not have people with specific theatre training therefore, a strong creative team can include people who are simply willing to learn those roles. This could take up a few weeks because it will involve word of mouth and just tapping into people's potential by sharing passions and goals. This process of teambuilding is important. The pools of talent in many cases could be fellow classmates, church members, family, and friends. This will also be a great way to invite people to participate in the church's activities who are not members.

The director should have extensive theatre experience. Needless to say, the director must be well rounded and most importantly called to write plays. This kind of director should have a love for theatre but, most importantly, Scripture and studying the Word of God. The director must be prepared to articulate a vision or concept for the play once the script is completed with specific attention paid to the church's mission and vision, as this ministry is to complement the church.

Typically, an assistant director is the director's right hand. She or he will do whatever the director needs that includes but is not limited to directing rehearsals when the director is not present, run lines with the actors, etc. The stage manager will serve as the liaison between the production staff and the actors, timekeeper, sets schedule, finds rehearsal space, theatre venues, works with the director and cast to establish a rehearsal schedule, etc. The lighting director will work to create a lighting sequence that will create moods according to the scene. The props manager/set designer should employ minimalist standards because the set needs to be movable with minimal stagehands. Ideally, the props should not cost a great deal but should be durable to last several shows due to touring and traveling. The set designer should have experience with designing sets and drawing. The set should not be ostentatious and take away from the content of the play. The costume designer should have experience in costume design and styling. This person should utilize thrift stores to keep production costs low. The clothes should not be new since the operating budget and overhead costs will need kept at a minimal. The costume designer should understand the concept of layering because most churches may not provide an adequate backstage for the cast, if one at all.

If available, the pastor or a seasoned minister should serve as an advisor to the director. It is also important to have other spiritual advisors as well as to have well-rounded critique of the

theology and interpretation. If available, another mentor could be a theatre professional. This mentorship would have minimal responsibility to include providing feedback after the first table read once the script is completed.

Playwriting Workshop

The first step for the playwright will be to find a Scripture and exegete the text through various sources such as the software program called “Logos”, which is a great resource for Biblical sources. The next step will be to write the script with a particular vision and theme, often about answering questions about the human condition. For example, why do bad things happen to good people? The Bible says in Proverbs 29:18a, “Where there is no vision, the people will perish.” This correlates to the role of the director.

The playwriting workshop should be led by a playwright, a seminary student or Biblical scholar. The playwriting approach should not come from a secular perspective, however, this approach should embrace tools and standards for playwriting. The workshop should last for six weeks. Class would meet for three hours once a week, four classes for instruction, two classes for sharing, and one class for personal critique. Since material shared may be personal, the workshop should be limited to ten people with a strong emphasis on thoughtful feedback that follows the sandwich method. The sandwich method is typically used in secondary schools, where positive aspects overall feedback is given, followed by areas of improvement and concluding with more positive feedback. It should be noted that this method was gleaned during observing secondary school teachers in my tutoring context.

Before the first week, students should be sent an email requesting them to find their favorite Biblical text. The first class will be a crash course on Biblical exegesis based on Michael J Gorman’s book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and*

Ministers. Another resource will be Thomas Long's *The Witness of Preaching*. It will not be discussed but a handout will be given out. Long gives a brief outline for exegesis in his third chapter entitled "Biblical Exegesis for Preaching."

Outline of a Brief Exegetical Method for Preaching

- I. Getting the text in view
 - a. Select the text
- b. Reconsider where the text begins and ends
- c. Establish a reliable translation of the text
- II. Getting introduced to the text
 - d. Read the text for basic understanding
 - e. Place the text in its larger context
- III. Attending to the text
 - f. Listen attentively to the text
- IV. Testing what is heard in the text
 - g. Explore the text historically
 - h. Explore the literary character of the text
 - i. Explore the text theologically
 - j. Check the text in commentaries (61)

The facilitator will take the first hour to present sections of the book through lecture and Power Point. The second hour will be class discussion and an example text will be used. The last hour, the facilitator will give a brief lecture on themes and tropes.

For the second week, the focus will be on character building. For the first hour, each participant will create character archetypes based on the theme of their Scripture. Names will be created based on the archetype. For the second and third hour, character bios will be created. In a play each character has a life beyond the play and the play is just a moment in their lives. The characters have a yesterday before the play and a tomorrow after the play. The characters will be limited to two to five characters. The bios will give birthdays, hometowns, professions, favorite colors, foods, places to go, hobbies, and anything else pertinent. Each bio should not exceed a paragraph. The homework for the following week will be to create a conflict that needs to be resolved and how each character is involved in it.

The third week will focus on script development. The entire three hours will be spent developing the script mainly through creating dialogue. The dialogue will be created as the characters interact with each other based on the conflict. This could be done through improvisation or simply sharing ideas as with the group – similar to a brainstorming session. The first five pages will be done by the end of this session.

The fourth week will focus on finishing the script and creating a title. During the fifth and sixth weeks, each participant will read their plays and the class will give a collective critique. The final week, each person will meet with the facilitators for individual critique.

Auditions and Rehearsals

Casting is important because the director must find actors who are open to the playwright/director's vision. The playwright/director have an open mind when selecting a cast. She or he should not impose any prescribed physical attributes. The cast selection is vital because the actors will be the vessels to carry out the vision. The audition process would begin through a publicity process to include sharing the audition information through email (friends, family, high schools, and colleges), Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, word of mouth (visiting churches), radio (if money is available), school newspapers, etc. for a period of two weeks to a month. This could be done during the last few weeks of the playwriting workshop. The ad should the play's Scripture focus, vision, theme, and summary must be presented and compensation if possible.

At auditions the following people should be present, the playwright/director, assistant director, and the stage manager. Auditions should be done approximately ten to twelve weeks before the performance. Each potential cast member must prepare a one-minute monologue or presentation. Each presentation will be recorded so that the team can deliberate at a later time.

The first casting can take one or two days depending on the turnout. After the first round of audition, there should be a second round of auditions with the script. Each cast member selected will be asked to sign a contract that will say they will not reproduce the script, they will be committed to seeing the project all the way through and if they foresee any conflicts inform the director immediately. Understudies will also be cast because they may need to step in if necessary at a moment's notice.

Rehearsals will begin approximately one week after the cast is set. For the first four weeks, rehearsals will be three days a week two hours at a time. During this time the lines will be read only; this is called table work. Movement in the beginning stages distracts the cast and they focus more on movement than learning the lines. This table work process is done to build a sense of community, so that the cast will be familiar with their characters, lines and one another.

A typical rehearsal will begin with warm-ups to include stretching and vocal exercises. Following warm-ups, the cast will sit around a table and discuss any new character discoveries or personal connections. Then the director will share his or her new developments or insights to move their vision or concept for the play forward. Then the cast will read the script aloud while the director will ask the cast to pause during certain moments for clarification or new discoveries. As the weeks progress, the rehearsal time should increase as the cast should develop their characters more thoroughly. After a couple of weeks, the cast should be off book to assist with blocking. Off book means the actors should have their lines memorized and if they do have moments where they forget a line or two, they will call out "line" and the stage manager will state the line. Blocking is the director's placement of actors on stage in relation to the other actors and other production elements. Blocking will begin in the seventh week. From the eight to ten or twelve-week mark, rehearsal time will increase until tech week. Generally, tech week

includes dress rehearsals; the combination of the show's elements to include full costumes, lighting, sound, and a completed scenic design. Tech week is used to ensure all the technical elements of the show are aligned and address any final cast concerns. Finally, the production is ready! A typical opening weekend would consist of a Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday afternoon. If any shows will be taped for those unable to attend, such as the sick and shut-in congregants, the Sunday afternoon would be the best date for that.

Moving from the Church

After several attempts of creating drama ministries at various churches in Richmond, VA, I decided I needed to create a unique organization. I found many churches were unable to provide the resources necessary to initiate and sustain a sacred theatre ministry. I saw many churches wanting to use this type of ministry as an innovative measure to reach young people but lacked the people with the necessary skillsets to produce successful productions. I also discovered that many churches did not want successful productions to include scripts with fully developed characters or casts off book. They often just wanted Christmas and Easter musical productions, which are not my forte. This reality hurt and tainted my outlook on the Church. I didn't understand how churches could claim wanting to be excellent for God, yet be unwilling to do the same for this type of ministry. I had to step away for a while, still attending but not participating fully, to reevaluate this call I claimed to answer.

In the first quarter of 2012 during this process of exploration, an unarmed 17-year-old African American male, Trayvon Martin, was gunned down by a 28-year-old Hispanic male, George Zimmerman in Florida. This case was riveting because Trayvon Martin's archetype was familiar to me. He could have been a brother, cousin or most importantly, he looked like many of the male students I tutored and mentored. This case was my awakening moment for action and I

knew I had to do something more than be a social media activist during the trial. A social media activist is often a person who uses social media to lament about social injustices but leaves their protest on the screen. Watching this case brought up feelings of helplessness. These feelings caused me to evaluate my current activities. What was I doing for my community? Truthfully, nothing of social justice substance. I felt a call to purpose justice. For justice to occur, I believed and still do, that people need to do more than write social media posts, action must be taken place in real life. I needed to do something in real life; I needed to stand up for justice in the only way I knew how, working with young people.

Renewed Passion and Company Fruition

We are a faith-based theatre education organization seeking to inspire, educate, and uplift youth in Richmond and Vicinity through creative expression, identity articulation, and leadership development. Our aim is to produce generations of fearless young people who unwaveringly chase after their dreams while empowering them to discover, evaluate, and maximize their potential to reach their goals.

This journey crystallized in Summer 2013 as a children's feeding program monitor with a local nonprofit in Richmond, Virginia. Typically, this position works with a federally funded program that offers grants to local nonprofits in support of feeding children breakfast and lunch. In this role, the program monitor evaluates over 30 local childcare agencies to ensure the agencies are following FDA food standards. These childcare agencies ran the gamut from traditional daycares to public and private schools to specialty arts and sports programs. During this time, I found the same issue was found – limited programming for middle school students.

