

Resiliency: How the Black Woman Comes into Her Power

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Dedicated to my mother, my angel. This is for you.

To the Black women who struggled and still found a way to smile.

You are a powerhouse that I aim to be.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Family Structure.....	7
The Souls of Black Folk (1903).....	13
The Strong Black Woman.....	14
Mental Health.....	16
Dr. J. Marion Sims.....	17
The Tuskegee Experiment.....	18
Henrietta Lacks.....	20
Culturally Component Therapist.....	21
It Needs a Face.....	22
Voices in Mental Health.....	22
Black Theater.....	27
<i>For Colored Girls</i>	28
Pipeline.....	29
Final Thoughts.....	31
Appendix.....	32
<i>Trickin'</i>	33
Characters, Setting, Time, Notes and Songs.....	34
SCENE 1.....	35
Works Cited.....	102

ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the journey of how the Black Woman has found her place in a world of limitations. I have presented my findings from journals about mental health, a series of award-winning plays, such as Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, and Dominique Morisseau's *Pipeline*. In addition, I have referred to extensive interviews with actresses such as Jennifer Lewis and Taraji P. Henson and novels like Rebecca Scoot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. In this research, these women detail their laborious journeys in this weary world and how they redefine well-being and find their resiliency and healing.

Keywords: Mental Health, Strong Black Women, Henrietta Lacks, Stereotypes, Black Community, Dominique Morisseau, Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, Black Theatre, Jennifer Lewis, Taraji P. Henson, Marriage, Miscarriage, Selfcare

Introduction.

As I travel through my reality of being both Black and a woman, I am compelled to reflect on what a Black woman is. She is the backbone of the world, a fighter, a confidant, a goddess, and what I recently discovered in my personal journey, flawed. I look at Black actresses, such as Jennifer Lewis and Taraji P Henson and ask how they did it? I see how deeply connected they are to their essence and how valuable their voice is to the Black community.

Cultural ideologies associate the Black woman with being loud, belligerent, bitter, and illogical, 'the angry black woman' trope. "The 'angry black woman' has been tagged and caricature rooted in other people's fears." (Winfrey) During the 2016 farewell interview, Michelle Obama recounts periods of misrepresentation in the media and how she retaliates by living out loud. Her mother instilled strength in her by telling her to "keep it movin', brush it off," a quote that has been said numerous times in my household (Winfrey).

"When Shonda Rhimes writes her autobiography, it should be called "How to Get Away With Being an Angry Black Woman (Stanley)". A struggled praise written by Alessandra Stanley. The quote celebrates Rhimes' contribution to redefining the Black woman on television. In 2012, a political television and three-time NAACP awarded series named *Scandal* aired on ABC showcasing Black women in power, created by Shonda Rhimes. The protagonist, Olivia Pope, owns a crisis management firm while fighting her past job as a media consultant to the president. The strong Black lead was stylish, educated, showed no sign of backing down, and most importantly, she was human. Alessandra Stanley associated Rhimes with *How To Get Away With Murder*, a show created by Peter Nowalk and executive produced by Rhimes.

Rhimes fights back in a Hollywood Reporter article and she states, “They wouldn’t say that someone is ‘the most powerful white male showrunner in Hollywood... I find race and gender to be terribly important; they’re terribly important to who I am. But there’s something about the need for everybody else to spend time talking about it ... that pisses me off” (Rose).

That unfavorable profile of our existence is being excessively portrayed in movies, television shows, and, more so than ever, on social media. Related concepts of this stereotype are a caricature name ‘Sapphire’. She is an aggressive, overbearing, stubborn Black woman. An excerpt from this song states this term eloquently:

My skin is brown
 My manner is tough
 I'll kill the first mother I see
 My life has been rough
 I'm awfully bitter these days
 'Cause my parents were slaves

- Nina Simone, “*Four Women*”

In 1951, CBS. launched a television show with previous popularity on a radio program called *Sam' N' Henry*. “Sam ‘n’ Henry was the first radio show of Gosden and Correll, premiering on Chicago’s WGN on Jan. 12, 1926” (Sam “N” Henry). The show modeled minstrel shows centered around negative racial stereotypes and was created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, White entertainers who portrayed Black actors. “The cultural touchstone sprang from the blackface minstrel show tradition, with White voice actors animating Black characters” (Sam “N” Henry). They later revamped the show changing its name to *Amos and Andy*, and the radio program became a weekly sitcom in 1951 on CBS.

In 1928, Gosden and Carrell took their act to a rival station, the Chicago Daily News' WMAQ. When they discovered WGN owned the rights to their characters' names, they simply changed them. As their new contract gave Gosden and Carrell the right to syndicate the program, the popularity of "Amos 'n' Andy" soon exploded. (Editors)

The series featured Black actors: Alvin Childress, Spencer Williams, Tim Moore, and Ernestine Wade. The name 'Sapphire' is another label for 'angry black woman'. It is rooted in Ernestine Wade's character Sapphire Stevens, the wife of Amos and Andy's friend Kingfish.

The co-author of the best-selling etiquette book *Basic Black: Home Training for Modern Times* corresponds to a podcast called *Code Switch*. The topics are ethnicity, race, and culture. In episode "Anger! the Black Woman Superpower", Bates explains how "Sapphire became kind of a shorthand or a Black woman who was a demanding scold, kind of an emasculating harpy, just angry"(Anger). Bates further explains, "Sapphire was a figment of some White television writer's imagination; she eventually became the embodiment of the angry black woman. And, hey, in real life, sometimes we do get angry" (Anger). Sapphire is a nagger; she is sassy, rude, and loud, not to be mistaken for Mammy. 'Sapphire' has no compassion and dehumanizes Black men.

Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll's popular show showcased the worse in Blacks. The first week the show aired, the NAACP published a bill of charge against the show. The NAACP bulletin stated, "Negro Women are shown as cackling, screaming shrews, in big-mouthed close-ups, using street slang, just short of vulgarity. Millions of White Americans see this *Amos 'n' Andy* picture of Negroes and think the entire race is the same" (NAACP). Shortly afterward, CBS sponsorships were withdrawn. The NAACP may have gotten this show and many others that displayed a harsh representation canceled, but 'Sapphire's' legacy continues.

More television shows took on this stereotype, such as Florence Johnson from *The Jeffersons* and Aunt Esther from *Sanford and Son*, played by Evelyn Porter. Porter, throughout her career, continued playing the ‘Angry Black Woman’ role in shows like *Martin* and *A Different World*. Sadly, the stereotype saturated the film industry with movies like Adam Shankman’s *Bringing Down the House*, Eddie Romero’s *Black Mama White Mama*, Tyler Perry’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, and *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*. In “Anger, The Black Woman Superpower” podcast, Professor Brittany Cooper, the author of *Elegant Rage! A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* adds more insight to the topic.

She states, “The angry black woman stereotype is part of a series of what the feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins calls controlling images that shape the way black women are perceived in American culture” (NAACP). She proceeds to say:

A black woman is at work, and she's being serious, or she raises a concern; if she does that in a way that is not overly solicitous in terms of, like, not smiling, then folks often think that she's angry for no reason. And that can lead to the projection onto black women of ideas of them as being threatening, being dangerous and being unsafe, in addition to being emotionally unstable. (NAACP)

Culturally, blacks have become infamous caricatures based off deeply rooted pain.

When asked about their state of being, Black women often use the encompassing term ‘tired’ facetiously. I never once thought to dig deeper into what was truly being expressed until I said it. It is a peek through my window, a sign, a cry of needing help from whatever misery is placed within. So, I will say tired, pray it away and keep on moving. But is that temporary band-

aid helping me internally? It is not tired; it is emotional fatigue, unknowingly concealing our pain by being mislabeled

In W.E.B. Dubois's critically acclaimed book, *In the Souls of Black Folks*, he writes about the coined phrase 'twoness' or 'double consciousness'. "An American, a Negro," he wrote, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Dubois 2). This duality is an ongoing conflict; we come out of the womb being lectured on the importance of being ten times better than our counterparts because our skin is a problem.

