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“The Ground On Which I Stand”
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Crafting a Solo Performance through the investigation of Ritual Poetic Drama within the
African Continuum.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Bachelor of Arts in Theatre

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This is for you and the meaning of *Ubuntu*:

“For now... and then... and before...

Ase.”

Abstract

“The Ground On Which I Stand”
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By: Ashley W. Grantham

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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Virginia Commonwealth University

April 16th, 2019

Thesis Adjudicator: Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates

Committee: Dr. Keith Byron Kirk, Director of Graduate Studies and Karen Kopryanski,
Head of Voice and Speech

How does this method of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum, by extension, solo performance, uncover, heal queer trauma through witnessing and performance practice? How do these methods give us an intersectional approach to talking about race, identity, gender and bridge those divides? How does this devised work of solo performance allow the author as practitioner to claim the ground on which they stand and surrender to their own healing?

This thesis attempts excavation of the foundational theories in regard to performance structure, and to discover how healing trauma through theoretical techniques achieves liberation through their enacted practice. This is an allowance of ourselves as artists and facilitators to claim our traumatic bodies as worthy sites of invention.

A Glossary of Terms

The following terms are essential to the technique of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum and are rendered here for ease of understanding as the terminology is repeated often. These words are compiled from *The Black Aesthetic* and *The Black Theatre Movement*; also included are some key phrases, essential for context.

“Apprehend” (*“apprehension”*)- a ritualistic naming or claiming within the African Continuum. According to Dr. Pettiford-Wates, “when I apprehend something, it is mine, I have power/control over it”. This is used within the facilitation of RPD instead of “comprehend,” which is considered a word from the Western Canon (see “The Canon”).

“Appropriation”- in critical race theory this term applies primarily to white individuals who usurp and colonize spaces that were not meant for them. Think of this term as an “apprehension” of something (a method of performance/acting method) that was not yours to begin with, but you have chosen to claim ownership of said thing and claim it as your own without honoring the foundational context. In essence, colonialization.

“Ase”- an affirmation meaning loosely, “I agree with my whole being.”

The “Canon” (*“canonicity”*, *“The Well-Made play”*)- The “canon” refers to the Western Canon of Theatre, an idealized space that is primarily white and male. It is inherently exclusive, white patriarchal spaces not open to diverse voices, namely playwrights/ theatre artists of color. The “canon” refers to work that is engrained as “the standard” of

theatrical achievement. These include artists such as Ibsen, Sheridan, Shaw, Williams, Miller, etc.

“De-centered”- this is an academic term found in scholarship referring to an experience that is meant to remove a scholar or student from their presupposed ways of thinking. De-centering allows for exposure to methods, concepts and theories that are not within the general per-view of the student/scholar. It is, as you will witness, highly effective.

“Embodied storytelling”- The African Continuum refers to all stories as embodied, because it (the story) has no other choice *but* to be embodied with the entire being of the actor/storyteller. A spiritual connection to story is facilitated through sound, breath and movement. The canon would call this “present” or “dropped in” to use rigid acting terminology.

“Impellation” - or *“Revelation”*. The impellation is the moment of revelation, the need to “expel” the story from yourself. Dr. Pettiford-Wates likens this moment to projectile... (You can imagine the imagery here). The story has no choice but to be impelled because it *has to* come out of you and onto the stage floor. It also relates to the concept of “birthing” the story that Dr. Pettiford-Wates calls upon frequently.

“Journey- Work”- the process of “journeying” through the exercises facilitated through RPD. These are exercises are working spaces often accompanied by ritualistic sound, breath, movement that are then reflected upon and expanded upon during (and outside) of

classroom/studio work. This leads to the process of creating the individuals solo performance.

“Liminal space” - refers to an idea promoted by Richard Schechner and Performance Theorists. Liminal Space is the threshold of transformation, metaphorically a doorway that alters the subject who passes through. The doorway allows “change”/“transformation” to take place from one state of being to another. Liminal space is charged with meaning and energy.

“Revelation” - what the story or “Drama” in Ritual Poetic Drama is based on. This comes directly from James Baldwin who claims, “a story can have nothing to hide... at least not intentionally... the aim of the story is *revelation*.”

“Sankofa” - An African word meaning loosely, “to go back and get what was lost, stolen or taken from you,” according to Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates. This terminology is accompanied with an image of a bird-like creature made up of an unbroken circle. We as practitioners of the method are always allowed to “go back” thus continuing the journey.

“Ubuntu” - directly translated from African language, meaning, “I am, because we are”.

The “Queer” canon - refers to my own, as authors preconception of what “mainstream” queer theory promotes (in my experience, white theorists working within the confines of their own white scholarship within the Academy/Canon). Such as *Gender Trouble* by Kate Bornstein, *Still Acting Gay/ Acting Gay* by John Clum, Judith Butler, etc.

“The Well-Made Play”- read: *“The Canon”*, plays/works that create spaces that are primarily Caucasian/Euro-centered and exclusive. The “well-made” portion refers to the “linear” notion of plot structure (i.e.: conflict, rising action, falling action, denouement, etc.) and again, upholds the white male gaze as foundational (Williams, Miller, etc.).

Introduction

Throughout this journey I wish to investigate the “process, not product” of a vital, de-centering storytelling methodology being taught at Virginia Commonwealth University entitled Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPD) as facilitated by Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates (Dr. T. as she is lovingly called). It is through this process of applied performance practice I wish to render my body as a unique, artistic entity grounded in embodied storytelling. This will allow me as practitioner and facilitator of RPD to take the process from theoretical practice into applied performance practice. RPD is a technique that is based on emotional, personal connection to narrative in relation to the practitioner’s own story. My hope is to claim my story; to show that performance has the power to heal through RPD and it’s applied practice. I also will create a solo performance in facilitation with this methodology, to be performed in March of Spring 2019 semester.

The process of RPD is made possible due to applying theoretical practice that becomes a method of applied performance through journey-work or guided meditation as a vehicle to “*sankofa*” (meaning, “go back and get what was lost, stolen or taken from you”). This facilitation takes place to unmask the actor and retrieve their own authentic voice, story and narrative through in-studio exercises. The actor through sound, breath and movement practically apply the practice of RPD making it a working methodology of performance by embodying a series of “rite of passage” moments from their lives. These narrative exercises are eventually woven into a solo performance, an “impelled” story that has no choice but to be told out loud through revelatory moments.

I will uncover through this process how RPD along with trauma, memory and performance intersect, as they are the conversation between the performative body of the actor and the audience. It is my hope to examine the purported healing of the space between actor and audience through community, or “common unity” to quote the Black Aesthetic. The Black Aesthetic refers to scholarship that is inherently rooted within the Black Theatre Movement, a safe space created for artists of color to facilitate and tell stories that are not in line with the “mainstream” narrative of the Western Canon (the “white” canon). Both the Black Aesthetic and The Black Theatre Movement are essential to understanding RPD and how each practice as theoretical (and practical for our purposes) embodies the concepts of Life, Death and Transformation (RPD/ The African Continuum), along with the Cleaning, Binding and Healing (The Black Aesthetic). To put it simply, how can witnessing trauma during performance begin to facilitate healing for both parties [actor and audience]?

RPD is a method to be taught in parallel to “the Canon,” as an alternative mode of storytelling, which is vital for our diverse and changing student population. Note, RPD does not claim to be better than “the canon” due to the fact that that statement would be in direct opposition with its main tenets, which are a sense of community, inclusion and a place for all actors to find solace and healing through it’s applied application.

Anna Deavere Smith (*Twilight: Los Angeles, Notes from the Field, Fires in the Mirror*) and E. Patrick Johnson (*Sweet Tea and solo/black/woman*) serve as supreme witnesses to the power of “non-canonical” thought and performance practice and they are profiled here for their own methodologies of healing through performance, I offer these as comparison with RPD. These scholars claim their work as witness and through them I

wish to create a “bridge” of meaning, offering their example through critique and cultural observation.

As an artist I have always wanted to cultivate and curate voices for an audience, to use my work to act as a witness of storytelling. Initially, I anticipated this experience would involve directing a play but I quickly realized that the story I needed to tell was my own - much in the same way I discovered that switching to a dramaturgy concentration would further my scholarship and research. Many questions arose for me during this process; essentially, I was wrestling with my identity, how could I find the purported healing of this RPD methodology and be able to speak to both the theoretical practice and performance practice as a facilitator. I had co-facilitated the Solo Performance class in Fall 2018 as Dr. Pettiford-Wates graduate Teaching Assistant and then took the class in Spring 2019. I would be fortunate to have a dual view of theory and practice.

I began to ask myself: How do we claim this work that is living, sharing our own stories, performing through our trauma and ultimately healing ourselves as performers, to give that experience to an audience?

Part One, Theory, is laying claim to the “ground on which I stand”. Chapter One is “Life” or The Foundation of Ritual Poetic Drama (RPD): An Introduction. This is considered the opening of the circle, beginning at the threshold of identifying what the methodology is and what it aims to do. Each subsequent chapter will continue the cyclical journey through the life, death and transformation cycle of the Black Aesthetic (Black Theatre Movement) and will eventually “birth” the solo performance found in Part Two.

Chapter Two, “Death” is an investigation of how trauma impacts the performative body, how the “performative” must “die” so that the “embodied performance” might live. Excavated here are the theories that make up large writ Performance Studies with intersections of traumatic, memory and queer studies. Of note, there are many interstitial theories present in this analysis. They are rendered here, in part, in an attempt to facilitate healing at their intersection.

What I am proposing is that performance heals the community forged between the actor and the audience by witnessing an act of performance, how does theoretical practice and embodied performance practice accomplish this? These collaborative experiences of witnessing are a “bridge” built on the body of the performer to the audience. The reader will experience this journey by investigating performance artists Dr. Pettiford-Wates, Anna Deavere Smith along with *solo/black/woman* as written by E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon Riviera-Servera, also Johnson’s *Sweet Tea: An Oral History of Black Gay Men in the South*.

Chapter Three, “transformation” details Anna Deavere Smith, her performance works as a site of inquiry, critique and an example of a fully immersed witness. The chapter examines critical race theory and “difference,” which are essential to her work as both theoretical practitioner and applied performance practitioner. In essence, how does she create performance work that attempts to speak to division between communities?

Part Two, Practice, uncovers the crafting/creating such work as referenced in Part One. This will be rendered in journal portions of the journey-work through the creation of a solo performance using Dr. Pettiford-Wates method of Ritual Poetic Drama.

Part Three, Performance, is the script of the solo performance and the process of “becoming the work” and the findings/discoveries made within.

What you hold in your hands is a journey-work through the self, my self.

In the words of Tony Kushner, “The Great Work Begins.

Chapter One

The Opening:

Theory

or

“Life”

The Foundation of Ritual Poetic Drama (RPD): An Introduction

“In a perfect world, we would like to believe that our acting classrooms contain culturally diverse theories and approaches to replicating humanity, various species, and inanimateness. Yet, this is not the case, as most acting classes in the United States of America operate within a Eurocentric theoretical framework of performance, while ushering actors through the exploration of emotionality and embodied renaissances... just like in other subject areas, white-ness overtly and covertly pervades the texts and linguistic structures, and those who do not share a white lineage or hue are de-centered, misaligned, and exiled from a theatre history that they rightfully co-constructed.”

~Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer from the Introduction to *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*¹

Ritual Poetic Drama (RPD) founded in black acting pedagogy creates an examination of canonical whiteness (its inherent privilege) and is a technique that speaks to many disenfranchised groups rendering it more inclusive than exclusive. The technique speaks to those seen as “other,” who does not see themselves represented in the guise of “the white canon,” which as referred to earlier is the purported standard by which we are taught. This method relies heavily on disseminating information in regard to the authority of artists like Ibsen, Sheridan, Shaw, Miller and Williams, all practitioners of “the well-made” play and quantifies/qualifies their work as the pinnacle to be upheld.

RPD is an alternative to the canonical methodology established and was created by facilitator, mentor and performing artist Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates (Dr. T.). RPD is rooted in the African Continuum growing from Dr. T.’s own experience of feeling “displaced” by the white canon. This work of theoretical practice (the origins of RPD) and performance as applied practice serve as the framework within which we will interpret trauma and it’s rendered healing through performance. Ultimately, actors expose and perform trauma as a way to create meaning, shown through artists such as Anna Deavere Smith (*Fires in the Mirror, Twilight: Los Angeles*) and E. Patrick Johnson (*Sweet Tea* and *solo/black/woman*). These artists’ work will serve as guides to understanding and implementing the critical theories present in the holistic methodology of RPD as well as examine how their performance heals communities.

I, as author, allow these theories to de-center my own canonical thought and to allow alternatives to my presupposed concepts of Queer Theory as well. I already knew about “the canon” in regard to it being an oppressive and systemic regime (regarding marginalized voices of people of color). I also wish to recognize how much I did not

know that I was carrying in regard to canonical influence. I refer to the main tenets of queer theory (as I knew them) scholars such as Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*), John Clum (*Acting Gay/ Still Acting Gay*), Kate Bornstein (*Gender Outlaw*) and others. I had to let go of these preconceived notions of anything theoretical that was promulgated in the “white gaze/canon” and allow the Black Aesthetic/Black Theatre Movement/African Continuum to be my guide and teacher.

Dr. Pettiford-Wates, Deavere Smith and Johnson are such guides and teachers, they allow me as practitioner to claim the “ground on which I stand” through their enacted witness. They have helped me unmask and surrender to my own liberation through this journey-work. The process of apprehending the technique of RPD is a journey through the life, death and transformation cycle facilitated through theory and performance as I discovered. My entry-point to approaching the methodology was, how does this method and by extension, solo performance, uncover, unmask and heal queer trauma (namely my own) through witnessing and performance? How do these methods give us an intersectional approach to talking about race, identity, gender and bridge those divides? How does this devised work of solo performance allow the author as practitioner to claim the ground on which they stand and surrender to their own healing?

A note on the language of using the word “queer” in this excavation. Often seen as a pejorative against homosexuals I have chosen to claim the word as the most inclusive way to address how structure is decentered. Ultimately, queer is a testament to the power of owning the authentic voice of this author. It stands as a technique of survival in reclaiming power against words that oppress the community to which I belong. It is a term I feel comfortable with and use to describe my personal identity.

Luckett and Shaffer in *Black Acting Methods* set the intention that the mission of mainstream canonicity is to downplay any narrative that does not suit the homogenous narrative of whiteness. Learning this opened my eyes to the inherent privilege that I as a queer-identifying white person have perpetuated. I began to understand how groundbreaking the RPD methodology is when we identify and promulgate this devising method based on ritual and devising in Afro-centric technique as an alternative to the canonical model. In essence, I had to get out of my own canonical thought process and into my body to subvert those pre-supposed methods that I had, rather unconsciously, been participant in.

I have to acknowledge the grapple with learning from a black acting method here. This pedagogy and practice were meant to create safe spaces for marginalized people of color those whom the canon had eschewed. I was not that person, in fact, I fit quite well into the center of canonical thought. I wanted to embody these pedagogical methods fully. I had to first acknowledge my privilege before I could continue. Dr. Pettiford-Wates assured me that I was “doing the work,” speaking the words and owning my “privilege” out loud, somehow that didn’t seem enough. I sought the approval of the theoretical practice too, some shred of acceptance that I would unburden myself of my white guilt at claiming a “black acting/pedagogy” method for myself.

The canonical thought continued to infiltrate my perceptions of the work of these black pedagogies until and luckily Dr. Pettiford-Wates gifted me the book *White Privilege* by Robin DiAngelo. In it DiAngelo, a white woman and sociologist writes extensively about the mind of the colonizer or white persons. She speaks at length about

the various aspects of white supremacy, white guilt and how privilege serves to undermine authority of people of color. I was horrified as I read this epic work and I must admit could see myself in, in part. For instance, in regard to my own decentering, “No matter how I might explain why all these representations are overwhelmingly white [canonical], they still shape my identity and worldview” (DiAngelo 53). She also writes eloquently of how oppression is projected onto people of color, how it is adaptive. E. Patrick Johnson also writes of this adaptation of oppression in *Appropriating Blackness*. DiAngelo, “All systems of oppression are adaptive; they can withstand and adjust to challenges and still maintain inequality” (DiAngelo 40). I was perhaps most influenced and shaken by DiAngelo’s writing on how ideologies are systemic and oppressive within themselves. Ideologies birth doctrine, canonical thought and are “frameworks” within which oppression exists:

“Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand and make sense of social existence... Examples of ideology in the United States include individualism, the superiority of capitalism... consumerism as a desirable lifestyle, and meritocracy (anyone can succeed if he or she works hard)” (DiAngelo 21).