Prior to that summer, I had broad focus to work with all age groups for my theatre company. Then after talking with several childcare directors, I realized that middle school was the perfect age group. Middle school is such a precarious time for adolescents. Middle schoolers

hormones and bodies are in constant flux. They teeter between wanting to return to childhood and wanting to grow up prematurely. In addition to the biological and sociological changes, identity formation is paramount.

Once I determined my age group, I decided to do an informal polling to substantiate the childcare directors' recommendation. I asked people in my circle (friends, family members, church members, current and former colleagues, and classmates) when did they begin to participate in behaviors (such as drug usage and distribution as well as promiscuous behavior) that could compromise the brilliance of their future. The consensus was middle school – specifically in the summer. By middle school, young people age out of daycares or daycares do not have adequate curriculum to meet their needs, often resulting in middle school students being free labor to assist in the daily tasks for childcare providers. Throughout 2013 and 2014, I worked with several people, most importantly one of my best friends, who serves as my business partner, to establish Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre and the 2014 Courage Summer Workshop.

Summer 2014

Our inaugural theme was depicting life in Richmond, VA as a middle school student. The production, *Our City* was very loosely based on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Our premise was celebrating the beauty and wonder of the mundaneness in everyday life. The first summer summer taught us all about working together in community, collaborative and communication skills, patience, and most of all faith. We learned the process and value of a narrative. We learned what how to take a story from the concept to the execution in theatrical form. We learned about the connectedness and interdependence needed for success in performance. We learned about empowerment and identity through making healthy and positive choices.

Prior to the workshop beginning, I worked with the undergraduate acting instructors to create lesson plans for duration of the workshop. I used the following theatre education books:

- *Introduction to Theatre Arts Teacher's Guide: A 36-Week Action Handbook* and *Introduction to Theatre Arts Student Handbook: A 36-Week Action Handbook* by Suzi Zimmerman
- *Young Actors: The Ultimate Teen Guide* by Mary Lou Belli
- *175 Theatre Games: Warm-up exercises for Actors* by Nancy Hurley
- *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook* by Viola Spolin

During the workshop I served as a mentor on Fridays using *Letters to a Young Brother* and *Letters to a Young Sister* by Hill Harper, as mentoring guides, as well as using those books' subjects to connect the students' theatre education to various aspects of their social, education, and personal lives. My duties included assisting with meals; ensuring that a safe, inviting and creative atmosphere was maintained; and other duties as necessary. Initially, I served as the on-site dramaturge, volunteer recruiter, stage manager, and any other duties the director needed. In addition, my responsibility was to ensure the workshop ran smoothly with supporting the staff and students in the creative process, serve as a liaison to the stakeholders, and recruit volunteers. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, I had to step in as the co-director midway through the program. These circumstances hinged on conceptual and cultural differences that I was oblivious to at the time. It was a grave misstep in choosing a play with a purely European aesthetic instead of choosing a play with a Black aesthetic for this demographic. With this type of work, it is vital to have all or components, represent the Black aesthetic.

Chapter 2: The Case for the Use of Fairy Tales for Middle School Students in Exploring a Black Aesthetic

This chapter uses the theatre for youth's expert, Dr. Stephani Etheridge Woodson's theories of culture, authenticity, and identity discussed in her article "Authenticity in Children's Theatre and Art" as the framework to examine the historical implications of the Black Arts Movement in light of current cultural trends. It explores Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre's decision to focus on *Little Red Riding Hood* as the primary narrative to adapt for its production, *The Attempt*. It investigates the journey of the fairy tale from oral tradition or folklore to literary stories through various perspectives. In his book, *Fairy Tale as Myth*, noted scholar and playwright, Jack Zipes offers a window into the literary history of fairy tales as well as their function as myths.

Authors in the anthology, *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television* provide different perspectives on adapting fairy tales, specifically Disney fairy tales, for television. These adaptations were crucial in the development of *The Attempt*, as they offered models of narrative and character explanation through a visual medium. The adaptation of primary focus for the program was ABC's *Once Upon a Time (OUAT)*. This show places popular fairy tale characters in a modern context as they live between two worlds, Fairy Tale Land and Storybrooke, Maine. Finally, the collection of essays in *Fairy Tales with a Black Consciousness: Essays on Adaptations of Familiar Stories* includes the culture, worldview, and language to re-imagine traditional Western fairy tales for audiences of color. These essays also supported the Courage Summer Workshop's effort to move between the modalities of oral, literary, and visual traditions to re-contextualize *The Red Riding Hood* through the lens of a Black aesthetic by middle school students for middle school audience.

Historical Influence: Black Arts Movement

All movements for people of color are revolutionary. They are declarations of existential proportions to reclaim inherent value. They reposition the place of Otherness. These disruptions however, are not to diminish the inherent value of dominant cultures, rather they are to acknowledge the equity of greatness between the two. The Black Arts Movement did just that without the finesse or gentility of the Harlem Renaissance and Ivy League nuances. It demanded respect much like the phrase and sentiment of 1960s and 1970s, by any means necessary. This was the age of the television. No longer could bigots and pacifists dismiss the reality of monstrosities and venom of racism and Jim Crow. Much like today, police brutality, disenfranchisement, and the repression of civil liberties would no longer be overlooked. The promises of the Declaration of Independence – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – was unfilled, and African Americans artists could no longer sit content. This era demanded authorial autonomy of its own self-determined aesthetic, like no other. In many ways, Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre serves the same function.

The notion of who is qualified to represent whom, power and agency lay at the heart of the Black Arts Movement as well as Dr. Stephani Etheridge Woodson's hermeneutic approach, "Authenticity in Children's Theatre and Art," in the collection of essays *Playing with Theory in the Theatre Practice*. Woodson defines this approach as "a method of interpretation associated traditionally with St. Augustine and biblical exegesis. In the classical form of hermeneutic exploration, scholars focus on the written texts, or terms, moving from the literal through to more subjective and connotative meanings" (78). This approach serves as a guide for interrogating cultural authenticity using the following guiding questions: "Who is qualified to represent [the gatekeepers] of 'legitimate' or 'authentic art'? Who holds the answers? Makers? Audiences?"

Marketing Departments?” (77). These questions speak to the heart of her argument about the theoretical implications of representational art for theatre for children and youth as well Black artistry. Woodson layers this argument with the exploration of authenticity from Charles Lindholm’s theory of authenticity in *Culture and Authenticity*. Woodson interprets this theory of authenticity as a relational category to the complicated nature of power dynamics and identity structures. She offers “in order to map authenticity as a relational category, I argue that we need to consider (1) the identity of the artist(s); (2) the connection(s) to the source culture; (3) the characteristics of the thing itself; and (4) the ‘outside world’ in which the good is exchanged” (83). These categories will serve as a loose framework for analysis to examine the Black Arts Movement as an authentic artistic movement that sought to create a new aesthetic that empowers people of the African diaspora.

Black artists needed to break free from the all-consuming supremacy and privilege of Western ideals of aesthetics that defined what is or is not value authentic art. This ideal was imposed on Black artists through various ways such as white patronage, self deprecating philosophies of beauty and artistry, and academia. This movement was necessary because Black artists wanted to have the autonomy to represent themselves and their art as legitimate. No longer did Black artists feel the need to have the dominant culture’s validation, rather it was time to eliminate those gatekeepers and create a new set of rules. This was a paradigm shift. It was more than the Harlem Renaissance in that, it was more than a plea for acceptance. It was a declaration of protest. The relics, foremothers and forefathers, and the weight of white patriarchal ideology lost its appeal.

Poet, Larry Neal’s seminal article entitled “The Black Arts Movement” in the Summer 1968’s *Drama Review* was a summation of the connection between the Black Power and the

Black Arts Movement. It was a retrospective look at what began as an avante garde response to systematic disgrace. Both movements were countercultural measures to empower the marginalized aesthetic with an air of militancy and political unrest. Neal discusses in the “Black aesthetic” as the antithesis to all things Western culture to include “symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (29). He goes on to point out this aesthetic challenges the notion of truth and how this truth is legitimated; ethical agency of power in response to the lack of having any historically; and the rebirth of a collective cultural identity and consciousness rooted in the antithesis of Western culture to include politics, art, and spirituality. The notion of truth’s agency based is prevalent throughout the article. He calls for Black artists to dissolve all traces of a Western aesthetic for the Black aesthetic. He states,

Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a ‘Black aesthetic’. It is the opinion of of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas (29).

Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre exists in an intersection of two dimensions of Other – cultural and ageist. To make her case, Woodson breaks down the coded language of Other. She states, “Children are always Other than adult and therefore need regulation, protection, and intense surveillance. To question the authenticity of an artwork created for children – to claim ‘not for children’ – is to posit an identity structure for children that speaks to their inherent internal life (81).” These rules often devalue not only the Black aesthetic but

children's art. It is to suggest that children's art is less legitimate due a major uncontrollable factor, age. She writes, "A construction of age as power fosters habit of mind, interpreting children as unfinished, in process, and becoming" (81). The irony is that art is a process. Art is fluid. It must interrogate the present and move the culture forward to uncharted territory – a reimagined liminal space of freedom. The beauty of art, specifically theatre, is to share in the process work of the ensemble. She continues, "Questioning acceptance of age as power, in effect, posits that adults constructing art and media for children's consumption are more authentic, more appropriate creators and receivers than children themselves" (81-82). Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre seeks to shift power dynamics to go beyond a summer program, rather, it hopes to be a sustained life line for young people as they navigate life. It seeks to redefine and break down the stigma of Other.