Our racial alarm clock is a repeated brutalization of Black and Brown bodies, and we are supposed to get up and go to work like everything is okay. Unfortunately, we are conditioned to keep going no matter the wear and tear. We carry the myth, the armor, and the burden of a Strong Black Woman, also known as SBW, forcing us to ignore ourselves and suffer in silence. Vulnerability is not accepted; you must look like you have it together. Marla Paula explains this phenomenon in this way:

It is our hustle, grit and ability to get things done. It is our fierce love for friends, family and community — often at the sacrifice of our own needs. It is our deep faithfulness and ability to get right on back on our feet no matter how many times we are knocked down. It is our ability to hold our head up high and eagerly accept the challenge whenever anybody questions our talents or capability. It is pushing down the pain and putting on a smile no matter what we've been through. (Paula)

Many believed growing up, they were invincible and took pride in that, which caused unnecessary pain. "For too long, being strong has meant avoiding or denying how you really

feel. It's holding painful experiences — like trauma — in shame and secrecy” (Paula). The Black community is rightfully aware of the everyday racial, economic, and social war that surrounds us but are we aware of what that war does to our body, mind, and soul?

It was not until the global COVID-19 widespread pandemic and the epidemic of police brutality that the word self-care reintroduced itself and became a trending phrase:

Last year was undoubtedly the year of extreme self-care, and with good reason.

Between a pandemic, a presidential election, and a summer of protests against police brutality, self-care has evolved beyond a modern luxury and into a literal means of surviving during a pivotal time in our nation's history. (Houseworth)

You saw people dissecting familiar triggers and trauma as they looked closely at their problems. Things that had previously made us feel excluded now made us feel included. Adolescent Psychotherapist and YouTuber Mallory Grimste states this as being, “The sharing of a traumatic experience without asking permission for the receiver's capacity to hear or interact with that type of information” (Colombo). That is helpful to some, but what about the others brushing everything under the rug and calling it normal? Mental issues were not identified in the Black household. If things were slightly off internally, we are taught to run to the church and pray. Religion is prominent; it is a part of our heritage and a force to keep pushing when the odds are against us. The Black community is taught to hold in problems because being labeled weak - is not what an SBW entails. The data confirms this notion as well. 63 percent of Black people believe that a mental health condition is a sign of personal weakness (National Alliance).

Family Structure.

I grew up in a Black reality; my mother did not miss a chance to remind me how beautiful my chocolate skin is or how proud I should be to be Black. Laughter and smiles were the solidarity of loving the skin you are in. There was so much self-pride growing up in the nineties. Around 1990, buoyed by the success of Bill Cosby's situation comedy and Oprah Winfrey's daytime talk show, there was a renewed visibility of African American pop culture in the mainstream (Rischar).

Movies such as *Do the Right Thing* (1989; directed by Spike Lee) and *Boyz 'N the Hood* (1991; directed by John Singleton) represented a point of arrival for black directors. The new FOX network (and, to a lesser extent, NBC) featured the situation comedies *Living Single*, *Martin*, and *A Different World*, which starred and were, to varying degrees, written, directed, and produced by African Americans (Rischar). These shows treated their subject matter in a more unapologetically black way and were less dependent on the stereotypes of past shows (Rischar).

I was heavily educated on our rich, Black, diverse cultures and was surrounded by all shades of Black and brown people. In the words of Carl Sagan, "You have to know the past to understand the present" (Burton).

To stand in my ancestor's shoes, I was taught to have faith, pray for whatever I want, and you shall receive. That devotion started in a Southern Baptist Church. Every Wednesday for Bible study, I was a part of a least one extracurricular activity that involved the church; mine was the choir. Sunday was an all-day event, and a fashion show all tied into one. The elders would come in with their crowns, high-fiving God, dressed in their Sunday best. They faced limitations and implicit bias during the weekdays, all while slaving at work to keep a roof over their head. The only reward is coming to church and showing off their finest things. The church is the oldest source of emotional support for Black women. According to the Pew Research Center, 91

percent of Black Americans say religion is somewhat critical in their lives, and 79 percent identify as Christian (Pride News).

Sunday school was bright and early, and you go directly to regular church afterward. The sanctuary is our refuge; it is where you hear that radical sermon from the Pastor. The congregation will cheer him on with rhythmic claps and stomps, almost as if it was rehearsed. Black Baptists played a notable role in political and social freedom for the Black community. The churches hosted mass meetings, staged sit-ins, and marched in protest that shaped the nation. For example:

Baptist churches have made vital contributions to the identity of Black people in the state by shaping behavior and belief, serving as centers of community life, and creating independent spaces free from the control of white society. (Black Church)

Racially motivated acts of violence perpetrated by White supremacists have held a place in society for centuries.

In early September 1963, members at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, were bombed, killing four young Black girls, and injuring more than twenty. “Ku Klux Klan members bombed the Church. A box of dynamite with a timer was placed under the front steps of the church, near the basement, and was set to go off during Sunday prayers” (Four). The victims’ names were Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14), and Carol Denise McNair (11). A week later, a memorial service was held in Shreveport, Louisiana, by my late Pastor, Harry Blake, who was the Pastor for Little Union Baptist Church in Shreveport at the time. The late George D’Artois, the public service commissioner, received notice of the memorial and gathered several police officers to ride their horses where the monument was held: Little Union Baptist Church. Pastor Blake was beaten inside the church and

dragged outside by Shreveport's police force because he held a memorial without a permit.

Reverend Asriel McLain, a friend to Pastor Blake and a witness, recalls the events in The Associated Press:

The police brought horses up the steps of the church, grabbed (Blake) and left manure everywhere," McLain recalled. "After they beat up Rev. Blake, he came up the stairs and I heard my mother scream like I never had before.

We went outside for a moment and saw the cops going crazy, beating up people in front of the church; my dad said 'This is not right, this is not Russia or Nazi Germany, this is America. (Tyler Bridges)

He was treated at the church and required stitches for lacerations to his scalp. "They beat me until they thought I was dead or appeared to be lifeless," Pastor Blake said.

"In July 1963, Pastor Blake became the president of the local NAACP chapter, and he was arrested plenty of times for his role in a series of lunch counter sit-ins" (Dent). A gunman tried to kill him that same year as he drove home from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. There were bullets fired through his car window. Blake recalls his contribution to the Civil Rights Movement during an oral interview for the Library of Congress. In his interview, he talks about the time he was arrested and charged with 'mental observation', Pastor Blake adds, "They couldn't get anything else. It was all about intimidation" (Bridges).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a close friend to Pastor Blake's church member, C.O Simpkins. Dr. King was invited to Shreveport, Louisiana to raise awareness. Unfortunately, many elected officials, law enforcement, and racist organizations were hostile and were ready to attack. His house and office were firebombed, and Dr. Simpkins was prominently featured on a death list compiled by local racist organizations. Fearing for the safety of his family and

neighbors and being unable to obtain insurance for his home and dental practice, he made the difficult decision to relocate to New York (Ferrell).

Ministers put their lives on the line for freedom, and if you questioned the acts of God, you lacked faith. Mental health in the church was deemed as the devil's blasphemy. The congregation was taught to dismiss any notion of mental illness, so when that cousin hiding in the corner at the family gatherings was acting crazy, we ignored him.

We knew he was not wrapped too tight, and we all learned to leave him alone. Personal and familial issues are to remain explicitly within the household; this is a universal understanding in the Black community. "I believe we all have experienced an idea that alludes to 'Don't tell people your business' and eventually this could be more harmful than helpful" (Waller). Instead, we focused on faith-based practices and rituals that give hope and peace of mind.

I was brought up in a single-parent household, but my village ensured I did not go without. There are views on what children lack when they live in a one-parent home, such as they are worse off than children who grow up in a household with both of their parents.

According to the website, Institute for Family Studies, their research shows:

37 percent of black children are living in a home headed by their own two biological parents, 48 percent are living in a home headed by a single parent, and 4 percent are living in a stepfamily with one biological parent and one non-biological parent, as of March 2020"... Black young adults who grew up in a single-parent home are about 1.8 times more likely to have spent time in prison or jail by their late twenties, compared to their peers from a home headed by two biological parents. (Less Poverty)

Those from stepfamilies are also more likely to have been incarcerated. I beat the odds; my house may have had one parent, but it was a stable household, or so I thought.

My mother had two girls with no support from either dad. As an adult myself, I still cannot imagine the strain of taking care of herself and having two other personalities to raise off one check. Yet, she did it and never showed any signs of worry. Growing up, I did not even know I was poor; I had family, never missed a meal, and had a roof over my head and music to clear the void.

To quote *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a play that dramatizes the duality and bearings of the heavy load of African American rage, “The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding” (Wilson). My mother's silence, private worship, and prayer were her strength. Like clockwork, at 3 A.M., she would come to our rooms and pray over us while we slept.