In essence, RPD subverts these canonical ideologies by focusing on community and how we are “doubly conscious” to invoke Nancy Davis Bellamy and Toni Morrison (citing DuBois, but more on that later). The methodology exposes and creates community founded in an African-centered framework meant to subvert and rail against these supremacist mentalities.

Johnson in *Appropriating Blackness* writes, “‘blackness’ does not belong to one individual or group. Rather, individuals or groups *appropriate* this complex and nuanced racial signifier in order to circumscribe its boundaries...” (Johnson 3). That sentence

caused a wave of anxiety and more questions. However, Johnson continues to assuage his readers:

“The key here is to be cognizant of the arbitrariness of authenticity, the ways in which it carries with it the dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. reminds us: “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes an effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world” (Johnson 3).

With that affirmation, I began to exhale. I felt like I could begin, assuaging my own fear and trepidation to “step into the work”, meaning I could allow myself the permission to embody the theoretical practice and performance practice RPD devises.

Initially my first question, after the existential back and forth was, “What is a black acting method?” and was fortunate enough to discover a direct answer. Lockett and Shafer write:

“Black Acting Methods are defined as rituals, processes, and techniques rooted in an Afrocentric centripetal paradigm where Black theory and Black modes of expression are the nucleus that informs how one interacts with various texts, literary and embodied, and how one interprets and (re)presents imaginary circumstances” (Lockett 1).

I began to compile other questions in regard to this method and technique of performance that was inherently black. Lockett and Shafer call these methodologies of Black Performance/Black theory, “a text for all actors, simultaneously paying homage to Black pedagogy while highlighting the need for more culturally and racially diverse perspectives in acting classrooms” (Lockett 2). I soon learned these methods (RPD and the theoretical and practical application of it) expose and attempt to heal, through performance, which is ultimately what I wanted to discover. But how? How would I combine theory into practice and performance?

Now that we have uncovered what a “Black Acting method” is, we are called to examine how Dr. Pettiford-Wates came to define and create it. In her chapter “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: The Journey from Shakespeare to Shange” of *Black Acting Methods*, Dr. Pettiford-Wates offers:

“Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPD) is a tool for artists to access their own individual creative content, potency and power as artists. The methodology engages the artist as a creative entity rather than an imitative one. The process is designed to facilitate the artist’s ability to cover their ground, to discover their authentic voice and take responsibility for the contributions they are impelled to make to their community as empowered and engaged creative artists” (Pettiford-Wates 107).

Dr. Pettiford-Wates has created this methodology rooted in The Black Aesthetic/ Black Theatre Movement and considers herself a facilitator of its broader concepts. Through that knowledge, I learned the cyclical nature of our lives comes from the accumulation of these various traumas known as “life, death and transformation” cycle or “rite of passage moments”. She offers:

“RPD has proved effective in facilitating the process of exploring [these] questions [and concepts], while centering cultural awareness and exploration of cultural identity and authenticity within context as an essential component to the artistic training of the student/artist” (Pettiford-Wates 109).

Facilitation or “facilitating the process” is what I did during the Fall 2018 semester as Dr. T’s graduate teaching assistant. Later I was a student in the class, applying the theoretical practice as applied performance in Spring 2019. I had the privilege (it was indeed) to see both sides of that process/journey-work and engage in a very special community essential to RPD. Community comes from “common unity” in the African Continuum. The African Continuum is known, as we will recall, the “life, death and transformation” cycle that story and meaning making are created from. These can also be termed “cleansing, binding, healing” if we are speaking of The Black

Aesthetic, these two terms are synonymous with each other for our purposes here. These methodologies and theoretical influences to RPD serve as “both/and” both influential to creating RPD and as stand alone methods of theoretical practice, this is of note.

In regard to the foundations of RPD as theoretical practice, Dr. Pettiford-Wates considers Augusto Boal and Theatre of the Oppressed in co-facilitation with the African Continuum. Boal writes in his manifesto “The Aesthetics of The Oppressed,” “Art rediscovers and reinvents reality from a singular perspective: that of the artist, who is unique... from which is born the Work of Art” (Boal 21). Dr. Pettiford-Wates references Boal often and his concept of, “Process and Product... though the Aesthetic Process does not necessarily have to result in an Artistic Product- it can be inconclusive...” (Boal 19). The “process not product” mentality is far different from the Western canonical influence of normality. Eugene van Erven, a theologian who was also influenced by Boalian theory writes in “Revolution, Freedom and Theater of Liberation,” “it [the act of creating performance] is process oriented and does not focus on the performance as the sole purpose of theater” (Erven 11). The theological aspects in relation to Boal heavily influenced Erven, whereas Dr. Pettiford-Wates takes these concepts of creation and process in a secular holistic facilitation. The intersectionality of these concept allow for a facilitation of community, what Erven writes as, “one begins to practice theater as a language that is living and present, not a finished product displaying images from the past” (Erven 22).

RPD is the process (“not product”) of discovering trauma enacted upon the physical/emotional body of the performer and is meant to be retrieved throughout the work. In the African Continuum the term is “*sankofa*”. This theoretical practice is put

into process/ applied performance practice that is accomplished through journey-work, discovered through trance-like exercises guided through rite of passage meditations that Dr. Pettiford-Wates facilitates.

Each class session begins with calling the circle of artists, the community, together through sacred ritual. This includes washing the stage floor creating space that allows actors to communally wash the floor in silent meditation, and then to support each other throughout the journey-work/classroom process. Once the ritual is complete the circle that intentionally guides the work for that day is open. This is the affirmation of “life”, an opening that for our purposes is named “Trauma”, our entry to the circle.

“Life”: An Opening, “Trauma”

Trauma, what we as actors have accumulated throughout our lives serves as an entry point to the broader context of theoretical practice within the framework of RPD. It is through a journey-work process the actor must apprehend and examine their own “rites of passage” moments as worthy sites of invention to birth their eventual solo performance. Actors act as community, or co-facilitators of the process along with Dr. T.’s master facilitation to claim our own narrative as a worthy site of study.

Trauma is meant to illuminate the connective tissue between performer and audience bridging the divide between *both* theoretical practice *and* applied performance/ practice. This is the primary goal of the work of a solo performance and of RPD itself.

Dr. Judith Herman writes in her book *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence- from domestic abuse to political terror* regarding the traumatic witness as

liberation. We are uncovering how solo performance and RPD are methods of “truth telling”. Herman writes of the “truth,”:

“The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma... When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery... Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma... Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins to rediscovering history” (Herman 2).

Herman writes of the substantial need of claiming the traumatic narrative as valuable to a broader sense of community (directly related to the “common unity” of RPD):

“Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process, the survivor seeks assistance not only from those closest to her [him/them] but also from the wider community. The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of trauma. Restoration of the breach between the traumatized person and the community depends, first, upon public acknowledgement of the event, and second, upon some form of community action... These two responses- recognition and restitution- are necessary to rebuild the survivor’s sense of order and justice” (Herman 70).

Essentially, Herman and Dr. Pettiford-Wates offer the same claim that healing of trauma are acknowledged through a communal witnessing, a creating of “restitution and recognition” of the traumatic narrative. The actors are claiming their own bodies, their own stories as worthy sites of witness and the audience gets to witness a performance that can create deeper meaning.

Examining “Community”: Feminist vs. Womanist

Let us take a brief digression before continuing the excavation. It should be noted that RPD attempts, through community, to bridge the inherent divides between race, class, and gender identity by acknowledging the inner “power dynamics” within the

group. It should also be noted that while RPD has a strong connection to African spirituality, it does not claim to be a feminist technique by nature, nor do many of the women profiled in this thesis claim that terminology. As this is the “life” portion of the circle, it is important to excavate this very important subject of female centered pedagogy for me as practitioner. This is also a furthering of the de-centering process of my own canonical thought, because I did not know of the difference between the mainstream feminist movement and the womanist movement, which came about during my research. These definitions are regarded as supremely important to the holistic study of Black centered pedagogy and theoretical practice, which RPD is apart. The technique does make each member of said community (male and female) work as a unit, holistically, through their difference. This by practice lessens any between community members, utilizing ensemble based devising exercises, communal and ritual washing of the stage floor and assigning groups to work together to open the circle/close the circle and work on classroom projects. In acknowledging communal witnessing (of RPD) we can then examine a close reading of Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga furthering the conceptualization/ theoretical practice of community and meaning making.

Anzaldua and Moraga call themselves “Third World” women of color, a term the two use in direct contrast with the “mainstream” performed narrative of “all inclusive” women’s liberation movements, which inherently meant white, middle-class women “tired of the home and children,” to put it mildly. “Third World” refers to how women of color thought of themselves, how they were treated by the mainstream feminist movements of the early 1970’s. In their book of collected essays, *This Bridge Called My Back* the two activists write about what is considered a “theory of the flesh”.

Interrogating already established methods of the feminist canon (this refers to Betty Freidan, Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir) Moraga and Anzaldua offer the following deconstruction of those pre-supposed methods highly reminiscent of Dr. D. Soyini Madison, which we will examine later:

“A theory of the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives- our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual belongings- all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience... We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (Moraga 23).

These women attempt to bridge the “contradiction” between racial, gender difference(s) (much like Anna Deavere Smith and Johnsons’ artists in *solo/black/woman*) and are hoping to wrest control from homogenous narrative; this would result in what Anna Deavere Smith would later call “humanness”.

It is very important at this juncture we use this interrogation of feminism to lead us into the power of critique as both a teaching tool and practical application. The women profiled within this thesis (Dr. Pettiford-Wates, Anna Deavere Smith and the narrators/artists of *solo/black/woman*) would not consider themselves feminists in regard to the “mainstream” definition. This word has traditionally been applied as a form of erasure, particularly to women of color. Feminism is not an inclusive term, rather exclusive, as we will continue to examine.

bell hooks writes in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

“a central tenet of modern feminism thought has been the assertion that ‘all women are oppressed.’ This assertion implies that women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create a diversity of oppressive force in the lives of individual women” (hooks 5).

“However, feminist emphasis on ‘common oppression’ in the United States was less a strategy for politicization than an appropriation by conservative and liberal women of a radical political vocabulary that masked the extent to which they

shaped the movement so that it addressed and promoted their class interests” (hooks 6).

“...middle class white women were able to make their interests the primary focus of feminist movement and employ a rhetoric of commonality that made their condition synonymous with ‘oppression’” (hooks 6).

Anzaldua and Moraga write in *This Bridge...* about the exclusivity of white women’s feminism and its inherent privilege:

“Racism is societal and institutional. It implies the power to implement racist ideology. Women of color do not have such power, but white women are born with it and the greater their economic privilege, the greater their power...” (Anzaldua and Moraga 62).

These thoughts and actions of women of color were revolutionary to the mainstream movement and effectively fell on deaf ears. They are supremely worth mentioning as continuing to de-center the pre-supposed methods, canonicity that I, as author and researcher brought to this project. I was not aware of the differences between the mainstream movement of feminism and the creation of the word *womanist*, a term created by and for women of color who were left out of the mainstream movement until undertaking this research. There is a vast difference between the two terms that I hope to highlight here.

Alice Walker, the prolific author, activist and controversial writer of the human experience created the word *womanist* in her essay “Coming Apart” in the mid 1970’s.

She writes:

“ ‘womanist’ encompasses ‘feminist’ as it is defined by Webster’s, but also means *instinctively* pro-woman... Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women’s culture... an advantage of using ‘womanist’ is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word ‘Black’ (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word ‘feminist’), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ‘feminist’ with the word ‘white,’ since the word ‘feminist’ is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture” (Walker 100).

In highlighting the distinction between feminist and womanist, I hope to continue to examine the difference between the two terms. These now considered womanist spaces created are inherently for women of color, but, as we will see for all who do not see themselves represented in the guise of the mainstream. This critique of mainstream feminism illuminates the power critique has in regard to performance as theoretical and practical will serve our community as we continue the excavation.

Critique

Dr. D. Soyini Madison writes in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance*, “Critique is to deconstruct and reinvent those epistemological certainties that foreclose alternative possibilities for ordering and reordering authoritative regimes of truth” (Madison 6). Epistemology refers to the “theory of knowledge,” it is “the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion” according to Webster’s. In essence, epistemology is the interrogation process and uncovering of our pre-supposed methods of learning, our “authoritative regimes.”

Madison herself is a scholar on critique/performance studies and her scholarship enhances the concepts of Dwight Conquergood both accomplished academicians from Northwestern University (Conquergood passed away in 2004). Madison and Conquergood focus heavily on community activism, the various intersections of human interaction both anthropologically and socially, as well as indigenous performance methods. Madison writes extensively about the liberation of performance and how critique assists our knowledge in regard to understanding humanness as a societal need. RPD is another form of this critical and interrogative method to understanding community/ humanness as an “emergent liberation.” She writes, “Critique is to labor for

an emergent liberation where the limits of what one can be are cracked open... when desubjugation of the subject confronts and deconstructs the politics of truth/knowledgeable regimes” (Madison 6). In other words critique is “both/and”, both a method of inquiry and deconstruction of hegemonic (authoritative, read: canonical) structure:

“Deconstruction is an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought is grounded, as well as how a whole system of political structure and social control maintains its force” (Madison 179).

Madison, heavily influenced by Michel Foucault, also citing Richard Schechner and Victor Turner (godfathers of performance theory) argues that as performance practitioners we must expose the “logic by which a particular system of thought is grounded.” Indeed this concept applies directly to the performance work Anna Deavere Smith, E. Patrick Johnson and by extension Dr. Pettiford-Wates.

I would be remiss at this juncture not to invoke Dwight Conquergood further and his conceptualization of performance as theory and practice (his life’s work revolved around this praxis and application). He writes in *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography and Praxis* (edited by E. Patrick Johnson), “Performance [is] both an object and method of research, [it] will be most useful if it interrogates and de-centers...” (Conquergood 59). Essentially, Conquergood and Madison argue that critique is necessary if we are to learn anything from investigating performance. Conquergood, Madison, by extension Johnson, Deavere Smith and Dr. Pettiford-Wates would agree that performance is meant to study, “how people [make] meaning of their lives and how they resisted oppression... [how] they performed their identities and how those performances spoke back to structural forms of power” (Conquergood 7).

For all intents and purposes the excavation of the intersection of theoretical practice and applied performance practice will continue later, specifically as it relates to E. Patrick Johnson and Anna Deavere Smith.

In conclusion, Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates offers this succinct statement in regard to RPD as a site of inquiry, which we will continue to explore through the body of the performer in the next chapter:

“Certain characteristics are foundational to the process and the community that is created by intentional adherence to its tenets:
A Search for origins
Personal growth emphasized as intent of the process
Risk without judgment or evaluation
Acknowledgement of commonalities
Bonding with the rest of the community
Improvisation as a means to transformation
Spirituality rather than dogmatic or didactic paradigm
Homecoming/ familiar/ family encouraged as an integral part of the artist creative self: if the artist is to be complete and fully functional in his/her role within the community (Pettiford-Wates 110)”.

Let this be an affirmation then, allowing the performative body to be explored through its performance, enacting and uncovering. Never is this more present or more beautifully rendered than through E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon H. Rivera-Servera’s glorious work *solo/black/woman*, the next guide on our journey and a tremendous facilitator of what it means to be a witness. Johnson directly relates to RPD/ Black Aesthetic conceptualization of life, death and transformation and creates a bridged experience between the body of the actor and their audience through narrative. His performance techniques and scholarship are a supreme example of the bridge between theory, practice and performance, a witness to meaning making.

Chapter Two

“Death”

Or

The “bridge” from actor to audience, *Sweet Tea*, solo/black/woman and memory

From *solo/black/woman*:

“Toni Morrison reminds us that double-consciousness is more than a psychosocial state. It may also function as intentional “strategy” of subversion and survival”

Nancy Davis-Bellamy writes in *solo/black/woman*:

“this means we must embrace the body not only as the feeling/sensing home of our being... but the vulnerability of how our body must move through the space and time of another-transporting our very being and breath-for the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of realization and discovery”²

Building on the cycle of life, death and transformation as aforementioned let us refer to “doubling” as the Morrison quote appears in the epigraph. “Double consciousness” (cited from W.E.B. DuBois) creates a strategy of “subversion and survival,” that Morrison cites heavily in her work with the Black Consciousness. These concepts are furthered in regard to Black Pedagogy, particularly in RPD and The Black Aesthetic. In the methodology of RPD you as the actor and facilitator are “doubly conscious” meaning that you recognize who you “were” at the time the process begins and also who you are “becoming” as you unburden yourself of your “imitative identity”. In essence, through these Black pedagogies, and methods we must allow the performative body to “die” to “birth” the embodied performance RPD calls for and continue the “transformation”. I have to mention that as a life-long learner I relate wholeheartedly to this concept that “double consciousness” is life-affirming in its transformational quality. I have been privileged to be both theoretical practitioner as a graduate teaching assistant/co-facilitator to Dr. Pettiford-Wates, having witnessed actors/community directly applying these various “consciousness,” and I too have been the subject of the work in practical application (discovering my own “consciousness”) as a student taking the course of Solo Performance.