The only way to break down the stigma of Other is to create empowering paradigms that unequivocally assess the current realities of oppression. This assessment is about consciousness raising which is necessary to build new paradigms. Baraka writes,

On the surface, as we grow more conscious, we knew that as we demanded an art of struggle, an art that related to the reality of our history and the real life of the world, particularly of the Afro-American people, it became clearer and clearer that the standard bourgeois aesthetic of separation of arts and politics was stupid and becoming more and more openly bankrupt. (25)

In many ways, the Western hegemonic aesthetic is analogous to adults diminishing the value of children's art. This occurrence detracts from the purpose of children's art or Black art. Its intent is not for public consumption, rather, it a way to interpret and cope with life. Therefore, like children's art, Black art should be able to exist in its own context. In other words, adults or

dominant culture should not pollute the meaning making processes by involving themselves in problematic ways. Woodson offers as a solution “that within the parameters of theatre with and by children, authenticity exists in the processes of construction, devising, and creation in which actual children and/or youth are involved.” (82). All of this exists in a liminal place due to its precarious position; seeking to tear down negative ideology in two realms of existence.

This liminal space often exists with the meeting of minds in educational spaces. The Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School did just that in the spring of 1964 with various Black artists to include the movement’s most prominent leader, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones at the time). Baraka reflects on this time of guild in the Fall 2011 issue of *Journal of Contemporary*, “What seemed most important about the BARTS was that it was a living paradigm of what many people had come to feel was the direction that Afro-American artists and the art with which they expressed the particular culture they reflected had to go in” (301). This paradigm was critical. This paradigm included a holistic educational experience. Baraka continues, “We set up classes on history, politics, drama... We began to put on plays in the small downstairs space” (27). Neal recounts, “In keeping with its ‘revolutionary’ cultural ideas, the Black Arts Theatre took its programs into the streets of Harlem. For three months, the theatre presented plays, concerts, and poetry readings to the people of the community. Plays that shatter the illusions of the American body politic, and awakened Black people and the meaning of their lives” (32). Those plays at the time, embodied the aesthetic Neal describes. The artists’ identities greatly inform this aesthetic.

Looking at one dimension of authenticity, exploring identity through the originators is imperative. Woodson recommends that “Authenticity is a theoretical statement that points to, or signifies, identity structures” (80). James Smethurst in the “Black Arts Movement” chapter of *A Companion to African American Literature* describes the demographical composition of the

Black Arts Movement major practitioners and their ideology. He chronicles, “The core of [Black Arts Movement] BAM was made up of younger Black artists, intellectuals, and activities...who were guided by a sort of do-it-yourself ethic that did not wait for the benediction of higher authorities” (305). He goes on to clarify, “This core of younger Black radicals was joined to one degree or another by older Black artists and intellectuals... this group had been part of the Black Leftist circles of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s” (305). This relationship is important because there lies great opportunity for mentorship.

Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre’s identity structure values mentorships at its highest level. Multilevel mentorship while complicated provides a wide angle perspective. Mentorship adds a depth of experience to the major players’ work as an extension of their work as an existential demonstration. The existential demonstration of the Black aesthetic moves beyond the surface of meaning making processes to reflect a greater significance – meeting the holistic needs of the community. Neal writes, “[The Black artist’s] primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (29). This duty raises the stakes for the community as communities of color much like the Black Church existed as an encompassing support system – the village concept as many older African Americans reminiscence about. Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre seeks to revive some of the old traditions of communities of color through building sustaining relationships with the children and their families as well as churches and other agencies. This revival speaks to mentorship and relationship building with seasoned individuals much like the Black Arts Movement.

Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre is the grandchild of the Black Arts Movement. It seeks to revive the Black aesthetic framework for new audiences. This framework serve as a

reminder of history's cyclical nature. This nature, which is now springing up in disastrous ways, demands an artistic response from another generation of unapologetic people.

Fairy Tales' Historical Journey from Oral to Literary Traditions

Literary fairy tales find their roots at beginning at the end of the seventeenth century without usurping the authority of its earlier form, oral tradition. Zipes explains, "While the literary fairy tale was being institutionalized at the end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth in France, the oral tradition did not appear, nor was it subsumed by the new literary genre" (11). Unfortunately, Zipes does include the major catalyst for the shift from oral tradition to literary, the Enlightenment period. One of the major byproducts of this period was class distinction through literacy as well as the rise of individualism. This economic distinction took away the distinctiveness and communal nature of folklore. Folklore or oral traditional stories often represented specific cultural histories such as African-centered. This shift unearths the tension between African-centered and European-centered storytelling. The African tradition was communal while this new tradition was individualistic and elitist, thus positioning the African or communal tradition as less valuable. Zipes states:

Unlike the oral tradition, the literary tale was written down to be read in private, although, in some cases, the fairy tales were read aloud in parlors. However, the book form enabled the reader the withdraw from his or her society and to be alone with a tale. This privatization violated the communal aspects of the folk tale, but the very printing of a fairy tale was already a violation since it was based on separation of social classes. (13)

These economic distinctions found their way into the fabric of the narratives. The fabric markings were found in the social locations of the characters. In many ways, the shift from the oral tradition to the literary tradition reinforces economic division. Zipes claims, “In fact, the French fairy tales heightened the aspect of the chosen aristocratic elite who were always placed at the center of the seventeenth and eighteenth century narratives” (13). Thus the notion of happy becomes directly tied to the notion of wealth, as it remains today.

Much like today, literary censorship for youth audiences was apparent. Fairy tales were initially conceived for adult audiences due to their propagandist nature. They were used to reinforce the status quo of aristocratic society. Zipes points out:

At the beginning, the literary fairy tales were written and published for adults, and though they were intended to reinforce the morals and values of French civilité, they were symbolical and could be read on so many different levels that they were considered somewhat dangerous: social behavior could not be totally dictated, prescribed, and controlled through the fairy tale, and there were subversive features in language and theme. This is one of the reasons that fairy tales were not particularly approved for children. (14)

Therefore, if fairy tales were consumed for young audience indoctrination, there needed to be some major restructuring to their functions. Zipes emphasizes that “The form and structure of the fairy tale for children were carefully regulated in the nineteenth century so that improper thoughts and ideas would not be stimulated in the minds of the young” (14). Keeping with this notion of Other, the written fairy tale became dominant over local culture’s oral traditions. It took away a local culture’s agency to archive their own code of ethics and standards through their own mode of cultural collective histories. Eighteenth-century writers such as Charles

Perrault and the Grimm Brothers and the nineteenth century's Hans Christian Andersen became purveyors of moral and value systems of cultures outside of their context. This perpetuated the aristocratic agenda of class distinction. According to Zipes, "These tales did not represent communal values but rather the values of of a particular writer" (15). Much like history, written fairy tales were told by the winners, the bourgeoisie, thus obliterating the very essence of folk tales as mythic stories rooted in oral traditions that encapsulate a culture's value and moral codes which excluded Black people, especially Black youth.

Story Adaptation

Narrative or fairy tale adaptations or revisions serve as another mode to convey a story's major elements for a different often new audience. Zipes notes, "The purpose of producing a revised fairy tale is to create something new that incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences" (9). In the anthology, *Channeling Wonder: Fairy Tales on Television*, the ABC show, *OUAT* is heralded the embodiment of the modern-day reimagining of fairy tales.

In the modern context, modality is key for young audiences. Due to the prominence and power of the Disney conglomerate, most young audiences conceptualize fairy tales through Walt Disney's framework, visual medium. Rebecca Hay and Christa Baxter, in their essay "Happily Never After: The Commodification and Critique of Fairy Tale in ABC's *Once Upon a Time*" build upon this idea and take it a step further. Not only does Disney hold fairy tales in the collective consciousness hostage visually but it also controls the narratives economically through its mammoth reach. They claim, "To quickly attract and resonate with American viewers, *OUAT* draws upon the fairy-tale retellings most familiar to its audience: Disney movies. Because these versions are so widely known, *OUAT* makes a smart commercial move by remaining generally

faithful to their premises but adding narrative depth” (318). It should be noted that Disney channel owns ABC. This relationship complicates the nature and function of this adaptation as commercial success instead of artistic value is at forefront of modern television shows, much like the aristocratic indoctrination of the writers previously mentioned.

I believe that the writers accomplish their goal of fully developing characters rooted in the human experience. Hay and Baxter keenly observe, “By relocating the familiar protagonists to a modern locale, *OUAT* defers and complicates the possibility of happily ever after – and sells the idea of fairy tale as an everyday story that ordinary viewers can relate to” (316). Beyond general story elements, character adaptations play a major role in reimagining fairy tales. This becomes imperative when fairy tales are told from a theatrical perspective that inherently centers on character development. Baxter and Hay connect the major story development to character development, “Its narrative arc affords *OUAT* the scope to develop characters more complex than the archetypal sketches in most fairy tales or their Disney film versions.” This is imperative when teaching students about character trait synthesis between the show’s two planes of existence; Storybrooke, Maine and Fairy Tale Land. Hay and Baxter continues, “While *OUAT* embellishes Disney stories within Fairy Tale Land, the Storybrooke setting allows for origin and originality to interplay, resulting in a pull between the apparently simple Disney character and her or his modern-day version” (322). This concept provided the students with a tangible and good example of character redevelopment in the scriptwriting process.

A Youthful Black Aesthetic

In the attempt to re-engage the spirit of the folktale, the Courage Summer Workshop reflected the cultural demographic of the student population, African American. Laretta Henderson points out in her essay, “Aesthetics in Revised African American Fairy Tales” in

Fairy Tales with a Black Consciousness: Essays on Adaptations of Familiar Stories, that “African American authorship is a given in the Black Aesthetic since the goal is to produce art reflective of the culture of the community in production” (204). This relationship applies to every element of story in the reimagining of fairy tales. She expounds, “If the story is culturally relevant, the characterization – the manner in which the author reveals the personality of a character – will be informed by the culture it represents” (205). This is paramount for students of color because there must be a clear distinction that race is a major cultural component of the narrative. She shares, “African American retellings of European fairy tales resist an all-White world of fairytales thereby serving as a mirror for the African American child and a window for others” (206). It is imperative for students to locate themselves in narratives, or at least have the option to re-contextualize and reframe narratives through an entirely different lens, for literacy exploration and engagement.