Black mothers must use intensive efforts to raise their children and shield them from the dangers without destroying their child's innocence (Thompson). If that is the everyday task for a Black woman, when will she get a break? They must fight the expected fight, knowing they are stuck with a low-wage job. Oprah Winfrey's 2014 *Master Class* episode featuring Cicely Tyson talks about the hierarchy ladder “a ladder with white men at the top, followed by white women and Black men. Black women were at the bottom” (Reuters). Sojourner Truth alludes to this in her famous speech:

That man over there say that a woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helped me into carriages or over mud puddles, or gives me a best place—and, ain't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me. And ain't I a woman? I have horned thirteen children and seen them most all sold off into

slavery. And when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ain't I a woman? (Truth)

The Black experience has been and continues to be “characterized by trauma and violence more frequently than that of their White counterparts, affecting both youth and adult's emotional and mental health” (Roberts).

Although I was highly fluent in my culture and ‘*Say it loud, I'm black, and I'm proud*’, was on constant replay, it still did not prepare me. I had a strong memory of life before racial identity crept in and stole my innocence.

The Souls of Black Folk (1903).

William Edward Du Bois was a civil rights activist who fought for solidarity amongst the whites and blacks. He published a collection of fourteen essays to force white readers to see blacks as human beings (NAACP).

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
 All night long crying with a mournful cry,
 As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
 The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
 O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
 All night long the water is crying to me.

- Arthur Simon “*The Souls of Black Folk*”

He opens his lecture with a spiritual by Arthur Simon; each chapter follows suit with a song before he proceeds to speak. The initial question Du Bois posed: “How does it feel to be a problem,” introducing the “Negro Problem” (Du Bois). The first seven chapters take you on a Confederate journey downtrodden with his descriptive tales of struggling. He uses slavery as an

example of institutional racism, which is front and center still today. Du Bois gave us an honest, gruesome view of our origins. These powers of body and of mind were oppressed by the “double-aimed struggle of the black artisan” (Du Bois 5). He borrows the term ‘double consciousness’, from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *The Transcendentalist*.

Blacks live in outward peace of knowing the odds on poverty and not escaping white contempt, is an ongoing disappointment.

The Strong Black Woman.

The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman.

- Malcolm X

Strong Black Women are associated with the disempowering name, Mammy. She nurtures and accommodates her oppressor in any way to make them happy with a smile that brightens any room. In Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1934), the unappreciated domestic, Delilah, had a winning recipe exploited for the white’s advantage. Some Mammies took permission to boss up, sass, and take up space. They could do so because of their intense loyalty; Hattie McDaniel exemplifies this in her role as Mammy in *Gone With The Wind* because she is sympathetic, sassy, and an enslaved nurturing mother. “We feel proud over the fact that Hattie McDaniel won the coveted role of ‘Mammy. It means about \$2,000 for Miss McDaniel in individual advancement...[and] nothing in racial advancement” (Meares). How did we get to the SBW trope?

SBW originally was a compliment to shape how Black women are seen. Ams Ukaegbu writes in “The Problem with the Strong Black Woman Narrative”, “ ‘Strong Black Woman’ was initially conceived by Black women to subvert these negative stereotypes” (Ukaegbu). However, it hinders us because we are seen as unbreakable super-warriors with a chip on our shoulders.

They are identified with having a moral compass, carrying a no-nonsense attitude, emasculating the black men in their families, and disregarding their own needs to channel strength in others. I must be twice as good to get half of what my counterparts have. During unfair exchanges, we are expected to suppress those emotions. SBW deals with traumatic adversities, and still, she overcomes them. I admit there is a sense of pride and empowerment when obstacles can be won. If anyone saw me sweat, it was only for a split second because you must be strong, a trophy I had to achieve.

It is vital that Black characters in films and television series are allowed to make mistakes, be written with realism, and be seen as humans, not machines. In Melissa Harris-Perry’s book “*Sister Citizen*,” she argues that strong black women are validated, admired, and praised based on how they behave, not on who they are (Harris-Perry). Loss of social standing is an ever-present threat for individuals whose social acceptance is based on behavioral traits rather than unconditional human value (Martel). Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok shine awareness on the psychological and emotional strain of living up to this myth in real life. I have a complex understanding of when I realized what I believed firmly was a myth.

I ran a theatre company, and I was on top of it; anytime things shifted, I was ready to fix it. Joy followed when I could fix things without blinking or feeling an emotion. When I entered my master's program, I felt a change within the energy of me trying to fix what was broken. I was running on fumes and was a hair away from crashing. I was ashamed that I could not keep

going. How could I stop if I was not taught? I lived by; if I pushed my limits, I would feel good. I wasn't living for myself; I was living for accolades and applause. When the applause stopped and it was silent, my strength decreased.

The superstition of Black women's strength has deterred many from seeking mental health counseling. The real power starts with self-awareness; changing the narrative follows.

Mental Health.

Discussing mental health evokes ignorance amongst the public due to a lack of understanding. Dr. Jeffrey Borenstein speaks on this effect:

“Stigma often comes from lack of understanding or fear. Inaccurate or misleading media representations of mental illness contribute to both factors. A review of studies on stigma shows that while the public may accept the medical or genetic nature of a mental health disorder and the need for treatment, many people still have a negative view of those with mental illness.” (Borenstein).

We hear the word ‘mental’ and associate it with the word crazy.

Mental health refers to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. It is all about how people think, feel, and behave. People sometimes use the term “mental health” to mean the absence of a mental disorder. (Felman)

If therapy is mentioned, Blacks automatically associate that with their white counterparts. Also, talking to strangers bring out a sense of paranoia when venting. Mental health was pinned to the rich; you need money to see a therapist. Where would the extra funds come from with living paycheck to paycheck or bill to bill? Our access is minimal to mental health when “Black adults

are 20 percent more likely to experience mental health issues than the rest of the population” (Ellis).

Many in the Black community like to shy away from mental health due to a lack of knowledge. Often it is confused with the term mental illness. The illness refers to “conditions that affect a person’s thinking, feeling, mood, or behavior” (Ukaegbu). Are the body and mind reaching their full potential regardless of genetic makeup, upbringing, or life circumstances? Do you notice stress, anxiety, worry, sadness, or other conflicting emotions? The importance of good mental health ripples into everything we do, think, or say. Anything attached to health care because of the historical mistreatment.

Dr. J. Marion Sims.

In 1880, Dr. J. Marion Sims became president of the American Gynecological Society, which he established. He is known as the ‘father of modern gynecology’ and the developer of the surgical techniques for repairing a bladder-vaginal fistula, a severe complication during childbirth. Sims began experimenting from 1845 to 1849 on enslaved women “whom he quartered in a small hospital behind his house in Montgomery, Alabama” (Wall). Sims also invented the modern speculum and the position for vaginal exams, which he used on enslaved women without anesthesia. After carrying on with his repeated experiments and getting the information he needed, he did not seem interested in repairing the injuries he created. Instead, Sims toured conferences and medical conventions, and when asked about his successful technique, Sims would proudly talk about experimenting on his slaves:

One young woman, a slave, named Anarcha with a particularly difficult combination vesicovaginal and rectovaginal fistula, underwent 30 operations before Sims was able to close the holes in her bladder and rectum. (NCBI)

Dr. Sims believed in the notion that Black people did not feel any pain. His technique brought mixed reviews; some thought he was brilliant for taking the initiative of examining women organs; however, most physicians in 1880 ran from the idea. Sims admitted, “If there was anything I hated, it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis” (NCBI). He took to gynecology with a ‘monomania’ once he realized it was his ticket to fame and fortune (NCBI). In Durrenda Ojanuga’s journal titled “*The Medical Ethics of the 'Father of Gynecology,' Dr. J. Marion Sims*” she writes:

A result of unethical experimentation with powerless Black women” and refers to his attempts to cure vesicovaginal fistulas as “a classic example of the evils of slavery and the misuse of human subjects for medical research. (Durrenda)

Dr. Sims’s use of slaves for medical experimentation was unnecessary because the experiment was done by a Southern physician in the 19th century. His experiment was done in an ethical manner using white women who gave consent (Holland).

The Tuskegee Experiment.