We come to learn through RPD that the oppressor is our own body, our own emotional trauma that we are to discover through rite of passage moments. Allegorically, we are in essence silencing or killing the oppressor within us, symbolically.

The actor and their emotion live within space we in performance call “the fourth wall”. This space is saturated with meaning and intention and energy are constantly exchanged here. Imagine an invisible wall between the actor and the audience, where

energy can be directed toward from the stage. Entire worlds are constructed on the “fourth wall” and it is foundational to performance. It is a liminal space where actors can travel backward and forward connecting embodied emotional storytelling with transitional moments based in sound, breath, movement and text. Richard Schechner loosely posits that liminality is what is between the grounded presence of the actor and the audience where meaning making happens. D. Soyini Madison (echoing Schechner): “Liminoïd/Liminality is the state of creation and destruction-of the betwixt and between- and of being both and neither inside and/nor outside [both/and]... a new form of interrelationships between individuals, counterpoised to the all powerful socio-hierarchical relationships...” (Madison 175).

Imagine if you will, a “bridge” coming off the body of an actor leading directly into the audience (recall Anzaldua and Moraga). As their embodied truth unfurls through story the bridge becomes longer and sinks into the depth of the audience. Through RPD’s facilitation the bridge goes deeper and deeper into the shared connectedness/ consciousness between these two groups, allowing common unity/community. This is a reciprocal experience.

Dr. Judith Herman writes of this reciprocity, “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process the survivor seeks assistance from the wider community” (Herman 70). This is known as the intersection of trauma, memory and performance, the “bridge” or empathetic space created through performance through the applied practice RPD facilitates.

David Dean, Yana Meerzon and Kathryn Prince write in their introduction for *History, Memory, Performance*, “Theatergoing [is] one powerful form of storytelling and one powerful conduit for empathy...through empathy, an emotional connection is forged between the spectator and the onstage avatar of the trauma victim” (Dean 16). It is important to make the distinction here that trauma and memory as collective experiences told in solo performance are not always “factual” they are remembrances of things that were concealed in the bodies and emotional memory of actors that are discovered through narrative performance practice. Essentially, the emotional connection is what is aimed for, this is accessed through “the bridge” as well as the empathetic space as mentioned above.

It is of note, when the narrative is compiled and rendered through solo work the “characters” created may change but the embodied emotion of said moment remains the same. This is because actors have birthed these seminal moments through facilitation of RPD as a practice. What the performer is showing or revealing to an audience is a reflection of their “rites of passage”.

Theoretical Application becomes Performance Practice

For example in Fall 2018 during the solo performances at Virginia Repertory Theater (TheatreGYM) a student wanted to present to the audience memories he had as a child associated with being told of his sister's death. The student was grounded in their primary emotion of confusion and loss as he presented a character of his six-year-old self alternating back and forth between himself at six and his parents then, what he had wished they had said to him. The conversation that took place between the two parties

was not rendered verbatim but based on the embodied memory that the author of the solo performance received through his journey-work.

Another student chose to portray herself as a Triceratops dinosaur while performing her narrative. She would facilitate these moments of character as Sarah (the actress) and the Tri-“Sarah”-tops dinosaur as a method of escape between traumatic moments throughout her life. There is no differentiation of truth from the character (The Tri-Sarah-Tops) created and the onstage body of the actor (Sarah as a person); this is the apex of RPD in practice, this dual consciousness, and “both/and”.

Memory

Further, Dean, Meerzon and Prince write in *History, Memory and Performance*, “Memory acts as a shared crucible of discovery and a distorting lens through which history and theatre engage with the past” (Dean 1). Memory can be interpreted as, “personal, collective, imaginative, generational, and historical experience- [it] is the most actively interrogated issue that theatre of testimony and witness explore” (Dean 13). Theatrically, performing trauma and interrogating the vast expanse of human testimony (what a wonderful word) is daunting to any actor and must be approached through a cultivated series of techniques found in RPD, as we see from the above examples.

Neal Utterback, in Nicola Shaughnessy’s book of collected essays, *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science*, writes in “Embodied Memory and Extra-Daily gesture”:

“Who we are as a conscious selves is a story we tell ourselves. I am a story I tell myself. To be human is to be a storyteller... Telling our stories, with gesture and word, helps us shape and secure our memories in time and space. Play-acting, storytelling and performance are not simply entertaining; they are the foundation of all human experience” (Shaughnessy 153).

Richard Schechner writes, “For each performance there is a new audience on whom an impression is to be made. The actor makes a journey that ends where it began, while the audience is ‘moved’ to a new place” (Schechner 193). This perhaps most of all is the goal of embodied/solo performance and RPD as both theoretical and applied practice. The goal is to move the audience and by extension the performers into a new place of being, a becoming.

Sweet Tea and solo/black/woman

Dr. Pettiford-Wates calls this becoming an “unbroken circle”. What E. Patrick Johnson refers to in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South, An Oral History* as an unbroken, circular, sense of community, “The circle must be unbroken” (Johnson 548).

E. Patrick Johnson is of particular note due to his having crafted a community that has further decentered the homogenous narrative of this author. His scholarship as theoretical practice and applied performance has brought about a deeper understanding of the act of becoming as referred by Dr. Pettiford-Wates. Johnson, through exposing a community of storytellers who are black, southern and gay were incredibly decentering to my own felt inertia of white queer scholarship. What Johnson and Dr. Pettiford-Wates are teaching is that our identity is, through a performative act meant to be excavated by “doing the work”.

Sweet Tea and solo/black/woman came about during an independent study with Dr. Keith Byron Kirk in my first year of graduate studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. The book of *Sweet Tea* had entered my life three years before during undergraduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I was fortunate enough to witness E. Patrick and their performance of *Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of*

the South Tell Their Tales, a solo performance crafted from their interviewing techniques described in *Sweet Tea*. During their solo performance I found myself shouting, echoing the call and response method of “church” that E. Patrick crafted over the audience swaying and bending his body and voice to echo the centuries of black men who so bravely told their stories to him over a glass of the sweetest tea.

In “gay speak”, “tea” or “T”, is referred to as the “Truth”. Johnson while journeying through the lives of these men travels across thousands of miles and discovers himself through the pages of *Sweet Tea*, embodying both theoretical practice and applied practice as it relates to performance as an embodied action.

Johnson does not shy away from the staunch realities of a South broken by systemic racism and oppression, heteronormative patriarchal hierarchy, particularly in the black church (many engage in blatant homosexual relations and do not attempt to hide their gayness, this is of note). However, Johnson does divert from mainstream queer theory (canonical queer theory) to subvert it. This is his way of reclaiming blackness in regard to gay identity. His narrative focus is not on understanding a white concept of “queer” or gay. Some narrators choose to define their sexuality in terms of something to “deal with” or “being that way”. Understand the narrative this community creates makes space for themselves, as black men, as black Southern men, and as black Southern gay men lastly. Johnson’s work *Sweet Tea* deserves mention due to its supreme example of a living witness through curating of the intersection between performance and theory.

E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon H. Rivera-Servera’s work *solo/black/woman* also interrogates this curation in addition to *Sweet Tea*. *Solo* examines what moments of ancestry can create through various techniques inspired by the Black Aesthetic/ Black

Theatre Movement. Indeed many of the women profiled speak of their ancestors and forebears as the impetus to create their own witnesses. This explains how trauma has the power to unleash substantial healing through its performance in this way and to offer an experience that is now black, black and female, then black and female and inherently queer, lastly.

Johnson and Rivera-Servera speak on the powerful combination of performance and womanist structure, to recall Alice Walker, mentioned previously. These concepts are related in tandem with Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*, who is cited heavily in *solo/black/woman* as a forbearer to the work and an inspirational guide for the artists profiled. Also of note, Dr. Pettiford-Wates uses Shange as a model for the origins of RPD. Dr. Pettiford-Wates was in both the Broadway and touring companies of *for colored girls* and attributes her own becoming as an artist to Shange as referenced earlier in her chapter of *Black Acting Methods*.

D. Soyini Madison writes in her forward to *solo/black/woman* (echoing Shange), "Why perform alone onstage? Why pay attention to a black woman?" (Johnson xi). She continues this line of questioning, "How do performances of solo black women capture our attention" (Johnson xii). An answer:

"When a black woman stands on stage alone, she must become the consummate griot, the epic storyteller, the virtuosic alchemist letting loose blood, red, women cycles of hard truth, unabashed literacies, and black female abjection... This is a radical act of grand proportion and courage. She reclaims the record, holds the book to her ear, and listens to the spectrum of its horror as well as glorious triumphs" (Johnson xii).

Further:

"Performance... invests in primarily collective experiences that far exceed the binary plurality of the performer/audience relationship... [this publication offers] an abundance of models from which to conceive and sustain black feminist performance practices..."(Johnson xvii).

“Black women in particular were empowered to speak specifically to the intersections of race and gender in a context in which they confronted sexism within the civil rights and black arts movements and racism and classism within the broader feminist movement... catalyzing a critique from within and without, generating a powerful platform upon which to codify black feminist performance” (Johnson xix).

What Johnson and Rivera-Servera hope to achieve in this writing (that I would hope to emulate in regard to my own scholarship and performance practice), “ [is to] emphasize the performance encounter in which meaning-making happens in the moment of performance. Improvisation, revelation, and communion all become possible during the encounter between a performer and her [their] audience” (Johnson 1).

Let us recall James Baldwin in use of the term “revelation,” foundational to RPD and The Conciliation Project (a non-profit theatre company engaged in social justice performance founded by Dr. Pettiford-Wates). Baldwin writes this most basic tenet, which *solo/black/woman* promulgates (RPD/ The Conciliation Project use this as a mantra):

“A story is impelled by the necessity to reveal itself; a story has nothing to hide (at least not intentionally.) There is no resolution to a story. The aim of the story is revelation and, that occurs in each of us in what we make of the questions with which the story leaves us” (Conciliation 1).

Sharon Bridgforth offers in *solo/black/woman* a further exploration these concepts of “story” in relation to “questions” through *delta dandi*, “I’m working in a black aesthetic that assumes that the oral tradition is valid, that stories are performative in their nature... there will be multiple layers of things. It’s always prayer, and it’s ritual” (Johnson 227).

Bridgforth states, in regard to ritual story-telling and the methodology of The Black Aesthetic that when she encountered *for colored girls*, “it affirmed what I knew

was possible and important- words as music, storytelling as black and female and spirit” (Johnson 228). In regard to ritualistic theater inspired in part by the Black Church (*Tea*), and by extension RPD, Bridgforth offers that it is about collective history that influences her work the most:

“There was slavery... It was very complex. Many cultures were inside of that blackness and it’s something about grieving for home, the deep prayer that is the life that holds possibility for the future... Spirituality is part of my blood memory and where I, without knowing why or how, drew from to create the work. But I do really make worlds that are black American” (Johnson 231).

She continues:

“People who are queer in their gender and queer in their sexuality are just part of the world. It’s not separate. They’re part of the world, and they’re part of the spiritual matrix, part of the community, it’s a given... I think gender and sexuality would be much more fluid... I intentionally, organically, always have him/shes. People who are complicated in their gender, queer characters, lesbians, gay men as holy people, and people who are part of the communal process of invoking change” (Johnson 231).

Misty DeBerry encapsulates each of the aforementioned working processes in her attempt to heal her own trauma in *Milkweed*. In my opinion this is one of the most informative portions of *solo/black/woman*. It amazes me still how each of DeBerry’s methods used can also be related to the journey-work process of Ritual Poetic Drama. Her work helps create the bridge of actor and audience in regard to common unity and meaning making. She accomplishes this, startlingly, through the allegory of a Monarch butterfly. This concept is directly related to the parable/story-work of the African Continuum and it’s reliance on animals to tell a human story. The Monarch butterfly DeBerry fashions creates character as symbol of ultimate transformation. DeBerry fashions the Monarch as an avatar for herself as she journey-works through trauma in the performance narrative, dealing with her various trauma of sexual assault, brutality, and “becoming”. A butterfly is the perfect symbol of transformation regarding the African

Continuum (“life, death and transformation”) in relation to the Black Aesthetic (“cleansing, binding, healing”).

She offers the following in regard to healing trauma through performance:

DeBerry: “[in] understanding trauma and healing it’s crucial not to think of it as a linear process whatsoever and I really wanted to express that in the writing of the piece- it was initially very important to me” (Johnson 343).

DeBerry: “I wrote this for me [a black queer woman]- a black queer artist who has survived several experiences with sexual trauma- I wrote it for all other black/ women/ queer identified folk who can say- me too in whatever way “me too” means for them” (Johnson 345).

Francesca Royster in her interviews that concluded each chapter of

solo/black/woman writes:

“DeBerry leads us from the embodied state of trauma to the moments of attempting to speak what has been erased... Milkweed could be read both as a form of self-loving and as a model for coalition politics- a mechanism for longing and belonging... The play teaches us an ethics of witness, listening and reception. This is done through the exposure of vulnerability and by embodying the state of being vulnerable through breath, forcing us to look each other in the eye” (Johnson 359).

I would consider *solo/black/woman* a pilgrimage to the self (RPD thrives in this space as well). What DeBerry calls, “a first attempt to put myself back together, or re-inform psychologically what had happened to me, coming out of these experiences” (Johnson 349). Essentially, what these women are referencing is the naming of self, claiming their stories as vital. DeBerry says, “naming has such a long history in black feminist thought and culture- and on a visceral level controlling- claiming one’s name for one’s own sake is the work of being present- alive and kicking with full intentionality and no apologies” (Johnson 346).

None of the narrators/voices captured here spare any sympathy for erasure or censure of the black female body or its borne experience. Black women through this

work express that their canonical (white, and by extension feminist) oppressors have power over them no longer because they have wrested their power back through their traumatic unburdening, again a womanist reclamation as opposed to feminist.

These works charge an audience and community with a responsibility which creates a “return to meaning” as Molly Anne Heller writes in her thesis, “Becoming Incredible: Healing Trauma Through Performance”, “Taking responsibility means focusing awareness not only upon the events you identify with, but also upon the events you want to disavow” (Heller 10). She continues, “Performance is a return to expression and meaning- it gathers people together to feel and experience something larger than form. It is ritual. It can be a throughway to access our potential as humans...” (Heller 43).

How then can performance “transform” actors and our audience through application? If we are to accept that the work is a bridge that we create through our own healing, how do we charge our audience with the responsibility to do something with this revelatory transformation? This is something Anna Deavere Smith knows all too well through her blending of theoretical technique and applied performance as practice. She will serve as our next guide providing her own performative works as critique and liberation through enacted performance.

Chapter Three

“Transformation”

An Exploration of Anna Deavere Smith, Witnessing and Spectatorship

“The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”

~Audre Lorde³

Embodied performance creates an audience responsibly charged to “go and remember” what they have seen, making them a responsible witness to quote Dr. Pettiford-Wates. Caroline Wake recounts in her essay “The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies (from Trezsie)”, “The art-work that turns us into witnesses leaves us, above all, unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we’ve seen... borne on by our responsibility to events” (Trezsie 38). Wake continues:

“...‘to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker’”(Trezsie 39).

Both performer and audience are witness, “both/and”. *Both* performer bearing witness to their own trauma as embodied narrative *and* the audience bearing witness to what the person is doing onstage, “making meaning” of it. This is precisely what Lorde is referring to in the epigraph, a “bridge between sharers” which “lessens the threat of their difference.”

Understanding “Difference”

Let us take a moment to define “difference” in regard to womanist theory and critical race theory, of which the word is borne. Audre Lorde, from the epigraph also writes in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House, cited in *The Bridge Called My Back*:

“Difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic... Only within the interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively ‘be’ in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”

She continues:

“As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation... But, community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist” (Anzaldua and Moraga 99).

Deavere Smith says of her own work, “The whole thing is supposed to be an occasion to evoke a spirit. This was one of the things that lead me to thinking in more circular ways and resisting the through-line” (Martin 51).