In the “Traditional Tales and Children – Nurturing Competent, Imaginative, Cultural and Critical Reader” chapter, authors, Vivian Yenika-Agbaw, Ruth McKoy Lowery and Laretta Henderson advocate for students of color’s self-efficacy through retelling fairy tales for a myriad of reasons, to include a means of navigation. They offer, “Presenting children with literature that allows them to see themselves is a way to engage them in dialogue. It helps strengthen connections within schema and can ignite the will to read more books representing characters with whom they can ethnically and culturally align themselves” (222). This ignition will transform students from passive learners to active learners, thereby, empowering students to become storytellers. Storytelling, not in the traditional Western modality of the well-made play rooted in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but that was of a spiritual nature. The well-made play consists of a clear beginning, middle, and end. Often the purpose of the well-made play is that of

entertainment while African diasporic stories are more about maintaining familial connectivity and survival tools. Storytelling through the Black aesthetic encompasses an ancestral component of survival stories. This energy is what is needed to continue the work of the Black Arts Movement.

Adolescent Psychological and Faith Development

In his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, psychologist James Fowler provides a critical analysis of a person's life from infancy to the end of life. Middle school students are in such a place of transition. They are leaving the comforts of elementary school with one or two teachers staying primarily in the same class all day to having several teachers in varied classrooms along with a new level of freedom. They aren't always monitored every moment of the day. Adolescence is a great psychological and faith development stage for theatre involvement. Fowler notes, "The new capacity or strength in this stage is the rise of narrative and the emergence of story, drama and myth as ways of finding and giving coherence to experience" (149).

Fowler places middle school adolescents between Stage 2 Mythic-Literal and Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional. He describes Stage 2 as a place for self-assessment in the comfort of one's formational community. He offers, "Stage 2 Mythic-Literal faith stage is the stage in which the person begins to take on him-or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community" (149). This sense of community is imperative as a young person begins to transition to a place of self-awareness and identity formation. Self-awareness is manifested in every aspect of an adolescence's life. Before this transition occurs, it is during this stage that young people begin to see themselves through the perspectives of others. This is where young people can develop high or low self-esteem. Fowler states, "The emergence of mutual

interpersonal perspective taking ('I see you seeing me; I see me as you see me; I see you seeing me seeing you.') creates the need for a more personal relationship with the unifying power of the ultimate environment" (150).

Self-awareness also accounts for shifts relationships that will impact their sense of community. Middle school students often find they have less things in common with their elementary school friends, after encountering new experiences. This also means they will begin to create their own sense of community. Fowler describes, "In Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional faith, a person's experience of the world now extends beyond the family. A number of spheres demand attention: family, school or work, peers, street society and media, and perhaps religion" (172). Students often find this to be very difficult as it can feel like their entire world is upside down. Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre seeks to try to mitigate some of this shock by creating a strong sense of community for students who are preparing to enter middle school. Courage Summer Workshop's program target age group includes students leaving elementary school to those in middle school.

Correlating with fairy tales, middle school students are able to see fairy tale characters' humanity, in many respects, and not just as fictional characters. Fowler describes this anthropomorphic sensibility in Stage 2. He explains:

The actors in their cosmic stories are anthropomorphic. They can be affected deeply and powerfully by symbolic and dramatic materials and can describe in endlessly detailed narrative what has occurred. They do not, however, step back from the flow of stories to formulate reflective, conceptual meanings. For this stage the meaning is both carried and 'trapped' in the narrative. (149)

The 2015 Courage Summer Workshop sought to shift students from the literal to the reflective through small group discussions to meet each student's developmental stage. These reflections helped the students create and fully imagine their own versions of fairy tale characters. These reflections could be described as a way form their personal myth/identity. In our conversation, we were able to distinguish between viewpoints. The students were encouraged to have their own perspective even if it did not resonate with others. Fowler points out the need to do this type of work for identity development. He articulates, "The emergent capacity of this stage is the forming of a personal myth – the myth of one's one becoming in identity and faith, incorporating one's past and anticipated future in an image of the ultimate environment unified by characteristics of personality" (173). Identity formation is imperative when assisting young playwrights in finding their voices.

Chapter 3: Womanist Pedagogical and Theological Teaching Perspective

Womanist Teaching Philosophy

I believe teaching is about removing our mask of educational distinction to allow the semi-permeability exchange process of idea transaction. As a teacher, I am not the expert, rather I am a guide to the treasure map of the uncharted territories of educational exploration, self efficacy, and authentic holistic transformation. Barbara A. Lehman in “Masks in Storytelling or How Pretty Salma Turned the “Tale” on Mr. Dog”, relates the teaching concept of masking removal in storytelling. She states, “Symbolically masks both reveal and conceal, depending upon the narrator’s/author’s purposes and the audience’s understanding, while signifying larger truths behind the makes. In turn, stories and all literature serve the same function: to entertain and education, but most of all, to illuminate indirectly the meanings of our human lives” (171). This mask removal allows the classroom to be place of healing through liberation instead of pain through suppression.

bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* presents a transparent glimpse into her pedagogical process. She credits Paulo Freire’s theory on the liberating nature of education and Thich Nhat Hanh’s theory of teacher as healer as major influences on her notion of engaged pedagogy. The concept of engaged pedagogy has iconoclastic reverberations – changing the world. She writes,

Freire’s work affirmed that education can be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor. That notion of mutual labor was affirmed by Thich Nhat Hanh’s philosophy of engaged Buddhism, the focus on practice in conjunction with contemplation. His philosophy was similar to Freire’s

emphasis on ‘praxis’ – action and reflection upon the world in order to change it.

(14)

She reflects on the importance of creating learning communities that foster transparency, citing Mimi Orner’s essay about engaged pedagogy, “Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in Liberatory Education: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective.” She quotes,

Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs as holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (21)

Displaying appropriate vulnerability is one of the most powerful tools of classroom engagement. This vulnerability is expressed through my spirituality.

As a minister in the Black Church and African Continuum, I cannot divorce my womanist theological perspective from my pedagogical framework. Womanist theology is the authentication of the Black woman’s ontological necessity. *Inheriting Our Mothers’ Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective* is a seminal text in explaining Womanism. In the introduction, editor Letty Russell presents the notion of cultural inheritance as it exists as a paradox of bondage and freedom. She writes,

Many of us do not want to accept our inheritance either because it represents privilege in background because of race or class... or because it represents suffering and oppression... We all have an inheritance, whether we have claimed it or not, and all of us probably have a mixed inheritance from which we must make critical choices in regard to our own journeys. (13)

The “digging in your own garden” hermeneutic metaphor focuses on understanding our oppressive and liberating social structures so that we can also understand the social structures that affect other people’s lives.

Theologian Dr. Katie Cannon, in her chapter “Surviving the Blight,” reflects on the resiliency of the rich Black cultural inheritance. She states, “Despite the devastations of slavery with its unremitting exercise of raw planter power and unconstrained coercion, my ancestors had the hours from nightfall to daybreak to foster, sustain, and transmit cultural mechanism that enabled them to cope with such bondage” (13). There is unquantifiable strength in her use of “despite”. This resiliency is a necessity, particularly for me as a budding teacher, as I must learn to oscillate between being a beacon of hope for students while suturing my own wounds from society’s degradation. This resiliency is also found through the dyad of folklore much like Negro Spirituals; another frame and context to engage students. Cannon offers, “Operating beneath a veil of pseudo-complacency, Black women and men tapped into profound sense of cultural cohesion, creating an expressive system of coded messages to communicate what they considered good, worthy, and meaningful” (14). In other words, folklore gave the dignity of existence that slavery, racism, and discrimination sought to strip from people of color.

Glenda Dickerson in her essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African American Theatre,” scrutinizes the relationship of Black women and the nineteenth century notion of the cult of true womanhood. This notion emphasized a docility that many Black women did not have the privilege of participating in due to cultural, social and historical maxims. She explains, “Women of color were triply locked out: by class, by race, and by history” (179). She expresses the cognitive dissonance women of color continue to face. At the time, there was a dilemma for Black women who hated the cult yet due to social pressures

aspired to be a part of it at the same time. The reality is, Black women cannot divorce themselves from the larger cultural identity of America, despite the abuse. This corresponds with attempting to divorce the aristocratic of influence written fairy tale from its oral tradition beginnings – it is impossible. While this relationship is enmeshed, Dickerson credits turn-of-the-century African American writers as architects for liberation. She states, “Turn-of-the-century African American writers were able to find artistic freedom in at least one way: the liberating, subversive weapon of their folklore. I take that weapon also as part of my inheritance” (179). This is the same inheritance of *Inheriting Our Mothers’ Gardens*.

The embodiment of Dickerson’s folklore warfare was a collection of miracle plays. They are created from non dramatic sources for the purpose of occupying the liminal space of the African Diaspora cultural memory, present calamity at times, and the continued hope of resolution. She states, “[They] embody history, culture, literature, symbols, dreams, and inspiration. They put the events of the extraordinary together in a meaningful way... Their purpose is to help us remember, to enable us to climb and to delve: to count the stars, to know rivers” (180). These rivers are the same rivers that will continue to carry the collective Black aesthetic to new audiences for plays throughout generations.