I learned about the Tuskegee Experiment when Grambling State University put on *Miss Evers' Boys* by David Feldshuh. “The story is told from the perspective of Eunice Evers, the nurse on trial for her involvement in the secret medical experiment on poor black men from 1932-to 1972” (Feldshuh). The secret was a development to study the effects of untreated syphilis in Tuskegee, Alabama. Miss Evers was aware of the lack of treatment, but she was held

to secrecy. The study experimented with four hundred and twelve men with the promise of funding their treatment.

Instead, after the men were injected with syphilis, they had a fake long-term treatment, which involved the doctors giving the patients a placebo even after penicillin became a cure (Feldshuh). This experiment was called the infamous *Syphilis Study*. In 1932, Macon County, Alabama, recruited 600 Black men to study the entire progression of the disease. Elizabeth Nix details the experiment:

Doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service, which was running the study, informed the participants—399 men with latent syphilis and a control group of 201 others who were free of the disease—they were being treated for bad blood, a term commonly used in the area at the time to refer to a variety of ailments. (Nix)

Word made it to the local hospitals to not treat those patients. The story was leaked in 1972, and the operation was shut down. Unfortunately, 100 of those patients died from complications, and some passed the disease down to their kids. On May 16, 1997, Bill Clinton delivered a speech at the White House. In 1997, there were eight survivors alive when he issued an apology:

So today, America does remember the hundreds of men used in research without their knowledge and consent. We remember them and their family members. Men who were poor and African American, without resources and with few alternatives. They believed they had found hope when they were offered free medical care by the United States Public Health Service. They were betrayed. (Clinton)

Henrietta Lacks.

Rebecca Skloot's, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, was on my middle school accelerated reader list. I was introduced to Henrietta Lacks, whose cells "HeLa", "from the first two letters of her first and last names, are used to study the effects of toxins, drugs, hormones, and viruses on the growth of cancer cells without experimenting on humans. Her cells played a starring role in the development of Covid-19 pandemic"(Butanis).

Lacks had vaginal bleeding issues and went to the only hospital that treated the poor Blacks, John Hopkins. She went through treatment and was diagnosed with cervical cancer. Lacks' cells were taken for samples without permission. "Her cells were unlike any of the others he had ever seen; where other cells would die, Mrs. Lacks' cells doubled every 20 to 24 hours" (Skloot). After receiving a blood transfusion, Lacks died at the hospital. Lacks' family members did not know of her cells being harvested. Medical records were published in the 1980s without any family consent. The family found out and took it to court, where it was "ruled that a person's discarded tissue and cells are not their property and can be commercialized" (Skloot). The Black community has every right to not look in the direction of any hospital when they have fallen ill. When I was young, my household had a saying that we only call an ambulance if one of us gets hit by a bus because that is when it is out of God's hands. In the words of Toledo, a character in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*:

See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first, we gotta know we the leftovers. (Wilson)

Culturally Component Therapist.

It is evident that we need someone on our team who understands the Black woman's authentic experience. We are incredibly underrepresented as of 2020, “only four percent “of the psychology workforce in the U.S. is Black (“How Diverse Is the Psychology Workforce”). So, when we finally find an ideal therapist, their caseloads are probably heavy. Meaning the session would most likely be rushed, and the patient may not get all she or he needs. “The most common ethnicity among Therapists is White, which makes up 76.4 percent of all therapists” (Gaines). The biggest obstacle is trust, we need to feel understood, and it does not have to be of the same race to feel seen. The therapist we choose to bare all our problems with needs some understanding of what it means to be black. “Cultural bias and lack of cultural competency on the part of the helping professional work against any intended benefit to the client and may even result in harm” (Gaines). Patients want to work through their issues without spending time being the Rosetta Stone for Blacks. “Doctors must possess the perfect tool; ongoing sensitivity and awareness while educating themselves culturally on the experiences of the Black community” (U.S. DEPARTMENT).

A safe space needs to be created so more Blacks can become mental health workers (Neal-Barnett). A burden is placed when working in predominately White spaces; Blacks must present themselves in a certain way due to gazing eyes and avoiding rampant microaggression. There is a twoness in the practice of code-switching; “switching two or more languages or varieties of language in a conversation” (Oxford). A continuous juggling act of being yourself and presenting another self to the white co-workers to fit in. We all need to feel important to do the necessary work, but it starts with educating ourselves first and creating our own space.

It Needs a Face.

On March 11, 2020, an outbreak of a lethal virus called Coronavirus initiated a pandemic that lasted for two years (CDC). Within that isolation and loneliness, many discovered solaces in dance videos, rampant challenges, and narrating stories that created a camaraderie in self-expression within the media. Technology was all we had to keep us from going insane. An old platform that launched in 2017 came to the forefront, creating a safe place for creators to transform trauma into creativity and build a connection amongst 45.6 million users (Norman). TikTok is a space for short videos that touch on a diverse collection of content. Quickly, the world didn't feel so small, and many felt understood. The platform soon transformed into a place of healing as we got to see ourselves and our stories play out in people we had never met. "Through videos some on topics like grief, "race/race-ism," trauma, and healing, others raw reactions or trending sounds, like a call to action to amplify people of color on TikTok" (Norman).

Voices in Mental Health.

Celebrities soon hopped on this trend and were instrumental in showing us we are the same in that weary feeling of life. This free app is a place for them to show us another side of them. Lizzo is a multi-talented singer and flutist who advocates for plus-size girls. She has reached out on TikTok several times emotionally because it was a place, she felt seen and heard. After releasing the hurt of being picked on, she could come back and share the importance of self-care and having a therapist. It is essential when influential Black women like Lizzo share their tribulations, because she states that it is okay to not be okay.

This shines a light on the importance of seeking professional help, and not only brought her fans closer to her, but it brought awareness to seeking professional help. Like Lizzo, many more Black celebrities have stood up and raised their hands, admitting needing professional help with their emotions.

On my personal TikTok 'For you page', I have seen a quote from Taraji P. Henson saying, "perfection is the perfect lie" (Henson). A veil was lifted from my eyes, and I finally felt seen. For years I have been striving to be my idea of perfection because of what society has pushed in the media. So, I dug a little deeper into what Henson was saying and saw the repeated quote came from her therapist, and immediately I subscribed to her TikTok. I was taken aback when Henson, a Black woman like me, raised her hand at the Variety's Power of Women Awards in New York City, New York, presented by *Lifetime*. She emotionally discusses her struggles with depression and anxiety. She tearfully says, "the history of mental illness for black people in America stretches all the way back 400 years, 15 million people, and an ocean that holds the stories, as she reflects on her roles as an actress (Norman). Henson has acted in powerful roles that have given the Black community a sense of familiarity. Like the 'around-the-way' character, Cookie from Lee Daniel's TV drama *Empire*, or playing the unsung legend, Katherine Johnson in Theodore Melfi's movie *Hidden Figures*. Each of the women Henson studied kept going. "Four hundred years running through the veins. And we keep going" (Henson).

Also, at the Variety's Power of Women NY awards, Henson was honored for her work with the Boris Lawrence Henson Foundation. A foundation named after her father, a veteran who suffered from mental illness. Henson was inspired by how honest her father was about sharing in a time when mental illness was unheard of for blacks.

The foundation's vision is:

To eradicate the stigma around mental health in the Black community by breaking the silence and breaking a cycle of shame. (Henson)

During an interview in the *Real Daytime*, Henson talked about how she taps into her character. To do the work on screen, she must check within herself “if I'm lying to the girl in the mirror, how can I tell the character's truth” (Henson). She reminds herself that her body is her instrument every day, and it deserves proper care. Speaking her truth released her from suicidal thoughts. Talking about it made the internal suffocation stop. While fighting for the silent voices, she has found other avenues to spread awareness. On Facebook Watch, Henson and her best friend Tracie Jade hold inspiring conversations with other Black celebrities who have suffered in the shadows. The Emmy nominated series is called *Peace Of Mind*, and personal stories are shared “through an honest, profound conversation about mental health issues,” They provide tools and support through therapists and doctors. The first season kicks off with actress Gabrielle Union.

During the 20-minute show, we learned that Gabrielle Union struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, also known as PTSD. The term is normally associated with veterans, so hearing Gabrielle having it, was different. According to Psychiatry.org, PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event (Torres). In Gabrielle Union's case, she endured rape at gunpoint at nineteen years of age, which is a traumatic event. An ex-manager from Payless in the mall she was working at robbed all the different stores. None of the employees got word of the situation. The robber came during closing hours and held Union and her co-worker at gunpoint and forced them to take off their clothes.

He shoved Union into a bathroom and repeatedly raped her with the gun held at her head.