In *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines*, Deavere Smith writes:

“I am prepared for difference, live in difference. My pursuit of American character is, basically, a pursuit of difference... The most comfortable place to live is inside of what I call one’s safe house of identity. I have observed that is where most people live. Even if they leave a previous identity they often end up in another safe house, and leave behind any ambiguity” (Deavere Smith, 23).

Furthering this idea, scholar Cherise Smith offers in “Enacting Others”, a nod to the “politics of identity” Deavere Smith uses when she speaks of the “safe houses of identity”:

“It is generally understood that the politics of identity [she neglects to use the phrase ‘identity politics’] was assembled around blackness in the 1950’s and 1960’s during the black freedom struggle- though identity has been, and continues to be, a site around which other groups locate political action... These newly politicized communities struggled for social and political empowerment and equality, and they argued for a redistribution of wealth. At they same time, they called for recognition of their idiosyncratic experiences, predicating the representation of their culture in the manner in which they saw fit. In other words, they sought control of how their identities and experiences were portrayed” (Smith 6).

In essence, Deavere Smith engages in what is known as “critical race theory” through her examination of “difference,” she builds off Lorde’s definition. Essentially what Lorde and Deavere Smith, by extension, are creating is a reshaping of identity and an attempt to understand the communal aspects of how difference affects our humanity or “humanness”, if you will recall.

D. Soyini Madison writes of critical race theory:

“[It] analyzes the complex machinations of racialization in the various ways it is created, sanctioned, employed, but it also illuminates the various ways race is an effect of our imagination and how racial symbols and representations determine our understanding and attitude about race in the first place” (Madison 87).

This describes how Deavere Smith engages in creating an examination of difference that comes from understanding its various intersections. Deavere Smith is influenced directly by Homi Bhabha, scholar and post-Colonial theorist. Bhabha writes of the intersection between race, class, gender, “and other forms of difference [that] are always being ‘constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process’”, according to “Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Legacy” by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham (Olson 5). Olson and Worsham write that Bhabha in his theories of race and its structure consider, “[that] difference leads to a politics of discrimination” (Olson 5).

A closer reading of Deavere Smith and Homi Bhabha

Bhabha (and Deavere Smith) offer that theory, “must be both to intervene in the continuity and consensus of common sense and also to disrupt the dominating strategies of generalization within a cultural community” (Olson 12). Bhabha and Deavere Smith are getting us to examine, “what you identify with” (Olson 25) in regard to the differences of class, race, sexual identity and gender. These scholars encourage us “to see boundaries not as simply the space between [one self and another], but to see the boundary [of difference] as always facing inward... this allows us to think more generally of a way of connecting nations or countries [or actor and audience, for our terms]” (Olson 29).

Regarding identity, community and process Deavere Smith writes in the introduction of *Twilight*, “If we were able to move more frequently beyond these boundaries [of race, identity, difference], we would develop multifaceted identities and we would develop a more complex language. After all, identity is in some ways a process toward character” (Deavere Smith, xxv).

She creates a responsibility of witness, of owning identity, which can be seen as the ultimate transformation in regard to storytelling. Through her characters, Deavere Smith surrenders her body to the performance of a fully comprised and present witness that is what we are called to do through RPD. Deavere Smith, Dr. Pettiford-Wates, Johnson and Rivera-Servera all create this act of witness[ing]. This is the example of an “unveiling of understanding,” the intersection between theory and practice, as we shall see.

Ronald J. Pelias’ work *Writing Performance* writes poetically about what this bridged difference means to him, through the practical application of theory and performance. To Pelias the transformative power of solo performance:

“[is]

a way of giving shape to haunting spirits, putting into form what disturbs, what fascinates, what demands attention, that is, performance is a way of formulating the unforgettable so that it might be forgotten...

Performance is

a personal expression, a pressing for voice, a pressing against silence until one pushes onstage to assert, “I am, I am”, as the lights fade: Expression leads to oppression, oppression to expression...

Performance is

a demonstration, a public unveiling of one’s understanding, unfolding as a qualified question or as a potent proclamation nudging or forcing its way into the ongoing conversation controlled by those who know what counts as proof...

Performance is

a political act, at times charged with fury like a warring horde, screaming as it rushes into battle, ready to claim its rights and shed its anger; at times blinded by thoughtless thugs with their assumptions of normalcy and decisions of indifference...

Performance is

holy, a place of worship consecrated for the devoted who fathers in its name to listen to the sacred scripts, to join in the hallowed ceremony, to make the spirits rise as the world whirls away” (Pelias 109-111).

Perhaps most telling of the intersection between the “bridge” created between these two witnessing bodies [of actor and audience] is what Patrick Duggan, author of *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* refers to as:

“... an imperative to bear witness and testify to both world- defining traumas, like The Holocaust, and ‘smaller’ more personal traumas, such as loss, domestic violence, or rape. The imperative is driven by a desire to comment upon, stimulate some form of action in relation to and potentially come to reconstitute or historicize trauma events and symptoms... the core focus here is on the idea of a culture thinking itself through: trauma-tragedy as a performative addressing of and bearing witness to traumata” (Duggan 86).

Through her use of the theoretical influences to critical race theory and the blending of applied performance as practice Deavere Smith creates a new language of performing trauma and critiques many of the present hegemonic structures of our society through her work.

D. Soyini Madison (referencing Michel Foucault again) writes, to recall, “Critique is to interrogate the politics of truth that pertains to those relations of power/knowledge that determine in advance what will and will not count as truth” (Madison 6). It is through this process that Deavere Smith transcends these boundaries known as difference.

In her groundbreaking work, *Twilight: Los Angeles*, along with *Fires in the Mirror*, *Notes from the Field*, Deavere Smith confronts those “authoritative” regimes of identity politics [the theoretical practice] head on in an attempt to understand/grapple

with societal racism and institutional oppression. This creates material that is critical of identity, bias and political in-action that are sadly just as prevalent today, she writes in her autobiography *Talk to Me*:

“These young people really, ya know, are not in anybody’s statistics or data. They’ve been dropped off of everybody’s agenda. They live from grandmama to mama to girlfriend.” I said, “We now got young people who are twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old who have never worked a day of their lives.” I said, “These are the young people in our streets and they are angry and they are frustrated” (Deavere Smith, 53).

Deavere Smith would be considered a cultural critic by our standards today, a teaching artist who uses the theoretical conceptualization of performance theory, race theory and cultural anthropology to create a synthesis of theory and applied performance practice. She is a cultural ethnographer and embodied storyteller who use her entire vessel as a performer/artists to capture the truest distillation of story, which is why she is examined here. She is a facilitator of The Black Aesthetic, The African Continuum and a profound example of what artistry and witnessing can “do” to enact change. She, through her work, “becomes” the conduit for the story, to bridge the divide between actor and audience and to facilitate healing and dialectic conversation between varying groups.

In an interview with Carol Martin, Anna Deavere Smith offers this beautiful turn of phrase about the word “becoming” which we will remember from Dr. Pettiford-Wates and journey-work. From “The Word Becomes You: An Interview”, “My grandfather told me that if you say a word often enough it becomes you. I was very interested before I developed this project [*Twilight: Los Angeles*] in how manipulating words has a spiritual power” (Martin 8). She also writes in the introduction to *Twilight*, and perhaps most succinctly, “The spoken word is evidence of humanness” (Deavere Smith xxiv).

Deavere Smith speaks of her performance work as an empathetic one, “Empathy and the ability to identify with the other is proof that our color, our gender... is only a frame of something called the soul. And politically, of course, that proof is the very ingredient we need to get to “we”, to get to move from “me” to “us” (Deavere Smith 72).

Cherise Smith offers about *Twilight: Los Angeles*, connecting these various concepts of “transformation”, “difference” and “identity” that Deavere Smith creates:

“The central concern of *Twilight* is the violent articulation of identity differences: coming together against police brutality; splintering along gender, class, ethnic and racial lines; and expressing passionate emotions... She [Deavere Smith] performs across racial and other identity boundaries as a step toward reaching what she considers a democratic ideal, to discourage the notion of difference as opposites and to ‘encourage many more models for audiences becoming the ‘other’ temporarily; she believes that “if more of us could actually speak from another point of view, like speaking another language, we could accelerate the flow of ideas. She wants to encourage the development of “multifaceted identities” because she believe that identity and character are not fixed but a process” (Smith 137).

In conclusion, Deavere Smith leads us as practitioners of theatre to examine our own cultural bias as we uncover identity as “a safe house” that is discourses and interrogated, critiqued through process. The process Deavere Smith crafts is a learning tool, which creates a newly reshaped identity, a transformative one. Deavere Smith, through her ethnographic techniques, witness and powerful example of storytelling are directly in line and parallel to the work Johnson creates, as well as what Dr. Pettiford-Wates accomplishes through Solo Performance/ RPD and The Conciliation Project. These methodologies and pedagogies are the pinnacle of Ritual Poetic Drama, a fully present journey through “life, death and transformation” and thus in turn close this part of the circle. The next part of our journey rendered here will detail the concepts and exercises involved in Practice, or revelations, a process to “becoming.”

Part Two:

Practice:

Chapter Four

“Revelation(s)”:

The Process to “becoming”

“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”
~ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*⁴

The Beginning

This exploratory journey-work also known as “practice” attempts to create a holistic examination of the process (not “product”) of RPD. Performing a solo piece through embodied creation are the goals of these moments compiled through narrative exercises in the studio space. Journals and selected pieces of the journey-work are present here and are accompanied with details of how the technique of RPD puts these exercises into practice.

The goal of these exercises (or rite of passage moments) is to allow the actor to exhume moments in their lives that caused them pain in communication with joy, anger, sadness. These narrative writings (compiled in a journal kept at all times) become the eventual apprehended narrative embodied through performance during the final solo presentation.

How can I, through this method claim my body as a worthy site of witness? How can RPD teach me to heal myself, more importantly, could I let “the work be the work” to “claim the ground on which I stand”?

The answers to these questions and ultimate creation of a solo performance are a mission to claim, authentically, that I as a queer person can create a space for myself that is autonomous and wholly present. I am beginning this process knowing what I know, and surrendering to the rest, at least I hope so.

This technique aims to uncover my own emotional body as a site of invention and creation, an attempt to heal trauma through performance. It is my fervent wish to embody my own story that is impelled, authentic and present through this technique and performance.

As the facilitation of RPD begins in the studio space, one of the first exercises is the river journey, a guided meditation that is expressed through sound, breath, movement, then text. Sharing is done after the journey to witness to the Community of actors/artists assembled. The actor reads aloud with strong emotion their journey written through narrative form.

The River Journey

“This is for people who want to return to those childhood spaces that have influenced the adults they have become.”

~Tiffany Ana López⁵

Dr. Pettiford-Wates begins the process by calling the Community together inviting them into/onto the space/stage in an opening ritual (the stage is cleansed, washed and dried to begin work). Dr. Pettiford-Wates begins to drum softly to initiate contact with the realm of Ritual (Music) that allows the actor to calm themselves and focus on hearing and experiencing. She then calls the actor to lie on the floor, comfortably, with enough room to spread out in movement and begins to speak the actor into a trancelike state using her voice and breath. Dr. Pettiford-Wates begins to communicate to the prone body of the actor, and give images within which to contextualize the exercise (“imagine you are a feather that is floating up toward the ceiling, now you’re through the ceiling and through the roof of this building... we are going to a place that is a river, the river is you, you are the river and the water...”) to give example of the Poetic. The actor is guided through a series of primary emotional responses (“I want you to think of a time where the water was rushing all around you, it’s turbulent, rocky... go there now, what is that moment in your life...”, etc.) which are then reflected upon later, this

narrative/writing is Drama. Each “moment” in the “River Journey” is embodied through sound, breath, movement, text, then released into transition and the cyclical nature of the exercise begins again as the “journey” continues. The actor is called to cycle through four rite of passage moments.

After the exercise is complete the guided meditation ends and the actor is prompted to write their four major passages into their journals, or journey-work. This time is self-guided in which Dr. Pettiford-Wates encourages you to draw the map of your river journey across the pages of the journal. Each part of the “river journey” corresponds to a specific prompt. Number one being the “entrance” to the river journey with the prompt “and she came to tell me...”, and so on.

“Journey-Work”/ Journal

- 1) “The River become a rushing waterfall, it’s rocky and turbulent”

Primary Emotion: Disbelief, Anger, Hurt

Event: Parents Divorce at Age Five

Prompt: “And she came to tell me...”

And she came to tell me... she was leaving. I couldn’t know what that meant at five years old... how could she expect me to understand. “We don’t love each other anymore.” She tried to tell me that I was loved, but how could I be? No matter what you said, you didn’t know how much that would scar me. It would leave me open for men to hurt me, I wanted to be loved so desperately... and she came to tell me.

- 2) “The River opens up, it’s calm and serene...”

Primary Emotion: Pride, Excitement, Joy

Event: Gay Pride March/Parade NYC 2015

Prompt: “Because of you...”

Because of you... I knew who I was. All of you surrounding me that day as I twirled my faggot ass off, embraced by your humanness. My Brothers and Sisters in Gay Pride. I felt your ancestry under my feet as we marched, all along the way. I walked with them and for those who couldn't... I always will... because of you.

- 3) “The river narrows, it’s becoming barren and dry...”

Primary Emotion: Anger, Resentment, Angst

Event: Breaking up with my first love.

Prompt: “Oh, if only...”

Oh, if only... I could have known then just how much you would fuck me up. Well, you didn't fuck me... I begged you to in my way, but you couldn't. You couldn't because that would have meant that I meant something to you, I would have connected to you and you didn't want that. Love was a lie to you, ultimately. You wanted me to be devoted to you, because you needed to be needed. How you filled my head with lies, and you broke my heart. Oh, if only.

- 4) “The river widens and begins to take you up a mountain range, the

mountain range is change and overcoming obstacles...”

Primary Emotion: Catharsis, Release, Openness

Event: Overcoming Graduate School anxiety.

Prompt: “You always tried to...”

You always tried to... assert yourself over me, anxiety and anger, to hurt me. Maybe that’s why I hate you so much, you remind me of him and I swore I’d never be like my dad, irrationally angry and able to “fly off the handle”. When I realized I didn’t need anyone’s approval but my own I was free. You always tried to...

After the reflections are written the community then clears the stage and is allowed to share their journey with their fellow co-facilitators. Each actor will take space on the stage and in a strong voice with strong emotion deliver their written words. The goal here is not to “perform” the work for an audience. The Community acts as witnesses to the pieces being read/presented. There are no spectators here, this is most important. The goal of delivering these works in a shared presentation format is to hear the narrative written and to witness the strong primary emotion of the actor that they have just discovered through this exercise, the moment of revelation.

Movement Piece

During this exercise, the actor is prompted to create a piece of movement that is devised to either music without words/lyrics or to use natural sounds (breath, percussive movement). There are no limitations to the piece, it can be of the actors own impelling,

and should be rehearsed adequately to define specifics of the piece (where are you, what is the scenario) that is then embodied physically to reflect a “rite of passage moment” within the actors own life. Actors are given the entire space of the stage to work with and are encouraged to do so, using acting blocks if necessary to “create the world” of which they will then inhabit. This exercise is the attempt to get the actor out of the “thinking/intellectualizing” and into “doing/embodiment” of their “rite of passage moment”. The following will denote my own personal context of the movement piece presented and will offer some feedback given by the co-facilitators of my Community.

Music: Mission Impossible Theme

The Scenario: As a child, my best friend (a short-lived relationship) Nick and I would always “play”. We would create James Bond-esque home movies with my large VHS video camera. It was also around this time the movie of the beloved children’s book *Harriet: The Spy* came out. I was a fan of the book as a child and loved the precocious Harriet, her ability to “play” and to be completely serious in her undertakings of “spying” on her neighbors. Nick and I used to create all sorts of home movies, with plot lines, fake deaths, “spy equipment” and I wanted to return to that space. I wanted to capture that sense of play in the movement piece, which I believe I did successfully. I began by popping up over the apron of the stage, and crawling along my belly, then turning over on my back abruptly in a compressed position as I “spied” on the neighbors. Then I skirted along the “fences” of the neighborhood, my neighborhood was a series of lots side by side, most people had privacy fences in their backyards because one backyard literally was right next to another. I began to write in my “spy notebook” more frivolously

as the piece went on hiding behind and around acting blocks to simulate trees and such. At two points in the piece I was “caught” by my Father, which did occur often. Nick and I would get a good scene going perhaps roughhouse a little too much and my Father would swoop in and put an end to it, telling me it was time for dinner and for Nick to go home. The piece ended after a “karate attack scene” in which I failed my limbs all over the place in an attempt to fend off an “enemy” in the scene. My Father comes out, tells us to pack it up, and I end the scene dejected forced out of “play” and into reality.