Playwriting Influence: Adrienne Kennedy

The Black woman playwright, Adrienne Kennedy greatly influences my womanist teaching philosophy. Kennedy showed me that as a theatre artist I am supposed to tell stories then discover themes and symbolism from them. Writing for writing’s sake. Not everything written will be produced or should be produced but everything in life needs to be processed. Colonialism, sexism, racism, classism, and all the other institutions of isms that seek to denigrate the psyche must be battled in every realm possible, with theatre being no different. The power of

agency in writing and production as a woman creates the necessary paradigm shift that Kennedy's alternative Black aesthetic initiates.

Adrienne Kennedy's autobiographical information is the essence of her work as a playwright for they are inextricably linked. The most compelling evidence of that emerges from her scrapbook-style autobiography, *people who led to my plays*. She states in the beginning of the book that this soul-baring endeavor sought to answer two of the most commonly questions asked by interviewers, "Who influenced you to write in such a nonlinear way? Who are your favorite playwrights?" (3). This autobiographical account not only elucidates her motivation for writing and influences, it provides the framework of her alternative Black aesthetic in which she employs the agency to control her narrative. Her major influences were family dynamics, a keen sense of self-awareness and memory, iconic political figures, cultural capital to include various ethnicities of theatre artists, writers and entertainers, to name a few. Her worldview was not solely shaped in a monolithic African American world, rather, it was a melting pot of a diverse American culture. This does not in any way take away from the cultural climate of the time this work spans (1936 – 1961), rather it adds another voice in the conversation.

She credited the playwright Lorraine Hansberry as one of her direct influences in theatre. She states in the "Marriage and Motherhood" section, "I had abandoned playwriting by the time Lorraine Hansberry made her sensational entrance into the Broadway theater with the classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, because I thought there was no hope; but with Lorraine Hansberry's success, I felt reawakened. I read every word about her triumph and took heart" (109). Margaret Wilkerson, in her essay, "Diverse Angles of Vision: Two Black Women Playwrights," offers biographical and critical research exploration for both women. Chicago represented the paradox of racial uplift and the effects of modernity. This city spans the socioeconomic strata from

poverty to opulence. Growing up, Hansberry's family was upper middle class with accomplished parents: her father, a realtor and her mother, a ward committeewoman who found time for leisure. Financial stability and disposable income played a major role in shaping her worldview of endless possibilities, yet they still did not unchain the bondage of segregation's social climate and sexism. Wilkerson states, "Anticipating the women's movement of the 1970s, Hansberry was aware of the peculiar oppression under which women lived and the particular devastation visited upon women of color" (60).

Hansberry's most notable and pioneering work was *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959, which garnered her the New York Drama Critics Award. She was the youngest and first African American woman to receive this award. The plot is about a Southside Chicago family, the Youngers, faced with a series of choices when a financial opportunity presents itself. Hansberry presents the multilayer complexities of material, spiritual, and economic streams of poverty. Poverty isn't presented in one-size-fits-all motif. It exists in opposition to familial responsibility as a desire for materialism. Hansberry and Kennedy share the influence essence of Langston Hughes. Wilkerson states, "The title and theme are taken from a Langton Hughes poem, "Harlem", which asks 'What happens to a dream deferred?'" (62). In relation to the Black aesthetic society's materialism, sexism, and racial oppression squelches dreams and this play serves an exploration of a process for liberation despite the status quo of the time. Further we will see the directorial relationship between Hansberry and the legendary director, Lloyd Richards.

Returning to Kennedy, her most notable play was the Obie winning *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. It is the practical application of this alternative aesthetic. This play does not seek to tackle issues of American society; instead Kennedy invites the audience to participate in the process of

identity struggles as an African American woman in America. Kennedy personifies the tension between the oppressor and the oppressed through powerful imagery, especially that of losing of hair as a symbol of rape and loss of identity. *Funnyhouse* is about Sarah, the protagonist, who struggles with versions of herself personified through various characters such as the Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina, and her mother. Other characters include the infusion of elements of her father seen in Jesus and Patrice Lumumba as well a Jewish boyfriend and a landlady.

Michael Kahn, the 1964 director of *Funnyhouse*, describes his introduction to Kennedy's work at Edward Albee's (who would later become the play's producer) playwriting workshop and his desire to direct the piece. After conversations with Kennedy he understood her methodology of autobiographical poetic display through the medium of theatre. He states, "When I first met Adrienne, instead of explaining the play to me, she brought me loads and loads of photographs and reproductions of paintings. From that I really understood the power of the images for her. And for some reason, even though I was a white boy from Brooklyn, I shared a lot of these understandings of the same images" (Stein 191). He also describes being drawn in by the symbolism, imagery, and the creative space Kennedy provided for the director. It also helped that he was quite familiar with many of her cultural references and felt a sense of kinship with Kennedy. This kinship is the alternative Black aesthetic. Despite Neal's argument for the Black aesthetic being divisive, Kennedy shows the transcendent natural inclusion through this alternative Black aesthetic. Kahn does not reduce Kennedy's agency as a writer, instead, he builds upon her foundation which is the function of collaboration.

bell hooks was influenced by Kennedy's wrestling with Black intellectualism on the periphery of dominant culture. She states in an interview, "Few writers have focused, as she has,

on the place of Black thinkers in a white world, in an educational system that is always looking to Europe for directions and definition” (180). This empowerment focused on the beauty of the inclusion of nonwestern ideals but the execution creates the paradigm shift from tradition Black aestheticism to Kennedy’s alternative aesthetic.

Directing Influence: Rose McClendon and Lloyd Richards

As an emerging African American woman theatre artist, I would be remiss if I did not unconventionally insert myself reflectively into this critical examination as a budding participant in African American theatre through social change. Theatre is the tip of the iceberg about ephemerality and social change. Rose McClendon and later Lloyd Richards, like many of us, found looking at fleeting moments and personal connections to change the world into a better place; this is theatre for me.

Rose McClendon is arguably one of most underrated progenitors in the modern legacy of the African American theatre movement. Her extensive work as a trained actress, director, and Federal Theatre Project co-director fostered a generation of theatre practitioners through the creation of the Rose McClendon Players after her untimely death. Rose McClendon’s short directing career serves as a testament to the idea that impact is not about quantity but the quality of time committed to using one’s artistry and influence to affect change. Her directing and administrative career’s premature conclusion created a unique opportunity to examine her directorial debut of Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* through her aesthetic lens, public response, and subsequent influence on African American theatre as a visionary and pioneer.

Glenda Gill offers insight into McClendon’s aesthetic, personal and professional relationships, and elaborates on McClendon’s paradoxical desire to shift the cultural memory of African Americans from outdated tropes to authentic reflections of real life. In “Crucible and

Community: The Vision of Rose McClendon” in her book, *No Surrender! No Retreat!*, Gill includes various accounts of McClendon from those who knew her best, with an emphasis from her professional partner Dick Campbell. Gill discusses the three major tropes for African American women; Mammy, the Tragic Mulatto, and Jezebel, which commodify the woman’s body as either asexual or hypersexual. They are engendered projections of African American womanhood that do not take into account the multiplicity of roles performed daily. They are unrealistic and limited. These artistic tropes are problematic as they are emblems of how the larger dominant culture of America perceived and to some extent continues to perceive Black women. Unfortunately, these tropes were inescapable for Black actresses, even McClendon. Gill quotes Lisa Anderson’s *Mammies No More*: “McClendon’s career consisted, almost exclusively, of these three stereotypes. Through dogged persistence, courage, and naturally endowed talent, with her Negro People’s Theatre, she helped to change the image of African Americans on the American stage” (21). While most roles placed McClendon in the aforementioned tropes, she longed for the shift from the monolithic categorizations of the Black woman’s body to authentic African American narratives and she would later meet likeminded people who shared this same longing to share.

In *Voices of Black Theatre*, Dick Campbell, McClendon’s professional partner is interviewed. He describes meeting McClendon at a point of professional frustration with the lack of roles due to colorism for African Americans. Colorism is a term used to describe tension within the Black race based on skin tone. Campbell and McClendon met at a point of mutual frustration and existential unrest. The frustration fueled the making of a new type of theatre. Campbell described the people involved in creating their own theatre called the Negro People’s Theatre and the first production: “We organized what became known as the Negro People’s

Theatre. A few of us – Dorothy Paul, a chap by the name of Whitfield, Rose McClendon— produced a play by Clifford Odets called *Waiting for Lefty* at the Rockland Palace in 1935” (99). *Waiting for Lefty* centers on a labor strike and how the decision to strike or not affects everyone in New York City.

After her directorial debut of *Waiting for Lefty*, McClendon continued to articulate her aesthetic and the importance of building African American theaters in a *New York Times* editorial “As to a New Negro Theatre”. She wrote from the perspective of a community activist with her focus on theatre for social change. The tone is confident and informative. She opened the letter with the bleak reality of the failures of Black theaters due to play choices. She stated, “Now what make a Negro theatre is not so much the use of Negroes as the selection of plays that deal with Negroes, with Negro Problems, with phases of Negro life faithfully presented and accurately delineated” (1). There is a reliance on the authentic picture of African American life. She attributed the success of *Waiting for Lefty* to the number of audience members in attendance.

McClendon’s influence reached beyond her life on earth. Her desire to shift the image of African Americans did not fall on rocky soil, and she influenced several subsequent companies. The first, the Rose McClendon Players, was founded by Dick Campbell and his first wife Muriel Rahn. Campbell stated,

Shortly afterwards [Waiting for Lefty] Rose McClendon died. We sort of halted, but then we continued a couple of years later when I set up the Rose McClendon Players, which continued right on up to 1941. I founded this group because I left, as I said before, that there was much to be written and much to be done by Black people in theatre. (99)

Campbell, in discussing the financial and script discovery challenges states, “Now, the handicap of the Rose McClendon Players – apart from money—was getting scripts. Then, there was the necessity of educating and organizing audiences and doing what the Theatre Guild had... That was getting subscription audiences” (101-102). This realism is necessary when reflecting on the social and racial barriers of the time. While there was difficulty securing scripts Campbell soon realized there was a small group of playwrights in the group. He says, “We had some very fine writers come out of that group... I recognized at that time that this was a type of writing by a Black playwright that would eventually find a place in American Theatre” (102). The Rose McClendon Players spawned the careers of African American actor giants such as Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and James Earl Jones, to name a few. These actors would go on to be a part of various theatre companies such as the American Negro Theatre as well as have highly successful cinematic and literary careers. They would also work closely with director Lloyd Richards.