“Things like this happen to bad people. Things like this don’t happen to people like me” (Union).

In her memoir *We're Going to Need More Wine*, she explains that the gun slid when he turned her over. He asked, “Can you hand me the gun,” while in doggystyle. “He said it casually as he ripped into me, like he was asking for the salt” (Union). She grabbed the gun and shot at him. After beating her senselessly, he ran out the back door, and the police were called. During the examination, the officer told her and her parents she would need therapy, and Union took the advice. PTSD is not a one size fits all. We are conditioned to have the perfect visuals of what victims look like, so when celebrities like Union and Jennifer Lewis share their stories, we are quick to say, you don’t look like what you have been through.

Jennifer Lewis talks about her illness in the memoir *The Mother of Black Hollywood*.

Jennifer is an actress, singer, and activist. For over forty years, she has graced the screen portraying iconic characters in the Black community. In her book, she reveals her mental health struggles and talks about the importance of her story. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1990, but Lewis always knew something was not right with her for a very long time. There were also thirty years of sex addiction and depression. But, like Taraji P. Henson, Lewis's instrument saved her. “If you really want something, you ain't gone mess yourself up to bad” (Lewis). Her love for show business kept Lewis from making decisions she knew she would soon regret. So, she got in her skin and aligned who she was. When she received help, she was put on medications. She was afraid it would take her from her high a rush that worked for her on stage:

A person with bipolar disorder can go from feeling very, very high (called mania) to feeling very, very low (depression). With proper treatment, people can control these mood swings and lead fulfilling lives.

While the rate of bipolar disorder is the same among African Americans as it is among other Americans, African Americans are less likely to receive a diagnosis and, therefore, treatment for this illness. Most African Americans with bipolar disorder are going undiagnosed and untreated. (Lewis)

Luckily, the high stayed, but everything else calmed, and she could see things clearer (Breakfast Club). She advocates taking medication because it saved her from going down a dark road. Every chance Lewis gets, she lets the Black community know they do not have to suffer alone. It is crucial that we tell stories that prove that people can overcome mental illness:

Black mental health professionals joining the campaign to bring awareness to the Black community has become one of the most popularized content. According to Kaiser Family Foundation, “The hashtag #mentalhealth has racked up more than 28 billion views, alongside others like #blacktherapist and #blackmentalhealth that attract audiences of millions. (Norman)

Patrice Berry, a psychologist from Virginia, uses her TikTok to give back. She responds to questions and gives tips on setting boundaries and self-care. Berry has videos mocking the church and the refusal to understand mental health. The footage had mixed views. One user commented that was how she was raised in her Black Baptist church and that we have so much unlearning and relearning to do (Norman). Another wrote, “As a therapist, I love this. Preach! (Norman). Berry wants to create a safe place for hidden conversations to come to the forefront. Each certified therapist on TikTok, like Patrice Berry, quickly mentions that watching videos does not substitute getting professional help. Important information can easily get lost as you scroll. It is time to not be ashamed and get the necessary support.

Black Theatre.

People ask me all the time — what kind of stories do you want to tell, Viola? And I say exhume those bodies. Exhume those stories — the stories of the people who dreamed big and never saw those dreams to fruition, people who fell in love and lost. I became an artist and thank God I did, because we are the only profession that celebrates what it means to live a life.

- Viola Davis, “2017 Oscars”

Theatre has saved me when the real world was not working. I was able to take famously written classics and breath my frustration into those characters. My first show was *Raisin in The Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and I played Lena Younger, the matriarch of the family. She is waiting on her late husband’s \$10,000 insurance check. Lena has put money down on a lovely home in the suburb for the betterment of her family. As she and her family get ready to move, Clybourne Park Improvement Association sends over Mr. Linder to buy them out due to the family being Black. Hansberry explains the motivations behind the play:

Well--you see our community is made up of people who’ve worked hard as the dickens for years to build up that little community. They’re not rich and fancy people; just hard-working, honest people who don’t really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in. Now, I don’t say we are perfect and there is a lot wrong in some of the things they want. But you’ve got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain way. (Hansberry)

After Walter loses the money in a get-rich scheme, the family refuses the deal. I breathed life in that character because that story is close to home. The anger and frustration of wanting better a better life. I know this woman; she is my mother, grandmother, and aunt. Theatre has always been a place that holds up a mirror to the audience. They have a way of placing Black authenticity on stage. My love for theatre is the raw emotions behind the slice of life being shared. Black theatre is freedom, poetry, radical, culture, art, and reflective. Actress Ruby Dee feels this way:

Black poetry is not what Shakespeare begot. Nor with any sons. Its psychedelic beats have little in common with Shelley and Keith. It has its own diameter, not I am pentameter it has upon it. No rule of sonnet. No strait-laced corset. Nothing to force it. It's freaks. It's streets. It melts. It sings. It swings. It cries. In verses on paragraph. It groves. It moves. It's uncanny. It's a brand-new school, both hot and cool. A blues beat bittersweet is deep, deep blue, bright, red, and high yellow. It's loud as proud a super drum set up his own condition, the fire tradition is shocked it rocks it is human drama. It talks about your momma just love this brand-new dimension its many tracks so come sit down with me and speed rap this black poetry. (Theatre)

For Colored Girls.

Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf* provides music, dance, and poetry through nonverbal communication. The play debuted on Broadway in December 1976 (Harlem Community). It is a coming-of-age story of women trying to find their place in situations they have no control over. The play discusses relationships, sexuality, rape, abortions, domestic violence, and the cultural norms of Black women.

The story touches on the SBW narrative and how it is a myth that we do not feel any pain. *For Colored Girls* gives the Black woman permission to cry and be unapologetically human and vulnerable. It is a “clarion call to say that Black women need to be loved and caressed, not taken for granted, used, cheated on, and made to almost lose themselves! Black women have a strong, passionate, beautiful nature” (Ntozake). The language is for Black women by Black woman using American Vernacular English (AAVE), including the n-word.

Shange wanted to write *For Colored Girls...* in a way that mimicked how real women speak so she could draw her readers focus to the experience of reading and listening. The cast consists of seven Black women recognized by their assigned colors. They are the lady in red, lady in orange, lady in yellow, lady in green, lady in blue, lady in brown, and lady in purple. In the *Massachusetts Review*, Andrea Rushing quotes New York Times critic Clive Barnes “it could easily have made me feel guilty at being white and male it didn't it made me feel proud of being a member of the human race and with the joyous discovery that a white man can have black sisters” (qtd. in Rushing).

Pipeline.

Dominique Morisseau gave hurting mothers a voice in her 2017 play *Pipeline*. “The play’s title refers to the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’, where underprivileged students are channeled directly from the public education system into American penal institutions” (Morisseau). School-to-prison describes school disciplinary policies and law enforcement policies working together (Nelson). Therefore, any negative outcome for Black students, like suspension or getting expelled, is more likely to be incarcerated.

“It’s an effort to maintain order in the classroom, some schools overpoliced student behavior, suspending and expelling students for minor infractions or even referring them to the legal system” (Nelson).

Morisseau shines a light on the fears of a Black mother raising a son today. She even gives the audience hints on what to expect in her engagement rules:

You are allowed to laugh audibly. You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response. My work requires a few “um hmms” and “uhn uhns” should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize. This can be the church for some of us, and testifying is allowed. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to. This is community. Let’s go. (Morisseau)

Quickly, we know this is a story about Blacks, and it assures us it is a safe place. The main character, Nya, is a high school teacher in New York that tackles the day-to-day problems of inner-city kids, brutal fights, clashes with other teachers, and not having full support from the outside. Although Nya is committed to her students, she wants to keep her son far from her student's reality and give him a better opportunity. A Black mother's worse fear is losing her son on the streets, being brutalized by the cops, or being found dead in the streets. She wants her son Omari to have the things she knows her students can’t have, so she sends him off to an expensive private school. As Nya fights for her son's and student's education, Omari gets in a fight with a teacher and is threatened with expulsion. This causes Nya to reflect as a woman and a mother. Nya pays attention to their dysfunctional dynamics, like the father is not around due to Nya having an affair. Nya is afraid of losing her son in a cold world that does not understand his anger. *Pipeline* is a space that reflects on underpaid black teachers and single mothers who will fight tooth and nail for a brighter future for their kids than the appointed one.

I appreciate the plays that bare it all and allow the audience to see themselves. Our stories are instrumental to our mental health.

Final Thoughts.