“What did we like?”:

The Community enjoyed the sense of “play”, “physicality” and my grasping at a sense of “joy” that the piece connoted. The Community appreciated my sense of space using the entire stage to “play out the scene” and to “embody” the “joy and play” of being a kid again.

“Challenges?”:

Some in the Community were challenged by the “story”, as in “where were you in the scene...” “who was in charge...”, “are you experiencing some ‘danger’ in the scene... that was not clear.”

“Questions?”:

“What are you ‘fighting’ in that ‘karate battle’?”, “What is the mission?”, “What/Who were you spying on?”, “How does it end?”, “Did you rely on the music too much to ‘telegraph’ the story?”

“Suggestions...”:

“What are the two different moments of getting caught, perhaps explore those

more...”, “Can you either get closer to the goal of the mission, or further away from it to create conflict...”, “What is it you are searching for and what happens when and if you find it...”

As discussed previously, the movement piece is an attempt of the RPD method to get you out of the “head” and into the “body” which I definitely feel was accomplished. This was a wonderful exercise because it allowed me to capture the “play” and “spontaneity” of being a kid again, recalling those moments of joy that did not rely on the “trauma” of my childhood to take over. I was able to embody the frivolity of kids being kids, doing silly things, “spying” and making some fun home movies... I wonder, where those movies are now?

Emotional Mapping

This begins the process of the deepest “immersion” into RPD that the Community has experienced to date, roughly occurring five weeks into the process. As actors we have come to the moment where our inhibitions and fears are ready to be exposed. Our emotional selves ready to be mapped, traversed and explored further with each remaining class. Emotional mapping consists of the actor beginning in a prone position on the floor, as Dr. Pettiford-Wates facilitates the drum beat. She then calls each actor to fully participate for a “good journey” into our emotional selves. The actor focuses first on the breath then the guided facilitation begins with movement, then sound and finally, as always, text. Dr. Pettiford-Wates asks each emotional place on the “map” that is our bodies be fully present, with eyes closed, to allow ourselves this journey through this emotional button pushing. (As an aside, the entire Community after this exercise is

absolutely spent). This can be a precarious moment as a lot of fear begins to surface in the actor, their habits and inhibitions are about to be displayed. Dr. Pettiford-Wates calls to each actor, “we are going to journey through several emotional states now, each lead with strong primary emotion, you are called to allow the emotion to be in you, on you and all over you,” it is then that the emotion is named, for instance, “joy”. Each “emotion” is then guided with Dr. Pettiford-Wates summoning each actor to “not plateau” as they make their journey through sound, breath and movement. She says not to get in the “robotic” or “choreographed” moments/movement (which is where I tended to get “stuck”). The goal of this exercise is to allow the body to be fully immersed in the journey, to allow ourselves to experience the fullest range of emotional spaces during this process. As each emotion is cycled through, it begins with naming the emotion (“joy”) then that emotion is “dropped in” to the body through movement, breath, sound and text. Once that cycle comes to an end there is a “transition” period, where the next emotion is named, (“shame”, for example) and then embodied. After a series of emotions, when the journey winds down, Dr. Pettiford-Wates invites the actor to lie on the floor, re-summoning the breath, relaxing the body and returning to the state at which we were at the beginning of the journey. This calls upon the cyclical nature of life, death and transformation that is present within The African Continuum. After the cycle/cool-down is accomplished the actor is compelled, and instructed to “free-write”. This is writing without stopping to the beat of the drum and then shared through their embodied narrative. Here is what I wrote:

“Journey- Work”/ Journal

Fuck! Where to begin this whirlwind of a journey! Sure I plateaued, I’ve always

been the intellectual type, but I felt some things so deeply here that I saw pictures. Sound and movement bring earths, planets, constellations of galaxies long since buried, of grief, pride, shame, regret, torment, to me. I felt as though I was engrossed and trying to capture myself, the truest essence when we get out of our heads and into the body. I want to be held in this space, feeling the safety of it... *(at this point I began to waver, Dr. Pettiford-Wates invited us to keep writing past the block, “do not turn this into literature”, she is fond of saying... “don’t plot, write”).*

I’m not sure what else to write here, except sunshine and rainbows, trees buried under ice. The flower blooms when it is time, this time is mine. Like a Phoenix I emerge. Behind the mask as it comes off, over the rainbow with so far to go... Maybe “Over The Rainbow” could be a title?

Solo Journey Number One

This is perhaps one of the most impactful moments of work during this process so far. I say that because the individual journey is an even deeper experience than the emotional mapping. Instead of calling forth the emotion we give ourselves over to whatever emotion presents itself within the moment that we are experiencing, we aren’t prompted (“shame”, “pride”, etc.). This is tricky because some actors (myself included) have presupposed what our “moment” might be. Dr. Pettiford-Wates calls that “rolodex” where we are flipping through our emotional traumas to “pick one” to embody. That is something that I have to keep reminding myself of as I undergo this process. I am meant to be fully present, not “producing” or “narrating” as there are no spectators inside the

process of Solo through RPD. I have not felt myself spectating, which is a good thing. I am attempting to be wholly “there” within the confines of the work. I will admit here that this is where the intellectual side of me begins to manifest itself as I tend to “get stuck” in moments of “movement” often repeating the same movement over and over during a journey. This means that I plateau when I “hit the spot” that I believe I am supposed to “be in”. I tend to “settle” as opposed to pushing myself further past the “comfort”, past the “plateau” facilitating sound, movement and breath to carry me through. This has been one of the harder things to grapple with during this process of enormous change. I am, however, not resistant to it and show the ability to “come out of the repetition” when guided by Dr. Pettiford-Wates. She is able to keep the focus within the body of the actor as she is facilitating, which is a monumental task. At points she will even use her body as a reminder, by touching the side of her body next to yours as the actor, getting you to get into your body more and out of the performative space of “what the narrative looks like”.

This process begins with the actors called to a circle. The actors then begin to sing an African chant that symbolizes the safety of Community and the sacredness of the circle. It is called, “*Tu-es*”, which roughly translated means “we are all together”.

The circle of shared space then “calls” two, sometimes three actors “into” it to “journey”, other members of the Community will assist the journey for the “journey-er”, offering themselves as guides (allowing the actor who is journeying to feel comfortable and safe. The assistants/co-facilitators for the actor journeying also embody the sound breath and movement of the journeyer).

The exercise begins with Dr. Pettiford-Wates drumming, allowing a focus to be placed on breath only, then using sound and the “laying on of hands”, a particularly

touching moment when the touch of the Community allows the “journey-er” to know that they are held in the space, protected by their facilitators and ready to begin their work.

Dr. Pettiford-Wates, through a state of relaxation and presence begins the journey by asking the actor to come to a place, “between (age) and (age)”, for instance, “I want you to go to the place between the ages of six and eleven where you experienced a rite of passage moment, do not rolodex to the moment, allow the moment to come into your body now, that moment, with strong primary emotion is in you, it’s on you, it’s all over you...”

The primary emotion of the “moment” is then enacted and physicalized through sound, breath, movement and finally text, where the actor and their facilitators are embodying these specific moments. This physical devising can be exhausting. In my case, I was performing “at” the thing, instead of “allowing” the moment to be connected throughout the entire vessel of the body, I was “dancing” as opposed to “living” in certain moments.

Each moment begins and ends with drumming, coming back to sound and breath before transitioning to the next moment connected to the same event or rite of passage. These moments are usually three distinct instances connected to the same event in this rite of passage journey. The exercise comprises a totality of around thirty minutes of “process”.

Each journeyer is then compelled and at this point “impelled” to write the journey they have just experienced in their journal and to not stop writing or attempt to construct narrative out of what just happened. Something happens in this space, the pen begins to move and the journey does indeed pour out. In this process of “automatic writing” the

ego becomes divorced from the mind. When you allow that to happen the words will come.

My share:

“Journey-Work”/ Journal

Fuck! Why don't you believe me? No, I said NO!

His hand on my back, I felt it across my skin, my sixteen year old skin, the sun blazing it's yellow orange light through the curtains. That smell of the river water. The rocking gently of the boat. I felt it again, how innocent I was, his naked body in bed with me. I told him no, he wanted to masturbate in bed, with me in it. A child, what else did he want? I'll never know. I told Dad, he said he'd talk to Randy, he did, then he came back and said it didn't happen. “Sounds like you were watching too much TV.” I never saw him again, he didn't molest me, but he took something from me that day that I never got back, now I realize that. He took the trust that a child should have in a parent, he took the soft nature that I always had and exploited it.

Would I have liked it? Did I want him to touch me?

Did he know something about me that I didn't?

I shamed myself over it, burying it when Dad told me to squash it.

I always wonder, would I have liked it?

I wonder where he ended up, his wife, his children...

Who else did he do this to?

Did he ever get his shit together?

It was during this process of the first journey in particular that I began to discover a block within myself that I had not known existed before. I've always been a "performer" as I've mentioned previously with complete control of the technique that I "use" to create a character. I realize now that I was attempting to execute "technique" here, or "form" rather than "content". Dr. Pettiford-Wates advised me, "In this methodology, content *always* comes before form." I understood finally that I had been so acculturated into creating a "product" as a performer, that I "was" the "product". I would allow myself permission to come to class, participate, but there was something missing, I felt. I knew where I was within the confines of the journey and didn't feel taken "out" of it, necessarily, but my entire body was not present.

I likened this moment to feeling a literal block sitting at my solar plexus and that there was a divide between my head (intellect) and my body (heart). I was intellectually "going there" allowing my mind and memory to create a witnessed experience, a "narrative". I could feel my body stuck in this mode of repetition, I was "performing" the movement and not "being" the movement. It was not "organic", nor "embodied". I can reflect now that that was because I knew the intellectual process of journeying, but was "holding the banana", which is a phrase Dr. Pettiford-Wates uses to describe how we as actors are acculturated in technique, practice and control. We become rigid when confronted with a methodology that is meant to come from our own bodies. When we "hold the banana" we are in control at all times, a defense mechanism, because we are afraid to let go due to whatever reasons our intellect conjures. I was proof of that and that caused me to feel shame because I wanted to "let go" so badly.

It was at this point that I had to acknowledge that I had been setting myself up for

sabotage, as hard as that is for me to write. I realized that in an effort to complete a “creative project” in relation to this thesis, I was attempting to “birth” this narrative that had not been fully explored yet. I had all of these experiences coming up in my emotional memory that could be used for “narrative” and creating a solo performance and I knew that. I had to realize and did at this moment that I had to write the unspeakable thing. My most vulnerable place, internally, had to be exposed to the Community of artists that I was sharing this journey with.

With that in mind, this is what I shared during our next class period, my unspeakable (until now) truth. I render it here and expose it, because I want to use it, to lift the foundations of myself and begin the process to full immersion into the traumatic body that has held me these thirty-one years. In an attempt to liberate myself and to “fully embody” my own story, I shared the following:

An attempt to navigate “the block”:

To write the unspeakable thing...

I feel like I’ve never been a good son. My family could never know what I was capable of, what I could do to men’s bodies, to make them leave scratches in my headboard, to make their bodies shake and writhe... if they did they would be ashamed of me.

I’m ashamed of myself because there is something I’ve kept so buried I don’t know whether it’s actual or not, because I’ve convinced myself that it can’t be.

I’ve never felt like a man...

The only time I’ve ever “felt” masculine is when I would do, as all boys do, and discover what was in between my legs. I’ve never felt attached to it, but I

strangely am.

I remember discovering my dad's porn once, I was more fascinated by what human bodies were capable of, intellectually than the physical sensations, and those came later.

I've always felt a disconnect between my sex and my gender.

The truest truth is, I've wanted, identified and needed to be aligned with "woman". That wasn't the hand I was dealt though, maybe that's why I don't believe in "God" either.

Somehow this body feels wrong, I feel so aligned with a feminine energy... but I can't say the word trans*, I guess until just now. I don't really know what that means, exactly. Except, that I transition between states, I feel. Not either/or, but both/and.

I don't mind what this body looks like outwardly, I guess. I dress for comfort with some sense of style, some say flair. But inside there's always been a little girl hiding somewhere, soft and delicate who likes pretty things, who wants to be a Queen.

I want to meet her and give her a chance to "come out and know herself"...

Could I love her?

The "Process" continues

Each class following the initial journey-work of Community, members begin to synthesize the RPD methodology as practice. Dr. Pettiford-Wates requires each Community member to share their written work and receive a series of feedback from the

Community based on the questions asked (Challenges? Suggestions?, etc.). The community member begins to assemble their processed work in navigation of creating the embodied Solo Performance at the end of the semester. Once again, this is “process”, not “product”... which I will admit has been a substantial block for me. I’ve learned that I put restrictions on myself, my body, my work by attempting to make it “do the thing”, when this process is antithetical to that “well-made” canonical model.

As I began the next phase of putting it together I had finally come to understand that what I “was”, was not who I “am”. Meaning, my presupposed identity was not all there was to me. I truly began to understand the concept of *Ubuntu* in this moment. *Ubuntu* means, loosely, “I am, because we are”.

In order for me to fully surrender to the “process” of presenting a solo work, I had to know what I “was” and what brought me to this place now. Our ego is what is being shed through the Continuum. This, in and of itself is a pure moment of revelation. The cyclical nature of the African Continuum allows us to “*sankofa*”, to find and discover those places that were lost, stolen, taken and oppressed within us throughout our lives. This perhaps is the “meta” lesson of the technique. In order to discover who I “am”, I had to “*sankofa*” to who I “was”, at least who I thought I was. That person, the story that I had to tell will be detailed in Part Three, “Performance”.

Part Three:

Performance

Chapter Five

“So Far...”

A Journey-Work (In Process)

“Your silences will not protect you.”
~Audre Lorde⁶

“All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story; to vomit the anguish up.”
~James Baldwin⁷

Performance as Process

This process has imparted many lessons that I daresay cannot be completely and conclusively summarized here, as much as I will attempt to do so. The most impactful lessons have come from listening, witnessing to a Community of Artists that I barely knew before we began the journey-work process. During the Spring 2019 semester as I prepared for this thesis, creative project and eventual solo performance I was tasked with taking the course entitled Solo Performance as a student, a Community member and not a Graduate Teaching Assistant/ Co-Facilitator. I had the pleasure of witnessing an entire group of twelve undergraduates take the course and change their lives during the Fall 2018 semester and now I was a part of that cyclical journey. How unprepared I was, I reflect now. Having “seen” the process and been a part of it before had allowed me to witness the transformative growth of a group of young students, to come into their fullest selves and “own the ground on which they stand”... and I wanted to do the same thing. I had borne witness to those students, rejoiced, comforted. challenged them. Now I had to do the same for the toughest critic of all, myself.

As much as I wanted to let go, to be present, it wasn't until I acknowledged that the “block” that came from my own sense of self-protection that I truly began to work. I was standing in my own way or, as Dr. Pettiford-Wates says, “holding the banana”. This is a terrific metaphor for how we are acculturated into how to “be” onstage, how we create and fashion “performances”. The “banana” symbolizes the control that our minds produce as we hold onto it, it is the epitome of ego and self-protection. The “story” we tell ourselves that we have total control over. Only until we “are” the “banana”, when we “become” “story” and allow ourselves to have the skin peeled, to be ingested and

consumed by “story” can we truly “let the banana go”, according to Dr. Pettiford-Wates. I struggled against my own failings or what I perceived to be failings, becoming frustrated that I couldn’t “just let go”. Anytime we place the word “just” before anything it is both a judgment and a negation of the words that follow after. I wasn’t “just” going to “let it go”, I had spent my entire life building these protected walls. Now, at thirty-one years of age, I had to go back to the beginning to uncover, to excavate what got in the way in the first place. I will admit here, I was scared to do that.

I don’t consider myself a delicate person. I’m passionate, opinionated and can be rather blunt at times. At times I can be incredibly cerebral, esoteric and then be incredibly silly. I’ve always taken to the phrase, “I contain multitudes”, nothing more appropriate than that adage to describe this experience.

I began to explore the concept of “Revelation”, what James Baldwin describes as a story “revealing” itself through “impellation”, which means that the story has no other way to come out than to literally be expelled from the body. The story pours out of you because it is yours, you have no other choice but to write it down and embody it because it is time, a season to do so. I had prior to this experience, always likened a “revelation” to something biblical, a literal earth-shaking moment. The power of the “revelation” is that it is much more quiet than that, sometimes you don’t even know that something has penetrated the psyche, settling into the marrow of your bones until much later. That was a discovery for me during this process. I was waiting for the moment when the “revelation” was to be like a cartoon moment, a smack on the head, when truthfully, a “revelation” is an opening of the heart. Dr. Pettiford-Wates offered that, in this process, as hard as it is for us to grasp.