The incomparable Richards would take up the mantle for African American theatre as a bridge between the playwright, the director, and educator. His career spanned over 50 years and his contributions are invaluable to the American Theatre and beyond. One of his roles was to discover and develop new playwrights, most notably Lorraine Hansberry in the late 1950s and August Wilson in the 1980s. His directing resume includes some of the most important plays in American Theatre. This section will include his work with Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson. The primary sources include four interview transcripts; *Lloyd Richards: Reminiscence of a Theatre Life and Beyond* by N. Graham Nesmith, *The Director's Voice* by Arthur Bartow, *Lloyd Richards: Reflections from the Playwrights' Champion* by Caroline R. Raymond, and *From Lorraine Hansberry to August Wilson* by Sandra G. Shannon. Richards had a holistic and

hope view of theatre. He states in an interview with N. Graham Nesmith, “I view theatre as an institution that educates, stimulates, and provokes the audience – it makes them think and feel” (293). Richards’ aesthetic and directorial style served as a blueprint for the Courage Summer Workshop with an emphasis on playwright development, rehearsal table work, actor/character development to create a work of art that will resonate with audiences.

Richards related his style of directing to teaching. He correlated directing and teaching to preparing birds for flight. He said, “As a director it is as if you are preparing a bird to fly. You are teaching, nurturing, caring for it. And one day the bird is ready to fly. If you cannot enjoy the fact that the bird is now flying, and you are there watching it, you could not be a teacher” (291). Additionally, in his interview with Shannon, he likened his style to igniting a spark for actors by stating, “I try to stimulate, provoke, or question, and in the process of the actor's discovery, he should arrive at the point where I want him to be, both physically and otherwise” (125). His delivery was gentle with no imposition. His goal was to allow space for actors to discover the choices he wanted them to make. In an interview with Caroline R. Raymond, he stated, “In my work I am trying to solicit the artist to make the choice that I want him to make. But I want him to make the choice, for each choice to be his and not mine. It is his, because he discovered it, not because I imposed it” (17). This style works well with adults as well as youth. Young actors are empowered to make their own discoveries. As with Richards’ rehearsal process, this discovery process involves a great deal of table work.

Richards began the rehearsal process at the table. He began with discussion the script with the actors and his vision for the play. He shared with Raymond, “I begin by talking about the work, giving them the background, all the environment that affects the work, and go from there. Tell them where I'm going. And then we sit around the table. I do a lot of work around the

table” (18). He would continue this work until he and the cast couldn’t “stay at the table anymore.” This impulse to get on their feet and start embodying the characters on stage was crucial. He went on to say, “It has to get up and go. That’s because we’ve done the work or I have infused each person with the concept to the point that when he gets up, he’s going to go where I want him to go without my saying go there. Enough information has happened around the table... I spend little time blocking because the blocking has been done at the table” (18). I employed a similar process for the summer workshop. We spent many weeks at the table. Our process involved combining table work with playwriting as we were devising our one-act play. When Nesmith asked about teaching playwriting, Richards responded, “Well, you can’t teach storytelling. People have stories they either can tell or they can’t. What you can teach is craft. You can teach structure and how things are put together to create progressive dramatic events. That can be taught” (294). After guiding the students in writing their play, I shifted from teaching playwriting to becoming the director. The students were the playwrights; I was just the guide for the students to create their narrative.

Richards correlates his role as a director to an investigator in discovering the playwright’s intent. He shared with Raymond, “Well, I try to find out the playwright’s intent even when sometimes he doesn’t know himself. Not that the playwright can define his intent, but that’s my job.” He went on to say, “How one manifests that intent can vary by your understanding of that and what you bring to that – but that’s my job” (17). This relationship with the playwright was paramount to Richards. His approach included having strict boundaries and understanding each person’s role. He said, “I have an approach, an attitude, that I am the director and he is the playwright. And that means that he writes the lines, and I direct them. Now that doesn’t mean

that I can't suggest things to him or provoke things from him or expose to him where things may not be going right, but I don't write for a playwright” (Raymond 20).

When Nesmith asked, “You will forever be linked to two major Black playwrights, Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson. What was it about their work that attracted you to them?”, Richards shared that their ability to relate to Black people was endearing. They had an ability to capture life as a person of color in such a way that everyone could relate to their characters’ stories. He continued, “Lorraine and August deal with conditions of Black people in society. I have been attracted to playwrights because they have been concerned about this subject” (293). This was so much so that audiences responded the same way. When asked about the impact of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* on American Theatre, Richards responded, “We were told that the [US] theatre was not ready for a play about Black family life. *A Raisin in the Sun* helped prove that the was not so. It also brought Black audiences into the Broadway theatre in droves, and everywhere else around the country” (288). This groundbreaking play from a young Black woman stood on the shoulders of countless playwrights who would never make it to Broadway. It brought out people of color to witness their stories being told on a major stage. Their work, along with amazing actors who later become the standard for acting excellence proved as Richards claimed, that America was ready at last for that moment to see a glimpse into the lives of a Black family. Years and accolades later, Richards would prove the same sentiment was true with the work of August Wilson.

His advice for directors was to continue to work to gain experience. He shared with Raymond, “Just keep working. Try and get better at whatever you're doing. Do it wherever you can, however you can” (29). While gaining experience, directors must be organized. This skill is imperative because directors must be visionaries to see how the moving parts will come together.

As Richards told Bartow, “Organization is involved in putting together any large picture that incorporates diverse elements. That’s true of the playwright and it’s certainly true of the director” (259). With this advice, the future of theatre looks optimistic. Returning to the Nesmith interview, “The future depends on what you create now. You speak of classic texts and those plays were that were new at some points...Without new plays there will be no classics. New plays contribute to be ongoing reflection of a culture” (291). This was what the 2015 Courage Summer Workshop attempted to create.

Chapter 4: From Theory to Praxis: The 2015 Courage Summer Workshop Program Overview

This chapter shows the implications of the theories presented in the previous chapter. It delves into the 2015 Courage Summer Workshop's curriculum design, weekly program overview, sample lesson plans, and a synopsis of the *The Attempt*. The curriculum design and lesson plan template utilized in a graduate education course at Virginia Commonwealth University. The program overview was compiled from a daily journal kept during the program's six weeks. *The Attempt* takes a closer look at the fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood* with a twist. The wolf, Mr. Howl E. Wolf is on trial for the unfortunate series of events following his meeting Little Red in the forest. This show illuminates the backstory of an infamous character whose present circumstances is a result of a complicated history. This show was the artistic expression of four RVA middle school students' dissection of cultural narratives and their influence on the following concepts: morality, criminalization, and virtue.

Curriculum Design

Stage 1: Identity Desired Results

Established Goals:

Students will learn to express themselves through theatre.

Personally:

Students will learn to holistically begin to recognize and assess their decision-making processes that influence behavior and outlook. Students will see themselves as autonomous moral agents of change. They will see their role in society as world game changers. Students will assess their fear barometer with an understanding that fear is a construct – something imagined. They will learn tools to overcome fear.

Socially – Students will learn the value of a being a part of a collaborative unit. They will learn accountability through team building activities. They will learn coping skills to work with others when circumstances are less than ideal. They will learn to work through adversity. They will learn group dynamics and how they function.

Spiritually – Students will learn that perfect love casts out fear. Scriptural reference 1 John 4:18b.

Theatrically – Students will learn elements of narrative and character construction, scriptwriting, acting, directing, and movement. Students will learn parts of a narrative structure using Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*. Students will examine and re-author cultural narratives – fairy tales – for their context.

Understanding:

Students will understand that:

- Theatre is a tool of self-expression through teamwork.
- Cooperation is necessary in every facet of life.

Essential Questions:

What is a story or cultural narrative?

What role(s) does cultural narrative play in our culture?

In what ways, does theatre influence our lives?

How can theatre be used to reflect experience?

What does it mean to be fearless?

What makes a good leader?

Students will be able to...

1. Read and analyze a story for theme, plot, and character.
2. Write a one-act play re-authoring a cultural narrative.
3. Assist in all aspects of play production.
4. Articulate the various roles of a creative team.

Calendar: Weekly Overview

Week 1: Creating Comfort - All About Me

This first week's focus was on the students getting to know each other, beginning the bonding process, introducing the theme of fairy tales, and discussing styles of leadership. Students were given some autonomy with the scheduling to include choosing the order of daily activities, recreation, and lunch schedule. I participated in most of the activities during the first week to acclimate students to the program as well as build connections.

Students were tasked with creating time capsule letters, collages, completing learning style assessments, and creating a code of conduct. Students wrote about their current feelings, goals, and what they hoped to learn in the program. We also focused on assessing and managing conflict with the hope of minimizing any friction as that was a problem in the previous year. We discussed the idea of seeing another person's perspective as a means to resolve conflict.

A major element of each day was watching and discussing at least one episode of ABC's *OUAT*. In our episode discussions, we explored elements of character motivation, conflict, and obstacle using David Ball's script analysis book, *Backwards and Forwards*. We also explored character growth and story developments. At the end of the week, we forecasted plans for the following week and secured a spot on a local television show to publicize the culminating production, *Virginia This Morning*. This week's process created a door for vulnerability. We discussed the idea of theatre being about putting your heart on stage and inviting others into our sacred performance space.