This thesis explores the journey of how the Black Woman has found her place in a world of limitations. Navigating the world as a Black woman presents challenges requiring a particular skill set: flexibility, knowing your past, tenacity, discipline, and confidence. The Black Woman finds her groove, her placement within her power. The power is the ability to know who she is and her purpose. The Black woman's power is the courage to admit when you are not connected to your body. Her power is uncompromising faith; no matter the problem, my mother never steered away from God. The Black woman's power is revolutionary, creative, political, cultural, and resilient. The black woman does not have to find her power because she has it. Resilience is doing the work to keep the power.

Appendix

Trickin'

A One Woman Play

by

Shaina Rogers

*I hope you have a good memory because I'm singing a long ass
song. **Shaina Renay***

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Characters: **Oya** - 31 years old. A bald woman with the hue of dark roux.

Security Guard (SG) - A big voice in uniform.

Setting: An Asylum. The space is a stark, pale, white box (padded cell) that sometimes turns blood red.

Time: Now.

Notes: Trickin' is a solo performance featuring the character, Oya James. Scenes are further enhanced with the help of a guard. The play should be in continual movement. Lights will never go completely to black. Scene shifts will be denoted by a dimmed light or a change in color. A scrim is used to provide visuals to further emphasize emotions or the story.

Songs: *Southern Hymn "I Love The Lord"*

The dialect used in this play will be home to Black women. I have written this in the same tone that is recognizable. This is not discriminatory nor is it private. It is, simply, unapologetically, a Black Woman Blues. This is our safe place

SCENE 1
The Asylum

In the alluring darkness we hear the Voice Over of lifestyle coach April Mason's "Independent Woman is Not A Compliment."

April Mason V/O

Please do not address me as a strong independent black woman. It's not a compliment.

Lights reveal a still image of OYA JAMES 31. She appears on a scrim, panicky and handcuffed. She's lost in hopelessness as her head hangs low. A light change reveals a wooded sign reading, "Chatham Crisis Hospital." Two tall BLACK COPS flank Oya as they escort her into the facility.

April Mason V/O

Because when you think of something strong, you don't think of coming to the aid of it.

Various projections of "strong black woman" imagery.

- A busy entrepreneur stands in the middle of her busy shop. Her face shows a mask of anxiety.

- A weary elderly grandmother sits at the kitchen table. She sits in prayer over an empty plate while her grandson enjoys a hot meal.

- A older flustered student surrounded by unfinished paperwork and stacks of bills and notices.

- A distressed mother sits in an unfurnished room. She breastfeeds her newborn. A purse with nothing more than change sits on a lone wooden table.

April Mason V/O

I ask the fellas... *If you had some luggage and you need an animal to carry it... fellas, what animal would you think of?*

Images of the same women wear "Chatham Crisis" patient scrubs. They stand wounded, worn down, and defeated. They stand in a straight line. Their identity is stripped.

April Mason V/O

An elephant, an ox...? Something strong. Why don't you think of a cat or a mouse? *(Pause.)* Cause a mouse can't handle a burden like this.

*The sound of a door straining to be opened can be heard.
A pad of soft footsteps follow a spotlight center stage.
OYA walks in dressed in a painter's smock, splashed with paint. Her paint-stained hands hold a cloth bag.*

April Mason V/O

Nobody ever comes to the aid of a strong woman.

We see a slow-moving image of the strong black women shuffling into a padded room, one by one, led by the same Two tall BLACK COPS. Each door slams shut!

*Oya stand before us, in disbelief.
A blistered scream from somewhere down the hall causes her to jump.
The strained door slams shut.
Her eyes knock into focus.*

*Lights fully rise, and a white padded cell is revealed. An uncomfortable twin-railed bed sits on dingy floors that have seen better days. A wooded chair sits on the right. A crusted "Property of Chatham Crisis" faded blanket hangs on the back of the chair.
A beat-up sink in need of a good scrub hangs on the wall to the left. An end table with a King James Bible sits beside the locked door. There is a small square window.*

Oya looks around in disgust. Her face reveals, "this shit is nasty." She clutches her bag closely.

A moment.

Oya crosses to the blanket and smooths a spot on the bed.

She places her bag down.

If we could read the bag, it would say, "Bride June 17th, 2020".

The first thing she removes are paint brushes from the bag. Her face brightens. A tune escapes her lips. Slowly, she conducts a melody with her brushes.

Dark, rich splashes of projects. More colors appear as she Oya speaks...

OYA

Copper and metallic bronze

Deliberately trickle on my canvas.

Sage. Ochre. Sienna. Azure.

A departure from reality to find the truth in abstract.

Oya waves her paintbrushes on the imaginary canvas.

The colors project onto an unfinished canvas. An emotional abstract depiction of Oya. A confusion of abstract shapes activated by muffled pain.

She continues in poetic verse as she speaks to us.

I can't bring you to an accurate depiction.

Because my emotions are gestural marks, shapes without shapes...it's not objective.

There is no logic.

No perspective.

It just is.

Each stroke.

I smoke.

Each strum.

Evokes the strings of my pain.

I'm the chief conductor of this symphony.

Art is my truth.
Orchestrated by the frame that is my mind.
A melodious tune that's intertwined.

*Her strokes get aggressive.
Paint projects.
Oya loses herself as she comes to an orgasmic
peak, then...*

*SECURITY GUARD barges into Oya's room with a
clipboard in tow.*

Oya wakes to her reality.

SECURITY GUARD

I know them nurses didn't tell you to come in here and have open
mic night.

Security Guard looks at the clipboard.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

What's your name?

OYA

My name is -

SECURITY GUARD

- James!

*Guard notices the paintbrushes.
Oya meets her gaze. Immediately, the brushes drop
to the floor.
Guard barges in and picks up the brushes.*

OYA

(Quick)

It's my paint-

SECURITY GUARD

- Girl, are you trying to get me fired before my ninety days are
up?

OYA

When they picked me up, I was painting.

*Guard opens Oya's smock, and a short black dress with specs of paint is revealed.
Immediate irritation hits Guard's face.*

SECURITY GUARD

They didn't give you a proper check-in?

*Oya shrugs her shoulder.
Guard rolls her eyes.*

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

You need a bath, Picasso.
It's late.
The morning will be here before you know it.
Get some rest.
You will need it.

Guard holds up the paintbrushes.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D)

Contraband.
You will get these back on your release date.

OYA

When is that?

Guard looks at her clipboard.

SECURITY GUARD

Don't see that.
Get some rest.
You'll do a proper check-in in the morning.

*Security Guard exits.
Oya takes a deep breath, crosses to the bed and pulls the sheet back. She quickly searches the bed.
A sigh of relief.*

OYA

No bugs.

She lies down, smock and all. Still clutching the bag. Pulls the covers up around her chin and closes her eyes.

A moment. As the lights begin to dim.

*Oya screams. Jumps out of bed. Scratching.
She pulls the sheets back and examines the bed up
close. She finds nothing.*

She searches again. She scratches.

*Oya remakes the bed.
She sits on the edge a long while..
and hosts a conversation with herself.*

OYA

(Laughs in disbelief.)

I got - I REALLY GOT
my stupid ass locked up in a nuthouse.
Good fuckin' job, Oya!
Boi' when you thought you couldn't get any lower.
You decide to jump into the fiery pits of hell and start a
party.
A freaking..

*She twists and tussles with herself - an all-out
mini tantrum.*

...mental institute and I'm the fuckin' patient.

Clearly not pleased with herself.

Oya Eshe Zina White - James, you finally did it.
You done lost all your shit!

*She flies off the handle, crosses to, and
lands a series of punches to the padded wall.*

Hyperventilates.

This shit is for real.
Oh, my God!
I can't breathe.

*Oya crosses to the chair to her and plops down
barely missing the floor.
Her eyes widen. Her breath shortens.
Terrified, she runs to the door and bangs with
the energy she has left..*

I CAN'T BREATHE!
HELP!

She bangs harder.

Security Guard opens the door, pushing Oya back.

Oya falls into SG's arms. Her chest heaves up and down.

SG holds her.

OYA

My heart...

SECURITY GUARD

Breathe, James.

OYA

My -

SECURITY GUARD

- Breathe slowly.
Breathe into your belly.

*Oya takes deep breaths.
She begins to calm.
Security Guard pulls out a walkie-talkie.
Oya stops her as she takes slow deep breath.*

OYA

See.
I'm fine.