In these moments, somewhere beyond our limited perception of thinking, everything we “thought” we knew, a door opens inside of us if we allow it. What you are about to witness, read, and hopefully have seen with your own eyes are my faults, my fears, my dreams. I’ve spent too long waiting for the moments to come to me. Now comes the time to apprehend them.

With my fullest self, with my heart, I offer the following words.

Revelation(s) was a collaborative effort built upon the Community of Artists who have opened themselves to the process of Ritual Poetic Drama within The African Continuum. The student run theatre organization known as SALT (Shafer Alliance Laboratory Theatre) graciously accepted a proposal to perform an evening of Solo Performances, which culminated in a two evening run on March 15-16, 2019 in Newdick Theatre at Shafer Street Playhouse on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

The evening was titled Revelation(s): An Evening of Solo Performance (in Process) and featured the work of Charlotte Kulak (“Playing with Fire”) and Ashley W. Grantham (“So Far...”), each performance was accompanied by an audience talk-back as these works are still in process, relying on Dr. Pettiford-Wates charge, “Process, not Product”.

“So Far...” An Exploratory Script by Ashley W. Grantham

Enter to Shake It Off

(I will cut off the music with a hand signal)

This is my baggage...

I carry it with me wherever I go... And I just want to say... it’s fucking heavy.

(drops bag)

Oh, that's better.

(the "chain")...

I'm not going to say I've had it any worse than anyone else, that would be an oppression Olympics and I'm not into that.

I learned that phrase in group therapy once.

Sometimes I don't feel like getting out of bed in the morning, anyone else?

I'm firmly convinced that I'll end up an eccentric old man, wrapped in shawls and turbans like Norma Desmond (does Norma) with a bunch of cats...

Little Edie:

"Oh Hi... You look absolutely terrific honestly, Mother wanted me to come out in a kimono so we had quite a fight..."

Why am I telling you all this?

Because it's time to lay it down... let go... and apprehend "the story". My story.

So... I'm white... now, if that's a problem for you... I'm working on it... because it's a problem for me.

I've never wanted to be white, in fact, that's part of the baggage I brought with me.

I also was born and raised in the South, anyone else? Yep, I'm a sissy, soft-boy, intellectual, performative, song and dance faggot from the South... and I'm up here to tell you some things...

One of the things I've struggled with in this process of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum is allowing myself permission to take something that wasn't mine to begin with... I mean, let's be real here, we white folks have been doing that for thousands of years...

I'm tired of being a colonizer... I was afraid of "laying claim" to something that wasn't mine...

Something else I had to let go of.

Because this isn't about what I "thought I knew"...

This is about the story, my story "so far"... , Revelation.

JB quote

James Baldwin said that, a black, queer man who was so disillusioned by the racism and systemic oppression of black people that he lived in France as an expat for most of his life... he saw what we were becoming... what we are now... divided.

I didn't and don't want to be divided anymore, I had to do something about it.

I discovered I had to *sankofa*, which means "go back and get what was lost, stolen or taken from you"...

I was scared, I am scared to be standing here.

I never thought I'd EVER say that on a stage.

Our vulnerability is our most powerful tool, I believe.

So... this is me, this is you... *Ubuntu*, "I am, because we are."

I guess I'm asking you to hold me, I have to trust that you will.

By the way, if you agree with anything I say tonight, we say Ase. That means, "I agree with my whole being"... if you feel yourself "impelled" please say Ase.

Whoo, I feel like giving a testimony tonight! How many of y'all know how to testify? Sometimes, you've just got to lay it all down... unburden yourself, release it and give it on up to glory. How many of you know what glory is?! I'm here to

tell you that glory is right in front of you, all you have to do is call on Him! And if you do, pick up that phone right now and tell our prayer warriors that you'll give a donation to our love fund... it's an offering... and we'll send you a miracle spring water...

My grandmother love this stuff, she still sends Benny Hinn her money, TBN. She thinks she can be healed.

Nannie

Lord, I verify that in Jesus' Name!

Bring me my rag bag would you shug... I swanee I hurt.

Takes out pill bottle from bag, takes one

Ashley Wayne Grantham, what is that on your arm?

Don't tell me... that's a tattoo ain't it... what's it of?

An activism symbol... oh, it wouldn't happen to be something QUEER would it?

Have mercy, I knew it, something queer, that's something queer on your arm ain't it?

Lord, son, I just don't understand... why would you want to put something like that on your body that won't ever go away?

Me

That's just it, Nannie, I don't want it to go away. Because I'm not going away. I refuse to be erased by you anymore. I know you don't like that I'm some queer faggot, but you don't get to choose this... I didn't choose it. I am.

*talk about pink triangle, Holocaust, ACT UP, Aids plague, witnessing and bearing responsibility for those who aren't here anymore, how many we lost and

continue to lose to the epidemic of AIDS. Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner, Sylvia Riviera, Marsha P. Johnson, Jim Fouratt. Names you've never heard of and don't care to know made me who I am. I always thought you made me who I am, and you are a part of it. But, you've suffocated me too... and I'm sorry to have to say that to you here, in front of all of these people. You burdened me with your guilt. I took it from you because I didn't know any better...

Mom

And she came to tell me she was leaving...

Ashley, your Dad and I don't love each other anymore...

I'm going to be going now...

I won't be living here anymore...

That doesn't mean I'm not your Mama, that we love you any less.

Me at five

Mom, Mommy, MOMMY...

Me to Dad

God, Dad, what is your problem?!

Dad

You... I'm sorry son, you know I didn't mean that.

Me

He said it though...

My deepest fear.

That I was the problem.

I've always tried to be a good son... I think I've failed.

The truth was, I needed parents who knew how to guide me... and I don't think I've ever had that. They were so young.

They couldn't protect me...

Transition to wrestling on the floor with Nick

Take off the Power Ranger Mask

Kiss

I first kissed a boy when I was ten.

He was my best friend, at the time.

Something happened then, I liked it, and wanted to do it again.

This is what I mean about not being a good son.

They couldn't know how I made the boys leave scratches in my headboard, make their eyes roll back in their heads...

Pulls letter out of bag

To the boys I sucked off in the front seat of their cars, that I kissed without knowing why, that I thought I loved:

You are some greedy motherfuckers.

I gave and gave, begged you to give me the smallest piece of yourself that which you chose to keep locked away. You ignored my desperation, I guess you could smell it. Desperate as I was for you to enter me. I gave you pieces of myself, because I felt unlovable. I felt that way for a long time. Remember when I bought you that book of love poems and underlined every one? When you begged me to give your lips a rest, because you were tired of kissing me? When you lied to me? When we chatted online, and I went over to your house, a stranger, to feel arms

around me as we watched a movie, ending up in bed, inevitably sucking some unworthy dick like a good faggot?

I gave you something, and demanded a return that you weren't able to fulfill.

That's my own fault. I accept that. I thought if I did it good enough, did what you liked, you'd love me.

It's different now.

I know that my worth isn't in how desperately I need to be loved.

My worth is *that* I love.

I finally have someone who loves me, and sees me.

By the way, thanks for telling me about your prison record...

XOXO, Gossip Girl

Alexa, play *I'm Every Woman!*

Dancing

Song plays for about a minute until I cut it off...

I should probably tell you... I love women.

Wait, let me back up...

I love Black Women... and they tend to love me.

Ms. Donna

Hey, baby! You look like you're in a New York State of Mind today... you're looking good. How's school? I'm doing okay, just trying to keep these children at Camp in line... but you know, Mama will take care of them. Just like I took care of you, Pookie.

You do what you gotta do. Go head on, baby. Do your thing. I love you.

God is a Woman.

God is A Woman plays...

There, I've said it. Don't @ me, Don't write me letters.

In fact, I think God is a Black Woman... and she is pissed.

But seriously, have you ever been held by a Black Woman? Have you ever had that love penetrate your being?

When black women speak, I stand up straighter. My heart swells.

I just had my Ancestry DNA results done, and it turns out, I have 1% Ancestry in Cameroon, Congo and Southern Bantu peoples... I don't know what that means exactly, but I'm open.

Transition

I didn't mention this before... but like every good queer person, I worship at the feet of the Divas. So there's "God" right... and then... there's Patti Lupone...

Are you there Patti, It's me Ashley...

Hey Doll! Listen, I just wanted to pray to your brassy, magnificent trap, and to tell you that I think you're doing great things in the world, like that female centered version of Company, fucking with the Patriarchy, all that fun stuff. I'm still sorry that we never got to see your Norma Desmond on Broadway. I just wanted to take a second and say thank you. Thank you for helping me be the biggest musical theatre queen alive when I hear you belt high E's above the staff on the OBC of Evita. Thank you for holding me in your flannel mouth, with the questionable diction, even though I don't care... no one sings Meadowlark like you. Thank you for teaching me that having a strong voice, not being afraid to "sing out louise",

and present your honest opinions and screw what doesn't serve you is the best way to be. Take it all, and regret nothing.

You've helped me to be... and I'll never be able to thank you enough for that.

Also, thanks for totally ignoring me at the stage door that time.

Even after I screamed at you, "Yo, Patti!"

(does "the look")

Keep on keepin' on.

Love, Ashley

Transition

All of this to say... I'm here now. You're here... and we're responsible for one another. Whether you know it or not, you've held me this whole time. And that's something I'll never be able to repay you for.

So Thank You.

Like I said earlier, we make our homes within each other. We have so much to witness through one another, and I'm grateful. I hope that you can hear that you are enough. Say what you need, don't be afraid to touch, listen with your whole heart. If we are meant to heal anything, that's how we can start.

This is for now, and then, and before...

Love liberates.

Ase.

Take off chain.

Blackout.

The Bitch is Back plays

Reflection on Revelation(s): An Evening of Solo Performance (In Process)

After each performance of Revelation(s) a talkback ensued to allow further facilitation of questions, suggestions, challenges and offerings of support for the performances witnessed. As I personally wanted feedback on my own piece to facilitate the growth of “So Far” this was extremely beneficial. It also assisted me in placing the entirety of the work “so far” into context of the greater work of the African Continuum in my own pedagogical process. Performing such highly personal, vulnerable work each night was truly an experience I will never be able to describe fully. I felt the most seen I’ve ever felt onstage up and to this point in my twenty years in the theatre. I also don’t think I’ve ever felt so liberated as being able to tell a part of my own story in such a way that only my body was the conduit. I’ve played various characters during my career onstage, many different embodiments, but there was always a “technique” I associated with “getting there”, to use acting terminology/ “actor speak”. I had my playlist of songs to “get into character”, I physically warmed up my body in a certain way, tailored to the role in the show. Each component was separate for me, up until this process. I had to allow myself to surrender to my own work, the story my body and spirit needed to tell. This allowance facilitated “So Far” to take place.

There was definitely an unburdening, a release, a crossing of a liminal threshold within myself that I had before kept firmly intact. I stepped “into” the work, and allowed it to “be”. I allowed myself “to be”. Interestingly through the performances and subsequent talkback I was flooded with feelings of wanting to change the script from one night to the next, as most of the feedback echoed my own questions about the work I was doing onstage. I did not, however, alter any of the work, instead choosing to keep the

integrity of what I had written (as referenced in the previous section) whole. I felt as though that would have been a disservice to myself and to my audience(s). They deserved to experience the work I had written not the work that was incubating within my body and spirit.

This entire process felt like “incubation” as Dr. T. would call it. She uses the “birth” analogy quite frequently when speaking of solo performance and I could not agree more. You have to allow the work to take residence, mold and shape into form and then be birthed out. With birthing, “you don’t want the baby to come out before it is ready to come out,” Dr. T. told me once. In essence, doing these performances at this time (March 15-16, 2019) was “too early” to be fully realized and I see that now. This was not the original plan for the solo work/performances, as I had originally requested a later date in the season of SALT (Shafer Alliance Laboratory Theatre). The date was chosen after some scheduling conflicts of which I had little to no control over. In a way, I’m very happy that the work occurred when it did, despite my previous statement, because it allowed me to see that the work is truly “in process”. The feedback I have received echoed my own thoughts about what I was “doing” onstage. In essence, I “had” to do this performance now, to “get it out” in regard to the “performative”. This is what Dr. T. calls the “exposition” to birth the eventual “fully embodied” solo performance to come at the end of April 2019 for Dr. T.’s Solo Performance course (in which I am enrolled). As I said to Dr. T. after the performances conclusion, “now I feel like I’m ready to truly begin!”

Each evening, I noticed that the performance changed slightly, in ways that I had not anticipated and of which I am very pleased. I didn’t do a complete “warm-up” as I

would do previously with other shows. I simply wanted to allow my body, voice, breath and text to tell the story I had set down on paper. I do feel as though I accomplished that, aided by having the script onstage with me. I took that moment of “revelation” of having the script present onstage from Wes Seals, who, in a brilliant moment during a rehearsal offered, “What happens when you just allow the text and your body/movement/breath to tell the story?” Seals holds his MFA in Theatre Pedagogy from VCU, is an adjunct professor and professional actor, director and choreographer. He also is a collaborator and facilitator of incredible work; it was a pleasure to have him attend a rehearsal. As I began the rehearsal process one issue began to present itself. I was attempting to navigate props, moving about the stage without focus and generally “performing ‘at’” the “thing”, this revelatory allowance of “simplicity” was birthed and I am so grateful for that note. In fact, the feedback I received was praiseworthy to that regard and it wouldn’t have been without Wes Seals.

Engaging the body in the course of the performance was something that I was nervous about, because I thought I “already knew how to do that”. I reflected in the solo piece itself, “this isn’t about what I thought I knew”, and this was certainly true in that regard. I felt, after each performance a full body engagement that truly was exhausting, something I had not felt before in a long time after a performance. That tells me that I was allowing the vessel of my physical body to be fully present and active within the telling of “story”, that being said, I do wish I would have used the body even more. I plan to, in the next revision of these pieces to engage the body more with physical levels, levels of playing space on the stage and some staging issues that were challenging both for myself and the audience.

The voice has never been an issue for me as an actor, or so I thought, before these pieces. The audience was challenged at points when my voice dropped in register, which I was surprised about, but grateful for that feedback. I allowed my voice to alter to present different “characters” to the audience, and for the most part that worked. I had some moments of what I will call “internal monologue” that the audience was challenged by, and I must say that I agree. As a performer I have been told more than once, “don’t allow the emotion in your voice to make you incoherent.” Those very personal, interior moments would have been better served by facilitating the breath. Breathing through the emotion and re-centering then continuing with the text. I had previously, as most actors do, when they go “internal” drop their voices to convey emotion, which I can see was a bit of a hold-over from the “technique” side of my training and muffled some of the sound. Through engaged breath work that could have been eliminated, or lessened to a degree. In the next iteration of these pieces, I would like to engage with some Kristin Linklater exercises to allow this facilitation to take place in the future. Linklater and her performance as practical application speaks to the foundational idea of the spine as the basis of breath. Her exercises keep actors and other voice-workers grounded in their bodies due to the fact that they are always thinking of how the spine, it’s alignment and positioning facilitate the natural voice, the natural breath. Her book *Freeing The Natural Voice* is considered a seminal work in Voice and Speech Pedagogy.

In regard to breath, I felt that I used it effectively, but there can always be more breath. In fact, in Solo Performance within the RPD methodology the breath is what we start with and return to and I did well to remember that in regard to “performing” these pieces. (Recall sound, breath and movement). I started the work with breath and I felt

used it to carry me through... there can always be more. In particular, I would like to reflect on a certain moment when I began overcome with emotion in the embodiment of “story.” I was composing a letter in the performance piece, to all the “unworthy former relationships,” and having done that reflect on my current relationship, which is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. I say in the piece, “I finally have someone who sees me and loves me,” and at this point I began to cry openly onstage and feel my breath constrict. Rather than “perform” that moment I allowed it to happen and facilitated it through the release and exhalation of breath. I felt “the block” rising, the “performative action” and I do believe I squelched that with the allowance of that breath to bring me through to the next moment. I released, let go and continued. Performance, in this moment, was relying on the practice that I had cultivated through this process. I felt held by the audience in this moment, and held by my own “desire”/“need” to “impel” the story, to allow it to happen to me and not be waylaid by it. Upon reflection, this felt to me one of the truest moments where the entirety of breath, voice, body and text came together as one to guide me through, all thanks to the foundation of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum and its reliance on story.