Week 2: Fairy Tale Exploration

By the second week, we were finally in a groove! We determined we could accomplish more in less time if we maintained our focus. As a group, we decided to change our ending time

from 5:30 pm to 4:00 pm. We discovered our energy waned greatly in the afternoon. We explored fairy tales as cultural narratives through comparing Grimm fairy tale versions to their Disney cultural memory versions, theatre history, and character development. The students chose their favorite fairy tale to dissect. Each were tasked with creating character webs to separate the character's personality from their fairy tale persona. This process was illustrated in one of the bonus features *OUAT*'s DVD. The creators discussed the process of Belle from initial concept through casting, costume, and filming.

We also brainstormed our first play concept. Rumpelstiltskin created a sweepstakes for high school students to win a trip to Disney World. The play's major plot points surrounded each character's discovery of their true identity as fairy tale characters. To further develop the story; students were asked to choose a fairy tale character to explore for the rest of the week. Through their exploration they created character webs, expressed their fairy tale's purpose and their rationale for choosing that particular story. Another major discussion area was the hero's journey using Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. After that discussion, we realized that it was too difficult to have three hero journeys in one play.

Finally, we decided to try to use an activity from my tutoring experience, putting a fairy tale character on trial using "*Advanced Fairy Tales on Trial*" by Janis Silverman as the framework. This activity book provided all the necessary legal terminology, court room procedures, and fairy tale elements for exploration. Instead of reinventing the wheel, the students decided to use the primary story in the activity book, *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Week 3: Dramatic Writing

This week's goal was to begin to create the script as the television performance was the following week. We decided that our opening scene should be a press conference to introduce

audiences to the world of the play. We also explored various versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* to include the movies, *Hoodwinked* and *Hoodwinked Too*. We spent time brainstorming the title, *The Attempt*. We discussed the idea of how all the characters were attempting something. Following the title creation, we created a character list based on their favorite fairy tale characters. In the writing process, I gave them space to work in the classroom with me as well as in another room. I wanted to give them some semblance of autonomy.

We continued with working on the first scene for the rest of the week. Once the first scene was completed, the the defense and prosecution began drafting their opening statements. They followed a template found in the *Advanced Fairy Tales on Trial* book. At this point in the process, only a few of the characters were assigned as we had only four students.

Week 4: Dramatic Writing Continued/Television Preparation

This week was a hectic. Our primary goal was to prepare for our television performance on that Friday and continue writing the script. We spent the beginning of the week editing portions of the script as well as delving into deep character exploration of the wolf. We created his backstory as a group through a series of background questions, very similar to the interview process in the beginning of the program. This process was similarly replicated for the rest of the characters as witnesses. Each student chose another character and the rest of the week focused on rehearsing to ensure all the students knew their lines. The television performance went very well for young actors. They were poised and delivered their lines confidently.

Week 5: Dramatic Writing Completion/Directing

This week's goal was to continue drafting the script. As a group the students completed witness statements for the following characters: Growl (the Howl's evil twin brother), Pinocchio, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Howl, Granny, Ruby, and Sleepy. After we completed the

script, to compensate for a small number of students we decided to tape the characters' witness statements to include pauses. This created a videoconferencing effect.

Week 6: Final Week

Our final week's goal was to reflect on our process, continue to revise the script, and prepare for our performance. The performance was held on August 14th at Second Baptist Church where we were housed. It was a phenomenal performance. The families responded to the performances in a positive way. We had a talkback after the performance and the students were lauded at their level of dedication.

The Attempt Synopsis

Referring back to *Channeling Wonder*, Claudia Schwade's essay "Getting Real with Fairy Tales: Magic Realism in *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time*" draws attention to the complicated nature of human action and the potency of the term "evil". She references a viewer's social media post:

Similarly, insight into villains' background stories, feelings, and personal motivations in *Once Upon a Time* explains why the evil queen and Rumpelstiltskin became malicious. For both, the loss of a loved one plays a pivotal role and can evoke in the viewer a strong sense of compassion for these miscreants: 'Yes, I do feel sorry for Regina. As it is stated many times 'Evil is not born. It's made.' She wasn't evil until she lost her love (Adevilishdiva 2012).

(313)

It should be noted that this concept directly related to the notion of racial profiling, mass incarceration, and the failure of the justice system. We related this conversation to the notion of

agency or lack thereof, the role of nature versus nurture, and fate. This functioned as a major plot point to express the difficult nature of intent in relation to action.

The Attempt opens with a press conference before the protagonist Howl E. Wolf's criminal trial in Manhattan, New York. Rumpelstiltskin serves as the defense attorney for Howl while Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* serves as the prosecuting attorney due to her love of books. Howl is a famed food critic with the critically acclaimed website, Porkchop.com. He is charged with two counts of attempted murder, criminal trespassing, two counts of identity theft, and stalking. He maintains his client's innocence while fielding questions from reporters about hearsay. The rumor around town is that Howl ate Granny and Ruby and Sneezzy, one of Snow White's dwarfs cut Granny and Ruby out of Howl's stomach.

Once the trial begins, the judge and jury discover Howl is unable to stand trial as he had an unfortunate accident. The jury also discovers that due to Rumpelstiltskin's reputation of making unfair deals, all of the witnesses will be video conferenced. The first witnesses are the Three Little Pigs named Jonathan, James, and Jeremy. They own the hardware store next to Granny's Bakery where the alleged crimes took place. Collectively, they describe seeing a wolf outside of Granny's bakery with two children. They allude to the idea that the wolf they saw looked similar to the wolf that blew their houses down. Rumpelstiltskin seeks to discredit Granny by asking a line of questions that create a feeble image of Granny.

The next witnesses are Hansel and Gretel. Their testimony reveals that their dad's friend, Growl, paid them \$1,000 to deliver ice cream to Granny. They also allude to the idea that Growl paid them to deliver a magical bag of wind to the Three Little Pigs. The next witness is Pinocchio. He is an environmentalist and was protesting to save the trees when he saw Howl in Central Park grabbing an ice cream cone from an ice cream truck.

The next witness is Ruby, Granny's granddaughter and bakery employee. She describes Granny 's strange appearance as a hairier, big-eyed, and big-eared. Then Granny gave her a poisoned piece of coconut pie. She claims to have woken up in Howl's stomach alongside Granny. Then she recounts Sneezzy's heroic measures to free them. The next witness is Granny. She appears to be as feeble as Rumpelstiltskin attempted to portray. She is clearly disoriented for most of the questioning. She describes a strange looking Ruby waking her up to offer her a presumably poisonous chocolate donut. Similarly, to Ruby, she finds herself in a wolf's stomach.

The next witness is Snow White, a day manager. She describes preparing cupcakes for Howl's birthday. Granny was Howl's former culinary instructor while he was a student at UCLA. Then she remembers seeing Howl go upstairs to say hello to Granny. The next witness is the heroic Sneezzy, the night manager. She (The students decided they wanted they wanted to recast Sneezzy's gender as a young woman after a lengthy discussion about heroes mainly being men in most fairy tales. They wanted to reflect the demographics of the program that included three young women.) describes finding the bakery door ajar and decides to investigate. She discovers that Granny and Sneezzy are in a wolf's stomach and cuts them out.

The next witness is the defendant, Howl. He describes his day much like the other witnesses corroborated. He also realizes that he too was poisoned. He then shares how he woke up in the hospital with no recollection of the preceding hours. The final witness is Grownl E. Wolf, Howl's evil twin. He describes how his jealous motive for framing his twin brother due to parental circumstances. Their parents gave them up for adoption. Howl was adopted by a family while Grownl lived in an orphanage. The trial concludes with Grownl confessing his guilt. Despite his admission, the show ends with the judge choosing a jury foreman and instructing the audience on their role as jury members using traditional legal language used in court

proceedings. The jury then decides if Howl is innocent or guilty. In all three performances (Richmond, Virginia Beach, and Charles City), there was a hung jury. It should be noted that all audiences were Black and older. Presumably, this population is keenly, if not personally, aware of the problematic and inherent racist nature of our judicial system. It can be surmised that even with evidence, justice is not about guilt or innocent in a cut and dry fashion in that particular story, rather, the larger implication justice is multilayered and people should not be convicted if there is any doubt present. Although this play was not factual, it presented a truth. A truth that as African Americans, it is difficult hold our own people accountable to judicial standards that are inherently unjust, malicious, and damaging, especially in a church context. The larger question is: How can we as believers in a church context convict, when our doctrine and dogma teaches us otherwise? This points to the survival and spiritual nature of the Black aesthetic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summer Reflection

The 2015 Courage Summer Workshop and this thesis project are the summation of my MFA collegiate career. I was able to incorporate most of the material covered in my courses and that material contributed to a successful summer. The program accomplished its goal of empowering young artists of color by telling stories from their perspective.

I was able to grow from the previous year but it was not without challenges. My initial goal was to work with a specific demographic – inner city young people but those partnerships were unsuccessful. As a full-time working graduate student, I didn't have the time build the necessary network relationships in the city. I learned that resources are a major factor in working with the inner city youth. If your program is not housed in a prime location, then transportation must be provided. I also discovered the particular problematic relationship or stigma VCU has in the community. Through hearsay, I learned that the speculation is that programs associated with VCU, explicitly or implicitly, were awarded large sums of grant money, or as an institution, while intending to do good work in the community, at times failing to be culturally component, as Richmond is a predominantly Black city. This forced me to think about class and gender in an urban environment and how my collegiate affiliation could be seen as an affront. This realization wasn't apparent to me initially. I realized that once some organizations discovered I was a part of VCU, the conversation shifted from partnerships to prices for services. This surprised me as I did not receive any money from VCU to fund my organization. I also found a startling paradigm in the public service community, there is a lack of diversity in nonprofit leadership. This forced me to think about Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre, not as a passion project, but as a legitimate organization seeking to meet a need in the community.