SECURITY GUARD

You are on the floor.
In my arms.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Your tongue was wagging from your lips.
That is not fine.

*A scream is heard from down the hall.
Security Guard looks towards the door.*

OYA

Go.
I'm fine.
They need you more than me.

SECURITY GUARD

Get back to bed and get some rest before check-in.

Oya scurries to the bed, pulls the covers and gets in.
Guard walks to the door and looks back at her.

SECURITY GUARD

I'm supposed to report this.

Oya looks at her.
Security Guard closes the door.
Oya prays.

OYA

Lord, please keep me near the cross.
By and by, I'm becoming the slow cousin;
The one everybody stays clear of at the family cookout.

She cries.

Lee got me locked up in here.

More cries.

Lord, please get me out of here.

My mind is running a fifty-yard dash,
and I can't get it to come to a halt.
Are my actions justified,
or am I crazy?
What is Ma' thinkin' right now?
I know my sisters blowing up my phone.
Shit! Where's my phone?

As she reaches and searches through the cloth bag. Nothing!

Shit! Do they even know I'm here?
If I could talk to my Mama...

Oya hums a song... maybe a song her mama would sing to her.

She cries to herself as she snuggles under the bed, a good long while.

She falls to sleep.

Lights dim.

A gut-strained scream can be heard.

Oya sits up.

She punches the air.

She grabs a flattened pillow and joins in a muffled scream.

Voicemails from Oya's sister AJA and MAWU can be heard.

OYA V/O

This is Oya; leave a message. *Beep!*

AJA V/O

Bitch, I been callin' yo' ass. Did you and Lee finally take each other out? Cause he ain't answering his phone either.

MAWU V/O

AJA!

AJA V/O

Nawl, Mawu. Oya, I tol' you not to go back to his triflin' ass. I am about to walk from I-20 to I-75 to do bodily harm.

MAWU V/O

Can I speak now please?

Hey, Oya, how did the surgery take? I know you are going through some fucked up shit -

AJA V/O

- Damn all that!

Call us and let us know you are alive.

Mama can't even get ahold of you either.

That ain't like you, O.

MAWU V/O

I love you.

AJA V/O

I love you, O.
Tell your bitch ass husband to...

BEEP!

OYA

Fuck!
I need a blunt.

Oya rummages through the cloth bag. Finds a tattered composition notebook. She rips a piece from the pages, sprinkles some imaginary weed, and rolls it up like a joint. Her fingers mimic a lighter as she lights the paper. A nice pull is taken.

A cloud of smoke projects.

Oya floats as she gets out of bed and crosses to center stage.

She addresses us.

I don't know.
Something about that flicker sound from a lighter,
Brings excitement in each flame.

She goes for another toke and is distracted by her stained fingers.

Steven Spazuk who uses flames as a paintbrush.

Steven Spazuk's paintings of trailing smoke projects: Smokey Barbie (2016).

He takes the ashes and creates figured silhouettes.
Soot revealed sets.

Another image. Elle (2019),

He allows direct candle flames and burning acrylics to guide him to beautiful destruction.

Another image. Smokey Silhouette (2016),

Mirroring the fragile state of one's emotion

Reflecting the grit of life with flames.
Expressing our emotions with an item that can be perceived as
freedom, natural, beauty, and pain.

Another image. And Ethereal Flame.

Oya takes a puff.

Spazuk coined the word *fumage*.

She blows.

I was such a fan I tested his theory.
You have to be pretty careful not to set yo' shit on fire.
I picked up a brush after a year of blockage.
So much energy is pent up and the urge to submerge in paint is
necessary.
I haven't had that rush in a long time, and I needed to ignite.
Cherry Blossom candles all around me with a hint of Black Divine
incense.
Bringing light to my evolving suspense.
A lush fruity and favorable corn drink to coincide with the
mood.
(She smiles) Bourbon.
Smoking Bubba Kush
...Allowing myself to freely think through the shackles of loose
screws.

*Oya takes another puff.
She exhales with true ease.
She sways back and forth.
She's high as a kite.*

Let's play some ole' skool' blues.

*We hear...
A soul/ Blues mixture with a little bit of doo-
wop. The bass guitar tightens her soul.
With each BA, DA, DUMP, DA, DUMP of beat, Oya's
hips unwind.*

OYA

This is my shit...

*Lights slice across Oya's black skin, temporary
tattoos of illumination.*

*Oya struts with a cup raised high like worship
for Sunday service. Inebriated, her head nods
back, and she belts out...*

*She rocks sensually left to right, mimicking the
guitar.
Her divineness oozes as she cuts loose.
The groove consumes her.*

Oya screams with honesty.

*She leaps onto the bed.
The bed barely supporting her.
Her hands are now free to explore.
Paint splashes project.*

The music subsides.

Paint everywhere, and nothing is working.

*She relights her joint.
Ashes projects.*

Ashes.

I see me, finally, in these remnants of fire.

*Oya freezes.
It's her husband, LEE.*

This nigga walking in between me and my canvas
Hey! I'm in a groove, nigga!
Do you not see me in my zone?
Cherry blossoms should have slapped you waaay before putting the
key in.
That's the sign.
Pay attention to the sign.
That's why it's a sign.
You know the severity of interrupting an artist?
Don't you see I'm paintin'!?

The room turns red.

The silhouette is intense.
My shit has never been this good.
You are interrupting my creation with tears of bullshit.
I'm trying to paint the fragility of my life.

Don't fuck with me while I'm creating.

But I get it.

He is mad.

Lee is mad.

Why!?

I dog walked da' FUCK out of his hoe that claims to be pregnant with his sperm.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

The sperm that was bonded for me and only me.

Because, HELLO!!!, I'm his wife.

Shit like that should stay within the marriage.

But nawl', he needs to share his sauce with EVERYONE.

Like a fucking twenty-four-hour fast-food restaurant.

To us.

But we will get to the details of all of that later.

I get it.

Lee is pissy mad.

He probably shitted himself when he got the phone call.

Oya mocks her husband's heavy New York accent.

Why... why can't you just walk away and be da' better person?

You's a professional.

You's gettin' your masters.

You's gettin' your masters.

Da' fuck dat' supposed to mean!?

Oya laughs.

She continues to mock her husband.

Bitch, you could have killed MY child.

Just stupid!

In the God damn hospital acting like some ghetto ass bitches.

Both of y'all.

Bitch.

I became too many bitches with zero understanding and not enough

"Bubba Kush"

and... he is fucking with me.

Lee, get out of my damn face!

He wouldn't move.

Mocks her husband.

You put everybody's life in danger.

He slapped the candle outta' his way.
Cherry Blossom went every fuckin' where.

Everyone?
Or just yo' hoe?
Danielle?
And that unborn bastard ass child?

*The edge of Oya's canvas burns projects.
She stomps out the blunt.*

Really?
Look at this shit!

*She looks around at a mess only she can see.
A moment.
As she addresses us.*

I wasn't mad.
I wasn't hurt.
I surpassed a level I still don't quite get.

A red light flickers.

Fuck, him!
Yeah, I popped that bitch.
She had it coming.
I needed one more element, and he was going to help me.
Time for the big crescendo.
I was going to get that orgasmic finish... with his flesh.

*Lit cherry blossoms candles, and incense
projects.*

*The smell of the candle can be smelled outside of
the stage in the audience.*

Again, she mocks him.

Bitch, you hear me?

(Pause)

Too many BITCHES.

See, he wasn't paying attention to the brewing fire 'cause he was TOO BUSY yelling about the bigger picture ...and how the baby is innocent.

I slowly raised Cherry Blossoms against his freshly oiled arm. Lee's arm is incredibly hairy.

Screams from a man can be heard.

The lights stop flickering.

Yep, that's the last bitch escaping from his lips.

I watched his tears fall on my painting.

Burnt follicles mixing into copper and metallic bronze paint.

He screams,

PUT IT OUT!

I almost forgot he could feel.

I didn't move.

He waddled his way to the kitchen and threw his flaming shirt under the running faucet.

He looked at me in horror and went to the back.

Baby, do you need a band-aid?

Baby?

SECURITY GUARD O/S

Sleep is free.

Instead, you want to sing dance and admit to arson.

Go to bed!

It's bad I got to treat y'all like my damn kids.

Guard's voice is distant.

SECURITY GUARD O/S (CONT'D.)

Ummm, what time is Mrs. Geraldine bringing her ass? I need a break!?

Her eyes are locked on the door.

An image of Lee takes her focus.