Findings

As this process is never truly “concluded” this will be absent of a formal “conclusion.” I will attempt to synthesize the essential components of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum as they relate to the initial charge of healing queer trauma. Having undergone this process, not product, I have been able to feel such a tremendous liberation of the self during it. Engaging and writing my own solo performance has been challenging, humbling and very healing. I have been particularly

touched by the feedback that the audience felt acknowledged during my solo performance, that they felt as though they could be “seen and heard” during the piece, encouraged to “offer feedback in the form of saying ‘Ase’ and snapping their fingers” (in agreement and solidarity). I would like to recall the elements that made this journey possible, *sankofa* to the beginning of this process.

How does Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum and by extension, solo performance, uncover, unmask and heal queer trauma through witnessing and performance practice? How do these methods give us an intersectional approach to talking about race, identity, gender and bridge those divides? How does this devised work of solo performance allow the author as practitioner to claim the ground on which they stand, unmask themselves, and surrender to their own healing?

It began with questions, so many that permeated my mind that it was a jumble of theory, an attempt to explain “what I thought I knew” up and to this point. I had to acknowledge these elements and release them to “give birth” to the solo performance event of Revelation(s). I had to loose myself from the systemic and institutional confines of “creating a product” which I had been acculturated and trained in for most of my life. In answer to how does RPD and by extension, solo performance, uncover, unmask and heal queer trauma through witnessing, I had to understand that the process was not an “either/or” proposition. It was not either “what I thought I knew” OR “what I know now”, it was both/and. This, in essence, “queers” the paradigm of theatrical canonicity as we let go of BOTH the acculturation of technique AND step into the present work of “becoming the story”. The inclusion and allowance of “both/and” is inherently queer and diversely inclusive, a major moment of revelation.

Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum and Solo Performance guide us as performers through witnessing of the community of artists present and uncovering the power of the witness of living and breathing story. These are crafted from our own narratives that are inherently intersectional. We as the vessels of story are healing our own divide by witnessing through these techniques of recording our own narrative. Embodying the “rites of passage” moments, using sound, breath and movement to facilitate the journey-work required to “being with and in the work”.

We are claiming space on the sacred ground of the stage as our uncovering. It truly is an experience that I will be forever grateful for, this unburdening of the self. Claiming myself as an artist worthy of invention. Truthfully witnessing that my own story deserves and needs to be told through the auspices of this methodology of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum has been the greatest gift.

Each of the theories represented here, during “Life”, “Death” and “Transformation” are the elements of which the Black Aesthetic/ Black Theatre Movement, and the African Continuum stand on their ground. It is through these theories and methodologies that artists are allowed to “name” themselves as worthy, credible, powerful sites of invention. Through the performance techniques of E. Patrick Johnson, Anna Deavere Smith, Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates the artist is called, challenged and charged with the responsibility to own themselves, to “name” themselves and to release each and every thing they thought they knew about what it means to embody and create story, a far cry from our well-made canonical model. Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum is an allowance of the liminal spaces within our narratives, within ourselves as creators that we are encouraged to break apart. We come to the threshold and

zenith of ourselves through this method, which is the greatest pedagogical tool I have been gifted during my tenure with and in this process.

Theory, Practice and Performance have lead us to examine, excavate and mine Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum to its many intersections. The methodology operates as we have seen in conjunction with the already prescribed canon as a “both/and” scenario. The entirety of RPD crosses many of the same liminal thresholds as performance studies, trauma studies, memory studies and queer theory. At each of these intersections meaning is made, the self is unmade and the performative body finds its release into the powerful light of revelation.

I have attempted throughout this process to find healing between each of these intersected groups. Ritual Poetic Drama is a methodology of personal growth and revelation (to me that signifies healing). I believe it shows how theory and practice can assist this cathartic process, thus the joining of theory, practice and performance.

When and only when we are ready the doorway shows itself and the path is made clear to us. The path was set before me before I began this process, I believe. This is the work I was meant to undertake. Through this process I have gained the strongest ground upon on which I stand, my own. For the first time I am able to plant two feet upon it, lift up my eyes and thankfully, humbly say, Ase.

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Notes

- ¹ Part One, Chapter One, Epigraph from *Black Acting Methods*:
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- ² Part One, Chapter Two, Epigraph from *solo/black/woman*:
Johnson, E. Patrick and Ramon H. Rivera-Servera, *solo/black/woman*.
Northwestern University Press, Illinois. Print. 2014.
- ³ Part One, Chapter Three, Epigraph from Audre Lorde, Goodreads.com:
Lorde, Audre. Accessed Online, 2019.
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/127673-the-sharing-of-joy-whether-physical-emotional-psychic-or-intellectual>
- ⁴ Part Two, Epigraph from *Giovanni's Room*:
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- ⁵ Part Two, "The River Journey", Epigraph from *Growing Up Chicana/o: An Anthology*
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- ⁶ Part Three, Epigraph from Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*:
"Your Silence Will Not Protect You" Silver Press. Print. 2017.
- ⁷ Part Three, Epigraph from James Baldwin, Goodreads.com
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Appendix A: Literature Review

The Foundation: “The Opening”

This Black Acting Method, Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum, established by Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates is centered in a practice of “circle-work” and building of “community”. This technique allows the actor to “impel” their own story through various exercises and creative strategies, including “journey-work” as rendered in the final thesis. This thesis and creative project are an attempt to heal traumatic (my own) oppression through this theatre of “life”, “death”, and “transformation” grounded within the African Continuum. RPD, it’s predecessor The Black Arts Movement and Black Acting Methods owe much credit to the formative work of The Black Aesthetic, Non-Western devising methods and artists/activists such as James Baldwin.

This exploration attempts to uncover how Ritual Poetic Drama and the investigation of trauma “queer” the paradigm of Western Theatre, in regard to the canonicity of the theatre. How does this method and by extension solo performance uncover, unmask and heal queer trauma through witnessing and performance? How do these methods give us an intersectional approach to talking about race, identity, gender and “bridge” those divides? How does this devised work of solo performance (and the methodology of RPD) allow the author as practitioner to claim the “ground on which they stand”, “unmask themselves”, and surrender to their own healing?

Part One

Chapter One:

“Life” or The Foundation of Ritual Poetic Drama What is a Black Acting Method?

We learn through Black Acting Methods of a technique called Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum (RPD) which is meant to de-center the “euro-centric” model of canonical whiteness and offer an alternative based in ritual, embodied storytelling and performance. The canon refers to the institutional upholding of namely white men’s work as the “standard” by which to quantify and qualify performance. Canonicity is notorious for marginalizing people of color and those who are considered non heteronormative. RPD as grounded in critical black acting pedagogy creates an examination of whiteness (it’s inherent privilege) and is a facilitation of technique that speaks to many disenfranchised groups thus it is seen as more inclusive. RPD speaks to those seen as “other” or minorities who do not see themselves represented in the guise of “the white canon”.

Initially my first question was “What is a black acting method”, and how does the “canon” support or not this methodology. Fortunately, Luckett and Shafer addressed these perceptions in calling these methodologies of Black Performance, “a text for all actors, simultaneously paying homage to Black pedagogy while highlighting the need for more culturally and racially diverse perspectives in acting classrooms” (Luckett 2). Homage I could do. I began “claiming the ground on which I stand” with that permission afforded me. Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates calls this “apprehending” as in I would “lay hands on” the methodology and claim it as a teaching tool, one that I could learn from

and impart to others as a “facilitator of the process”. These methods expose and attempt to heal trauma through performance, which is ultimately what I wanted to discover. But how? How could I do that in my own solo performance by using this method? This was the question I had to answer first, how to combine this theory into practice and performance.

Luckett, Shaffer and their prestigious work *Black Acting Methods* were and are instrumental to this discovery of methodology that is considered Non-Western and “non-canonical” to this author. The book in its entirety present artists, activists and Black Theatre scholars who offer alternatives to canonical thinking of the “well-made play”. Particularly in regard to Dr. Pettiford-Wates chapter “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: From Shakespeare to Shange”, Dr. Pettiford-Wates cites James Baldwin, The Black Arts Movement and works from within the African Continuum and the Black Aesthetic to create, support and validate this methodology that is founded in Western African tradition, Yoruba spirituality and ancestral cyclical epistemology. Dr. Pettiford-Wates introduces many concepts within her chapter.

Black Acting Methods

Luckett, Sharrell and Tia M. Shaffer. *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*. Routledge Press, London. Print. 2017.

What is Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum?

Through facilitation of Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum, I learned that the cyclical nature of our lives comes from the accumulation of these various traumas in a cycle known as “life, death and transformation”. This inheriting of trauma I came to realize is “named” as my own privilege, my own “performative identity” which had oppressed me thus far and had been cultivated as a “persona”. At this point naming my own “performative identity/persona” as a white person, I realized that I had enacted my own oppression of my own body. This is what I hoped to expose through “journey-work”.

I had to ask myself, “What do we do when the site of our own body is that of our oppression?” Dr. Pettiford- Wates offers, “RPD has proved effective in facilitating the process of exploring [these] questions, while centering cultural awareness and exploration of cultural identity and authenticity within context as an essential component to the artistic training of the student/artist” (Pettiford- Wates 109). The chapter lays the foundation of RPD, its origin and pedagogical intent.

“Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: The Journey from Shakespeare to Shange”

Pettiford-Wates, Tawnya, PhD. “Ritual Poetic Drama within the African Continuum: The Journey from Shakespeare to Shange” *Black Acting Methods: Critical Approaches*. Routledge Press, London. Print. 2017.

Augusto Boal, “Process”

The work that has allowed Ritual Poetic Drama to “become” is that of Augusto Boal and “Theatre of the Oppressed”. Dr. Pettiford-Wates considers this one of the bases of this pedagogy in co-facilitation with the African Continuum. Boal and his manifesto “The Aesthetics of The Oppressed” are monumental to understanding the foundation upon which RPD stands. Referencing Boal and his concept of, “Process and Product... though the Aesthetic Process does not necessarily have to result in an Artistic Product- it can be inconclusive...” (Boal 19).

Boal and his manifesto speak directly to the impetus of story and the process to creating it, as Dr. Pettiford-Wates cites inspiration to her foundational approaches to intersectional theories that also influence and create RPD. These solidify it as a methodology worthy of discourse, and study, and are extremely beneficial as Boal himself was oppressed and repressed for his ideas, influence and inherent subversion of “normative”. Boal and Pettiford-Wates speak at length about the “process” not as “product” but as “all”, the most important thing to work with and through is the process of embodied creation, upon which the two agree.

“The Aesthetics of The Oppressed”

Boal, Augusto. “The Aesthetics of The Oppressed”. Routledge Press, London. Print. 2006.

Intersecting Theories, “The Witness”

In acknowledging “The Witness”, we can then examine it in conjunction with the process of Anna Deavere Smith and the solo work of various African American women. These other works such as *solo/black/woman* along with the contributions of *Sweet Tea: An Oral History of Black Gay Men in the South* create a site of Witness and render the healing of trauma through “witnessed” performance.

I began to seek out different voices to speak to the performative experience undertaken through solo performance and it’s practice. Essentially, we are given all of this theory and not taught how to put it into practice or how to perform with it. This is what I sought to do with a solo performance that relies upon the foundations of a “non-Western” technique or RPD. Attempting to create my own version of a suitable and accessible narrative of these various intersections was definitely a challenge. I was not going to attempt to “reinvent the wheel”, but simply to make the material the most accessible as it relates to uncovering trauma through performance and how we can learn from that.

In making the material accessible I had to confront some major issues in regard to the intersectional political viewpoints of these theories. Theory begins to intersect with personal, political, relevant stories in regard to “birthing” the traumatic narrative. To that regard I referenced Gloria Anzaldua and Cherie Moraga and the “theory of the flesh” in *This Bridge Called My Back*. Moraga and Anzaldua are creating a critique of the established system of “canonicity”.

This Bridge Called My Back

Moraga, Cherrie/ Anzaldua Gloria. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York. Print. 1981.

Critique and “Community”

Critique and its purpose will serve to continue our understanding of the healing that solo performance attempts to create through the first guidepost of “community”. Critique is essential to our investigation, we as solo performers are critiquing and offering our trauma as worth of study, critiquing ourselves and our former “performed” identities through this work. We must critique, to, in a very Brechtian sense, “hold the mirror up” to our audience and ourselves if we are truly going to surrender “to the work”. No where is this more present than in the work of D. Soyini Madison.

The performances devised in this way, through critique of “canonical institutions” (RPD and Solo Performance) are to offer an alternative as they are examining the “whole system” of the emotional body of the actor and their own oppression. Indeed this concept applies specifically to the work Deavere Smith engages in, as well as Dr. Pettiford-Wates, a claiming and “apprehending” through “deconstructing” of our “taught” methods of performance.

Dr. Judith Herman writes in her book *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence- from domestic abuse to political terror*, regarding the traumatic witness as liberation, another tool and weapon used in the “apprehending” of our truest selves through Ritual Poetic Drama. This is perhaps the crux of the argument that RPD as a technique works, as it is a performance and process that begins with rediscovering our history. Madison, in connection with each of these scholars furthers this conversation.

This is an applied facilitation in it’s application through the African Continuum and the work of Dr. Pettiford-Wates, all of these intersections between critique and community. Again, all speak of the power of traumatic healing and it’s “reclamation” and challenging of our identities, how trauma can make as well as be unmade by our study and witness to it.

Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence- from domestic abuse to political terror.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence- from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books, New York. Print. 1997.

Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance.

Madison, D. Soyini. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics and Performance*. SAGE Publications, California. Print. 2012.

“Community, Memory and The Bridge”

Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake in *Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory and Trauma* offer much in regard to the intersections being crossed between “community” built through the traumatic narrative which lead us to another guidepost “memory”.

“Memory” serves the “community” founded and supported through the journey-work process of Ritual Poetic Drama, as which is excavated through its overlapping intersections.

Julie Ann Scott writes about this bolstering of “community” and “memory” as a witness to each other in *Embodied Performance as Applied Research, Art and Pedagogy*, “the embracing of our dependence on these mortal bodies and the need for culture to move with them in acceptance, rather than remaining rigid in fear- is possible. And it begins with bearing witness to the story of another’s body”. This is the ultimate goal of the “community” created during “journey-work”, “bearing witness to the story of another’s body” and thus our identities shared through this technique. The “community” of artists care for each other through witnessing as each bears their own trauma and “births” it together through the “process”.

Both Scott and Trezsie make some beautiful points about the connection to Trauma and Memory as practice and inter-social connectedness. How we yearn for “community” and how the traumatic witness can be a powerful tool between bodies to connect them together. We see this directly in relation to Augusto Boal, Madison and Dr. Judith Herman as each uses the traumatic body as a site of witness to a larger community and it is through these intersections trauma is studied. Trauma and Memory studies overlap here and become a tool for commonality, as opposed to “difference” which Anna Deavere Smith challenges and subverts through her work, but more on that later.

Each of the aforementioned practitioners of traumatic theory, memory theory and witness studies relate directly to E. Patrick Johnson and their work *Sweet Tea*, as well as *solo/black/woman*. Trauma and memory are interrelated, and our performative bodies, through facilitation through RPD witness to the audience creating a “bridge” between the two, but first a note on “Trauma” and “Testimony”.

Embodied Performance as Applied Research, Art and Pedagogy.

Scott, Julie-Ann. *Embodied Performance as Applied Research, Art and Pedagogy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory and Trauma.

Trezsie, Byroni and Caroline Wake. *Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory and Trauma*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013.

“Trauma” and “Testimony”

Theatrically, performing trauma and interrogating the vast expanse of the human “testimony” (what a wonderful word) is daunting to any actor and must be approached through a cultivated series of techniques, RPD.

Neal Utterback, in Nicola Shaughnessy’s book of collected essays, *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science* offers a beautiful framing of how trauma constitutes a powerful witness and testimony in regard to storytelling, indeed Utterback writes, “we as humans are all storytellers.” This further allows the connection to be made between the performative emotion of trauma as witnessed onstage, and to the audience. Through the facilitation of story, RPD builds upon this as well in that story is revered over the “plot”, or “well-made play”, thus offering the performance as “testimony”.

Affective Performance and Cognitive Science

Shaughnessy, Nicola. *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science*. Bloomsbury Press, London. Print, 2013.

Story-Telling, *Sweet Tea* and Becoming

E. Patrick Johnson is of particular note due to his performance work in solo performance and as a scholar having crafted a community which has further de-centered the homogenous narrative of this author. He has brought about a deeper understanding of the “act of becoming” as referred by Dr. Pettiford-Wates through exposing a community of storytellers who are black, southern and gay; incredibly “de-centering” to my own inertia of white queer scholarship. What Johnson and Dr. Pettiford-Wates are teaching is that our identity is, in and of itself, a performance act meant to be excavated through “the process” by “doing the work”, Dr. Pettiford-Wates is fond of saying.