This summer taught me three major lessons; be flexible, staff development is imperative, and don't forget to enjoy the work. I learned that I needed to maintain flexibility while working with middle school students. Everyday was an adventure; be it new moments of self-discovery, resolving conflicts, or changes in scheduling, lesson planning, curriculum design, and even food choices. Naturally, my personality is to write a plan and stick to it. I had a hard time deviating from my original plans but in order for the program to move forward, I learned quickly to adapt.

Staff development was critical. It was not a good idea to choose staff based on friendship or familiarity. I found that I should have interviewed all staff members, even if I knew them in a classroom or social context. While I created a small employee handbook, I needed to be sure that the staff read and understood the policies. I also needed to be clear about classroom expectations as well as hire a staff that is culturally competent, experienced, and comfortable with working with middle school students of color.

All in my doing, I learned to enjoy this work. While every day presented new challenges, there were more fun moments. We had a blast this summer! We laughed and joked everyday. The students taught me the value in taking life one day at a time, one moment at a time, from their constant shifting in personality. One moment, one was happy and another moment, everyone was at odds. It was very fascinating to watch to their dynamic change as the summer continued. They were like sponges in soaking up the material. I was surprised because the program ran similar to that of an English class with the amount of daily writing. The students wrote at least one page a day to include dialogue, character bios, or reflections.

It was interesting to discover how the students were in tuned with the current affairs of this country. They had strong opinions about young people of color, close to their age, being murdered and unfairly treated. They bought into the idea that we as small group would create a

work of art that matters. What is more powerful than creating a play that involved our own interpretation of what the judicial system should be? We had countless conversations about cases that involved young people of color including the nature of evil and criminality. I wanted to students to grasp the idea of not judging people based on a few unwise choices while being clear that all actions have consequences. We also discussed ways to live in their world as a person of color boldly. It was important to know the laws and their rights, even as middle school students. I tried to relate all of our conversations to their worldview. We also discussed ways to navigate their circles from friendship to family to school to church and other organizations. Last summer personified Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre's mission to create fearless young people as each student was able to have confidence in their performance and playwriting abilities.

MFA Experience Reflection: The Evolution of a Womanist Theatre Artist

I came with limited theatre experience, my background was Black literature and what little theatre experience I brought was rooted in the church; except a couple of theatre classes as an undergraduate student, one student directorial project, a props master, assistant costume designer, house management and box office experience, and one playwriting workshop. The only plays familiar to me were a part of the literary canon. In my personal statement to this program, I described Virginia Commonwealth University as a place that would be the culmination of my educational experience to date. I wanted this program to help me empower students to grow holistically. I wanted to be professor/advisor/mentor that I desperately needed during the first half of my college experience. Initially, I came to this MFA program wanting to be theatre or English professor, or a combination of both. I saw theatre as a liminal space that exists between what is and what could be. I have learned to see the classroom in a similar way. Like the classroom, theatre brings people together in a communal way in which each person's role is

important and valued in relation to the whole production. The production is an invitation for the audience to share in the transforming experience of rehearsals. In the classroom, the production is the the creation of the learning community.

After three years, I can say I accomplished and exceeded my initial goals for attending this program. I was able to learn about theatre from a Black perspective, global theatre history, dramatic literature, dramaturgy, tragedies, playwrights and celebrity, audience studies, the history of directing, and so much more. I was able to gain theatre experience to include working on a main stage production as a dramaturge as well as present research to an entire cast and crew.

Most importantly, I learned the components for teaching college students and the value of creating and maintaining boundaries. Similar to middle school, college is also a time of great transition. Students are often away from home for the first time. I learned how important it is to care about your students within limits. I can't save all my students and that is not my job.

I found my voice as a Black woman minister of theatre arts. I have learned to be unapologetic in my quest to write and study narratives about people of color. I had to confront my Western canonical educational history and recognize that I didn't know much about Black theatre. I realized I didn't have to throw away the church or ministry to be a theatre artist even in the academic environment. It was a struggle because often I found myself in scholastic environments where spirituality was not accepted. Additionally, I struggled with the professional nature of theatre that was often unable to function effectively in the traditional Black Church. That is to say, that even from my own church contexts, it is difficult to even have consistent creative teams and actors. The church for many, doesn't hold the same weight as it once did. Therefore, it is difficult for churches to prioritize theatre when many are struggling to simply seek and to save that who they lost. Thankfully, I've learned that theatre is not monolithic, it is

alive and ever-changing because its essence is about sharing stories of the human condition. With all of this said, the journey still continues for me.

What does the Black Arts Movement, Perfect Love Community Youth Theatre, the Courage Summer Workshop, and re-contextualizing fairy tales for youth audiences of color mean for this burgeoning spiritual creative, theatre practitioner, and academic investigator? I can't discard the crumbs of Western hegemonic intellectual privilege. Students of color need to see themselves in their own stories. For all of us, there is a story in every being we encounter – stories that demand advocates to participate in their retelling. These advocates must galvanize the mythic experiences of Black people for new audiences – often youth - coming of age in a hostile culture of fear. These stories must provide hope. These stories cannot wait any longer – the time is now. This transformational work is a call to action for us all.

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Appendix A

July 6th Lesson Plan Sample:

This lesson plan was formatted employing a lesson plan model used in VCU's TEDU 562:

Reading Instruction in Content Areas.

July 6th, 2015

Day's Purpose: Introduction to the program, team building, and program planning

- 1) Objective(s) (What do you want us to learn?)
 - a. The purpose of the Courage Summer Workshop is to help students learn to express themselves, work collaboratively, articulate their feelings, learn about elements of theatre, and participate in every aspect of the production process. Students will begin to get to know each other.
 - b. Students will forecast their experience with the program.
 - c. Students will use images as a means of self description.
 - d. Students will have a sense of autonomy and investment with being a part of the planning process. (Student centered learning)
 - e. Students will assess how they learn.
 - f. Students will learn the interview process.
- 2) Lesson Procedures:
 - a. Students will introduce themselves to the group.
They will include the following information:
Name, age, school, and what they hope to learn in the program.
 - b. Students will write a letter to themselves to be opened at the end of the program.
Students will write about what they hope to learn, how they are currently feeling, and any goals.
 - c. Who am I Collage?
Students will use pictures and letters from magazines that describe who they are to present to the group.
 - d. Students will complete the Learning Style handout to determine their learning style.
 - e. Students will work in pairs to interview another student.
- 3) Materials (List any that are needed)
 - a. Colored paper
 - b. Poster board, magazines, scissors, glue stick
 - c. Handouts
 - d. Handouts
- 4) Evaluation
 - a. Students will reflect on the day.
How was today? What are you looking forward to doing tomorrow?

July 13th Lesson Plan:

This lesson plan was created to discuss the hero's journey in Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* and connect the idea of story with Ball's *Backwards and Forwards*. It served as a way to build on the previous week's lessons. Grasping the concept of the hero's journey was vital when the students began to reimagine their fairy tales, as the hero's journey is the skeleton of the fairy tale narrative.

July 13, 2015

Lesson: Writer's Journey

Hero

Hero: Greek word for "to protect and to serve."

A hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his/her needs on behalf of others.

Audience Identification:

The hero has qualities we all can identify with. We connect with the desire to be loved, understood, succeed, etc.

CHARACTER MOTIVATION WE DISCUSSED WITH *Backwards and Forwards*.

Two types of heroes:

Willing: committed to the adventure or question, self-motivated, without doubt.

Unwilling: full of doubts, passive, needing to be motivated.

Anti-heroes: Outsider, a type of hero. They are cynics or sarcastic. They are tragic heroes – may not be likeable like Shrek.

Hero's Journey

1. The Ordinary World: Beginning of the story. Baseline, home base.

p. 96, Ex: Wizard of Oz.

Ask where do we see this in "Once Upon a Time" so far?

"Once Upon a Time": Emma's date.

2. The Call to Adventure: This might come in the form of a message or a messenger. This is a new event (quest). p. 104, Ex: Wizard of Oz.

Ask where do we see this in "Once Upon a Time" so far?

"Once Upon a Time": When Henry finds Emma.

3. Refusal of the Call: This forces the hero to examine the quest carefully. This is some hesitation. p. 112, Wizard of Oz.

Ask where do we see this in "Once Upon a Time" so far?

"Once Upon a Time": Emma's rejection that Henry is telling the truth about Storybrooke.

We will see this theme throughout the season and series.

4. Meeting with the Mentor: Help from the wise protective figure. Their role is to protect, guide, teach, test, and train the hero. Ex: Karate Kid. Fairy Tale: Seven dwarfs in Snow White. p. 123, Ex: Wizard of Oz.

5. Crossing the First Threshold: This is where the hero commits to the adventure or quest.

Turning point in the story. Leap of faith. There is no turning back. This changes everything. p. 131, Ex: Wizard of Oz.

Where do we see this on “Once Upon a Time” or have a seen this yet?

- Conflict

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies: The hero is test. This is where we see obstacles. p. 140-141: Ex: Wizard of Oz.

7. Approach to the Inmost Cave for the Ordeal: Major battle preparation.

8. The Ordeal: Greatest challenge. Hero must face death or something like it, i.e. – their greatest fear or failure. What is the worst thing that can happen in this moment? This is what causes the hero to change. The hero will never be the same. This is the crisis moment, but not the climax. p. 172: Ex: Wizard of Oz.

9. Reward: Hero wins the major battle. The hero gains new knowledge or a new skill. p. 183, Ex: Wizard of z.

10. The Road Back: The hero is motivated to return back home.

Show the diagram on page 188

p. 193: Ex: Wizard of Oz.

11. The Resurrection: Climax of the Story.

Hero encounters last fight with new knowledge. Last test.

p. 211: Wizard of Oz.

12. Return with the Elixir: Bringing something to share with others back home. Ends on stasis. p. 226, Wizard of Oz.

Vita

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