This process of witnessing and spectatorship that Johnson crafts during the journey of writing *Sweet Tea* allows the reader to become both voyeur and auditor of blackness (much in the same way solo/black/woman does) in all of its many facets and forms. Johnson does not shy away from the staunch realities of a South broken by systemic racism and oppression and heteronormative patriarchal hierarchy.

This is his way of reclaiming blackness in regard to gay identity. Namely, that the black gay experience is worthy of claiming in the first place. His narrative focus is not on understanding a “white” concept of “queer” or “gay”, in fact, many of his narrators shirk the words “gay”, “queer” and render instead a narrative that is predominately absent of those words. This Oral History and story-telling are paramount to work also within the Black Aesthetic, dealing with Ancestry, Ritual and naming that bring us to Ntozake Shange’s opus *for colored girls*.

Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South: An Oral History

Johnson, E. Patrick. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South: An Oral History*. University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina. Print, 2008.

Ancestry, and the Traumatic Witness/ *for colored girls*

E. Patrick Johnson and Ramon H. Rivera-Serveras work *solo/black/woman*, is an exploration of story-telling, ancestral reclamation and liberation through performance. This book interrogates what it means to be a solo performer and what moments of “ancestry” create. Indeed many of the women profiled speak of their ancestors and forebears as the impetus to create their own witnesses. This explains how trauma has the power to unleash substantial healing through its performance in this way and to offer an experience that is now black, black and female, then black and female and inherently queer.

Johnson and Rivera-Servera speak on the powerful combination of performance and black feminist structure, mentioned here for further “de-centering”. These are related in tandem with Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls*, paving the way for black feminism to

take to task the theatrical canon of whiteness and to contribute to a re-imagined process of diverse inclusivity.

solo/black/woman

Johnson, E. Patrick and Ramon H. Rivera-Servera, *solo/black/woman*. Northwestern University Press, Illinois. Print. 2014.

For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf

Shange, Ntozake. *For colored girls...* Scribner Press, New York. Print, 1997.

Anna Deavere Smith, “The Bridge”

Anna Deavere Smith uses this responsibility (ancestry, performance practice, traumatic witness) as performer and embodied story-teller to charge her audience through her techniques. Deavere Smith creates the “bridge between sharers”, which, as we know “lessens difference”. This allows for the further “de-centering” of this author and their methods of performance that can be seen as the ultimate “transformation” in regard to storytelling. Deavere Smith through her characters surrenders her body to the performance of a fully comprised and present witness, which is what we are called to do through RPD.

Deavere Smith, Dr. Pettiford-Wates, Johnson and Rivera- Servera all create this act of witness[ing], more specifically referencing the “bridge” that we spoke of earlier between the body of the actor and the audience. “The Witness” is a powerful tool, perhaps the most powerful in the arsenal of an embodied performance in this “theatre of liberation”. The “transformation” that occurs both between the site of the body of the actor and the bodies of the audience create this “transformational bridge”.

Ronald J. Pelias’ work *Writing Performance* offers this about performance as a public act, which is an “unveiling” of understanding. Pelias too wishes the personal narrative be moved into charging an audience with a responsibility to examine their difference. He writes poetically about what this “bridged” difference means to him.

Perhaps most telling of the intersection between the “bridge” created between these two witnessing bodies is what Patrick Duggan, author of *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* refers to as, “... an imperative to bear witness and testify to both world- defining traumas...”. In her groundbreaking work, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, Deavere Smith confronts those “authoritative” regimes of race, identity and politics head on in an attempt to understand/grapple with the racial conflict and political upheaval.

Writing Performance: Poeticizing The Researcher’s Body

Pelias, Ronald. *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher’s Body*. Southern Illinois University Press, Illinois. Print, 1999.

Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance

Duggan, Patrick. *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992

Deavere Smith, Anna. *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. Anchor Press, New York. Print, 1994.

Creating a “Character”

Dr. Tawnya Pettiford-Wates and RPD also speak on the concept of character, as do Johnson and Rivera-Servera. The “character” created during solo performance is birthed from traumatic narrative, it can and does transcend the “bridge” described previously. If the actor and the audience are both bodies of witness then the “character” is what walks on the bridge between the two. There is a spiritual power in this “character” as the character created speaks the words “birthed” through the trauma of the performer during “journey-work”, “standing in the gap” to create meaning between an audience and the actor.

In an interview with Carol Martin, Anna Deavere Smith offers this beautiful turn of phrase about the word “becoming” which we will remember from Dr. Pettiford-Wates and “journey-work”. From “The Word Becomes You: An Interview”, “My grandfather told me that if you say a word often enough it becomes you. I was very interested before I developed this project in how manipulating words has a spiritual power”. She also writes in the introduction to *Twilight*, and perhaps most succinctly, “The spoken word is evidence of the humanness”.

“The Word Becomes You”

A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance

Martin, Carol. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*. Routledge Press, London. Print. 1996.

Deavere Smith and Homi Bhabha

Bhabha writes of the intersection between race, class, gender, “and other forms of difference [that] are always being ‘constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process’”, according to “Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Legacy” by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham. Bhabha, Deavere Smith speak on difference as a learning tool, primarily engaged by the witness/spectator. Bhabha and Deavere Smith also engage in many of the same concepts detailing the intersectionality of race theory and critique, which are supremely beneficial to the thesis.

“Staging the Politics of Difference”

Olson, Gary and Lynn Wolsham. *“Staging the politics of difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Legacy”*. State University of New York Press, New York. Print. 1999.

Further Justification for Thesis Argument

David Dean, Yana Meerzon and Kathryn Prince write, in their introduction for *History, Memory, Performance*, “Theatregoing [is] one powerful form of storytelling and

one powerful conduit for empathy...through empathy, an emotional connection is forged between the spectator and the onstage avatar of the trauma victim” (Dean 16).

History, Memory, Performance

Dean, David, Yana Meerzon and Kathryn Prince. *History, Memory, Performance*. Palgrave MacMillan Press, New York. 2015. Print.

Critique, White Feminism and Anna Deavere Smith

Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua offer writings from radical women of color in their essay collection *This Bridge Called My Back*. The essence of this pedagogy is creating a new politic, one that thrives in “difference”, and takes aim at “white feminism”. This politic that is being reshaped and refashioned is one of necessity, according to the two activists and authors. The work directly impacts Anna Deavere Smith as she tends to lean more toward bridging the divide between her audiences and herself as a performer. Deavere Smith works “within difference” as a teaching tool, and while she may be radical in her pioneering efforts to represent all genders, races, etc. through the paradigm, she does not discount the work Anzaldua and Moraga paved for her in this passionate dissent of “feminism”.

In digression here, Anna Deavere Smith is profiled by scholar and activist Carol Martin, who also paved the way for the Feminist gaze (if you will) through her work *A Sourcebook for Feminist Theatre*. Deavere Smith offers her own understanding of the political/feminist discourse of her work this way, “It’s not that I don’t understand feminism. I try to understand things but I’m also an empathetic and intuitive person...I understand that feminism is about us, finding our place and finding our language” (Martin 51). Martin offers this in regard to Deavere Smith:

“Yes, but it’s also given women a means to read texts, life, power relations and interactions. Feminism is implicated in ways of seeing, believing and feeling as well as intellectual life... the way you present and characterize people through language and at the same time remain present as Anna also seems informed by feminist ideas” (Martin 51).

I wish to interrogate Carol Martin a bit here. As a cisgendered white feminist and prolific author, she attempts to make known her own feminist interpretation of Deavere Smith’s work. This is certainly worth noting and is applicable in this context of understanding the contributions of Deavere Smith to feminist/post-structuralist thinking. However, this is a dangerous amalgamation of current waves of feminist thought, as Martin, however erroneously she means, to school a woman of color on her own brand of feminism. This is and remains challenging to me that Martin would attempt to interject her own opinions by proxy onto Deavere Smith, who adequately and delicately offers her own diplomatic answer as seen above. “I understand feminism is about finding us,” she says. This phrase is a soothing balm in regard to “white feminism”, which, as we know historically is not as democratically inclusive as it claims to be. Indeed, there is substantial “difference” in that “other” of intersectional feminism versus feminism made for (and primarily by) white women.

In regard to this, I wish to engage in a brief digression on “queer time”, which I suspect Carol Martin is alluding to in relation to new identity politics regarding race and gender (as we are seeing that paradigm shift more and more in our current climate), “certain contested identities have their own logics, contradictions, and relations to temporality... According to Judith Halberstam (as referenced by D. Soyini Madison) “queer time” shifts our attentions away from [performance]... the past and future in queer time exist outside of the normative” (Madison 80). This regards and echoes Schechner and Performance Studies investigation of liminal time, and also relates to RPD usage of “journey-work” which definitely exists in what I would consider “queer-time”, by that I mean non-linear time and not bound to the “devices” of anything resembling “the well-made play”.

Continuing the previous theme, as a means to understand the intersectionality between “whiteness” and feminism, many feminist people of color today are raising their voices in the “whitewashing” of feminist movements. These are predominantly led by women of color which causes all branches and subsets of feminism to re-examine their social coding:

“As a form of critical postmodernism, materialist feminism argues that the interlocking web of patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity, and racism is neither abstract nor isolated, but it is interpenetrating and ubiquitous as it interacts at varying levels and degrees in regulating our everyday lives” (Madison 91).

Adrienne Rich, Feminist Scholar and beloved author offers this on the intersection between white feminism and the true essence of intersectional feminism:

“The connections- painful and oblique, and often bitter- between black and white women, including shame, manipulation, betrayal, hypocrisy, envy, and love. If we have learned anything in our coming to language out of silence, it is that what has been kept unspoken, therefore unspeakable, in us is what is most threatening to the patriarchal order in which men control, first women, then all who can be defined and exploited as “other”. All silence has a meaning” (Rich 308).

Rich continues, “But in you I seek both difference and identity... we were told we were utterly different, that the difference between us must be everything, must be determinative, that from that difference we each must turn away... there is fury here, and terror, but there is also power...” (Rich 310). In examining the role of whiteness and feminism, I’ll summarize Moraga and Anzaldúa with their own words on the issue, “We must use this knowledge, as Rosario Morales suggests, to ‘identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt’ (62). Essentially, we can and should feel the “oppressed” nature, and come to “identify” with it to see “difference” as something to be conquered and overcome.

Audre Lorde in her essay, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House*:

“For women, the need to desire and nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is discovered... For it is only under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women” (Moraga 99).

It is through this process of creating a new identity politic that Deavere Smith in essence, creates a new performative framework, vital to healing collected trauma by

crafting a new identity through the auspices of race. She says of her own work, “The whole thing is supposed to be an occasion to evoke a spirit. This was one of the things that lead me to thinking in more circular ways and resisting the through-line” (Martin 51).

This interrogation of heteronormative structure creates a non-linear through-line for Deavere Smith, which is, in and of itself deconstructs the linear nature of conventional theatrics.

A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance

Martin, Carol. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*. Routledge Press, London. Print. 1996.

Adrienne Rich: Poetry and Prose

Rich, Adrienne. *Poetry and Prose*. W. W. Norton & Company. Second Edition. Print. 2018.

What about a “queer” perspective?

“What do we mean when we say that someone or something is theatrical? What we mean is that such a person is aware that he or she is seen, reflects awareness, and so deflects our look. We refer to a fractured reciprocity...” ~John Clum, *Still Acting Gay* (21).

Clum writes of the juxtaposition of the “gay body” and the audiences attempt to distance itself from something clearly “non-normal” or in our lexicon, “non-heteronormative”. In essence, his use of the term “fractured reciprocity” is of note in that the idea created during the fracturing lends itself to an investigation of liminal time and space. The attempt of the traumatic body of the actor to reach the traumatic body of the audience in the space of creation, also known as the fourth wall is worth noting. In the thesis, I refer to this space of creation as “the Bridge” from actor to audience. What interests me primarily here, is the “imitative” connotation of the word “theatrical”, which Dr. Pettiford-Wates and RPD are attempting to excise during “journey- work”, we are moving through the “imitative” to the “embodied” in solo performance. Clum, by using the word “deflect” is in opposition to RPD, referring instead to the broken system of “fractured reciprocity”, which is concerning and worth investigation.

Let us focus on Clum’s specific language of “reflecting awareness”, which is the goal of “uncovering” or “naming” the act of witness in regard to solo performance. The act of witnessing and spectatorship is a “claiming” of the emotionally cathartic center of the art, ultimately a “revelation” of traumatic release as witnessed by an audience. Clum would refer to this liminal space between “gay bodied” or, for our purposes, “queer bodied” and audience as “the closet” of “memory”, which I find inherently problematic. As solo performers, our “job” is “exposure and destruction”, of our “imitative identity”, to quote Dr. Pettiford-Wates.

Clum refers to the “theatricality” of performers, the “imitative” persona of distance created between audience and actor as “the closet”, which I find inherently one-sided, and offer it as a challenge to Deavere Smith's working within “difference”. Clum’s reading of “the closet” feels like a step backward to me in regard to further separation

between actor and audience. I also acknowledge that Clum could be referring to the “aesthetic distancing” or “alienation” effect that the “queer body” enacts on audiences, an “othering” that is regarded as very Brechtian in nature. I also wish to recognize that Clum is a highly lauded “queer scholar” (he is also a white male) and his work is from a place of “the queer canon”, which is also in opposition to the more intersectional approach within which I’ve constructed this thesis. Clum offers, “it is about the theatricalization of experience as an act of liberation. Such theatricalization does not destroy the closet but makes the closet bearable. The option is exposure and destruction” (Clum 124), of which I do agree. Exposure and Destruction are powerful tools of critique, which each of the artists profiled in the thesis could attest to.

Alan Sinfield, another scholar, brilliantly (*Gay and After*) offers the following regarding the perspective of race and intellectualism as to the “privileged” study of gender and performativity. Of note, Clum never acknowledges his own ethnic/“white” privilege in his work, strictly viewing the work of scholarship as something to be studied, rather than excavated and examined, again, in my opinion:

“Recognition that race and ethnicity might be constructed, hybrid and insecure, but yet necessary, has obvious resonances for lesbian and gay cultural politics, and may help us to think about ourselves... Let’s be clear: I am not proposing any equivalence between the oppressions of race and sexuality- anyway, there is not one oppression of either race or sexuality, there are many” (Sinfield 30).

Sinfield acknowledges his privilege outright, which Clum never does, which is of note. Sinfield clearly states the “many” types of oppression, which, I would like to offer to counter the rather binary and “canonical” read that I have for Clum. Sinfield seems to be inherently pro-active in examining his privilege, whereas Clum seems to accept it and not challenge that system.

Clum offers, about a system of performance, what he calls, “gayness”, he writes, “I would like gay drama to show our awareness of our privileges as much as our dwindling oppression” (Clum 284). Which brings to mind the question of are we as queer people performing our awareness to others through our drama/trauma? What makes “our” drama “gay”? This statement reads as though Clum places as much weight on the “awareness of privilege” and “oppression”, which he refers to as “dwindling”, but through this examination and investigation, awareness of oppression should equal the awareness of our privileges, this is both/and. From where I sit as an academician, personally I do not see oppression as dwindling at all, that in and of itself comes from a very privileged place to make such a bold claim. It is in our act of witnessing the spectacle of theatrical performance/traumatic performance the heightens our awareness of privilege and our awareness of oppression to bring about a catharsis through the performative method of RPD and to offer a liberation through performance that is far from “dwindling”.

I would reframe Clum’s statement to read thus, my inference are in brackets, “I would like [queer drama] to show our awareness of our privileges as much as our [heightened awareness] of our [enacted] oppression, [for it is in the release of our privilege (specifically that of Caucasian people) that we may come to know, name and embody our own oppression, and recognize that we ourselves as white people have both enacted oppression upon ourselves and others].”

This is where I believe my reframing of Clum, as referenced above gains its ground, as Clum using the reductive “gay drama” works to simply replicate a binary paradigm, hegemonic in its lens of gender-ism (us as gay versus them as “straight”). This does a disservice to the study of queer performance and developing a broader intersectional approach to Queer/Gender Studies in general, I believe and deserves some unpacking. I hope to offer my own reframing as “an addition to”, not “in place of”, a “both/and” if you will.

Still Acting Gay

Clum, John. *Still Acting Gay*. St. Martin’s Griffin Press, New York. Print, 2000.

Gay and After

Sinfield, Alan *Gay and After*. Serpent Tail Press, New York. Print, 2000.