Look at you, prepping yourself for a premeditated blow.

(She laughs)

For once, I am turned on by how uncomfortable you are.

Scared shitless. I love every minute.

I ain't gone hit you but...

Sweat, bitch!

(sings)

You better be careful what you do to me

'Cause somebody might do it to you.

*Security Guard walks in and looks intensely at the
back of Oya's head.*

Oya stops.

After awhile...

OYA

(to the audience)

Is she behind me?

The security guard waits.

Oya walks to her bed and gets in.

The security guard shuts the door

Oya waits and then speaks to us...

The music was so loud I didn't hear the banging on the door.

Lee runs out with a wrap on his arm and my bridal bag.

What's goin' on Lee?

I poured myself another Double Oaked Kentucky Straight Bourbon.

His arm looks a damn fool.

He walks past me like I'm a prop in the house.

(laughs)

I almost got the white meat.

Baby, you put some Neosporin on that?

No answer.

More bangin' on the door.

Who you invited to da' house?

Now, I know this Negro hear me like y'all hear me.

He opens the door.
Two tall Black cop's steps in with a nurse.
She's wearing a jacket with "Chatham Crisis Hospital" *boldly written on her back.*
This bitch done called the nuthouse, y'all.
I chugged the rest of my WOODFORD RESERVE.
Cause I know these next couple of seconds were about to be pure fuckery.
As soon as I start missing that last taste, Lee starts crying.
Putting on a damn show.
How he's scared for our safety and feels like I will harm myself and others.

Others or YOU motherfucka'?

Does she have suicidal urges-?
YES! I think she does. She does.
Where da' fuck he get that from?

NEXT. He's throwing snot everywhere, showing the cops his arm.
Involuntary treatment, he says,
Mental break, he says
Not stable to consent-

- Can y'all please discuss this outside? I'm trying to concentrate!

They zoomed in on me so quick.
Not my best moment at all.
Blame the bourbon.
The two tall Black cops came over and shut my ass up.
Lee is with the nurse signing papers.
He gave the nurse my bag..

She empties it of its contents one by one.

Full of crystals to bring me peace and good luck...*(makes a face)*
...A picture of him and me. *The fucking audacity.*
My journal
My Meet Addy doll my grandmother gave me,
My family blanket,
My brushes
And my sketchbook.

How you feelin' Mrs. James?
Any remorse?

That's what the two tall Black cops asked me.

That man is breathing. I said.

Lee is fine.

Ask that bitch if HE feels terrible for his recent acts that violated our marriage?

Ask him, does HE feel bad for wasting my time?

Ask the right shit!

Asking me no stupid ass question.

The cops look at the nurse and then back at me.

Lee's simple ass, gesturing his ashy ass hand, *See!*

Really, Nigga!

You fuck me over, then cry wolf when I tear into your ass!?

You tellin' mother fucka's I'm crazy!?

Like you really believe that shit?

To have them standing in our living room?

YOU brought me to this place!

Black Cop #1 agrees to emergency detention.

Black cop #2 calls an ambulance for Lee's arm.

His dramatic ass..

No. No. I'm fine. I just want my wife to get better. She has been through enough and I need her to get the help she deserves.

Stand up, Ms. James.

Handcuffs follow.

Lee walks his ass over to me with crocodile tears in his eyes.

Mocks her husband.

It's only for a couple of days, O.

I love you.

He has the nerve to poke his lips out for a kiss.

So, I says,

Sir, don't fuckin' touch me!

I turn to the two tall Black cops.

Get me the fuck out of here, please, before I fuck him up again.

Oya looks around.. the lights start to dim

Now, this shit is my new residence.
How the fuck am I gonna get out of this?
I know my sisters are looking for me.

Oya lays down on the bed.

Time has passed
A bit of sleep, maybe.
The lights slowly rise.
Oya rubs her stained hands together and covers
her face in frustration.
She lets out a deep sigh.

To the audience.

OYA

The cops are hauling me fast like we just said a blessing over
Thanksgiving dinner.
Escortin' me inside Chatham Crisis Hospital.
My short ass workin' hard to keep up, barely maintaining my
balance with my hands cuffed behind my back.
My breasts are enormous.
No balance.
No gravity.
I'm about to fall flat on my face with my ass out.
We walk into the lounge, a nurse steps out and circles around me
like I'm the fresh hot dinner rolls with extra butter.
Before I can speak good, she shoves a tray of pills at me.
Then I hear...*swallow with water.*
I quickly clocked her name tag and looked her straight in the
eyes...

No, thank you, Ms. Paula.

She looks down at her tag to reminds herself that it is indeed
her name.
Once she gets over the shock that I can read, she proceeds to
say... *It'll calm you down.*

Then, you take it.

The other nurse who bombed my crib runs in and says, *No. No.*
She's good.

You betta' tell her.

Y'all, Paula was about to fuck me over.

My mind quickly went to *Ten Days in a Mad-House* by Nellie Bly. Nellie went undercover as a patient in this lunatic box back in the 1800s. The workers are feeding the patients rotten apples and fish.

Misdiagnosing people. *Oh, that's no head cold. You's schizophrenic!* Some shit like that.

Don't let Ms. Paula touch me.

Keep her the fuck away.

The cops sign off and left me.

Shit! Just when I was feeling safe with a cop.

Then they start looking for Geraldine.

Apparently, she has the key to the uniforms. So, no real check-in and I have to sleep in my own shit.

Cool, whatever.

I sign in, and we begin walking down this dark narrow-ass hallway.

My heart's beating faster than ever.

What are these people going to do to me?

I turn the corner, and that fear quickly left.

The smell of pissy pampers slap me in the nose and mouth.

I don't deserve that!

The smell.

It is pungent.

It is so horrible.

Ain't no way a building under the government should smell like the broken toilet at Pre-K.

This is where my husband volunteers for me to be.

I am feeling helpless and vulnerable.

The worse combination to experience.

And I can't do anything about it.

I'm sitting in it.

No one knows I'm here

I'm now at someones else's mercy.

I am powerless.

Oya looks down at her smock.

A deep sigh escapes her as her teary eyes follow to the ceiling.

A moment.

"Welcome to Savannah" projects.

I didn't need to come to Savannah.

Yep, I should have stayed in Shreveport.

Oya holds herself tightly.

Home.

The greatest bond.

Family.

Immeasurable love.

She wipes away her tears and mildly rocks herself.

Shreveport, Louisiana.

Ratchet City.

Lights shift.

Images of Shreveport project.

We live by the words of God, KSLA News, Betty Wright, and Johnnie Taylor.

(Laughs)

Liquor is our salvation.

Weed is our strength.

Good food is our ministry.

Cooked wings and more are shown.

So good, we can smell good home cooking

The flavorful whiff has a chokehold on Oya.

Umph, that good smell of crispy chicken and a boudin eggroll at a gas station.

Damn, I miss you, Shreveport.

The smell of some good soulful cooking is the perfect *I love you*.

I could use that right now.

Oya fights back her tears.

Every bite of my Ma's homemade potatoes is like the warmth of her lap.

When words weren't enough, she would sing and rock me.

My Uncle's breakfasts would bring me back to my innocence.

Cheese grits, the yes to my every request.

My Granny's gumbo was that sweet stern voice that said

"Baby, everything will be alright."

*Oya allows these images to comfort her.
She releases a heavy shrill.
She breaks down.
The door opens and Oya quickly covers her head.*

*Security Guard walks in with a tray of breakfast;
triangle cut toast, a small number of grapes, and
a spoon full of eggs.*

*Oya snuffles from under the blanket.
Security guard places the tray and snatches the
covers.
She takes a good long look at Oya, scared and
crying. She takes pity, takes a tissue package
out of her pocket and hands it to Oya.*

SECURITY GUARD

This is how Alprazolam ends up being your lunch.

*Oya chuckles as she takes the package and opens
it.*

OYA

Thanks for the laugh.

*Guard crosses back to the door and closes it
shut.
She sits beside Oya and holds her hand in
silence.
They sit like this for a long while.
Oya cries.*

OYA

I should have stayed in Shreveport.
I had an ex.
And two months short of our wedding date, he got cold feet.
After I had let my home and art studio go.

SECURITY GUARD

I don't want to be rude, but...
(Then...)
Go on.

OYA

Then, I had to give up my rental and move back in with my mom.

After I had paid off my wedding dress.
And he wasn't ready.

My Mama told me I only had a week to cry, and afterward, I
needed to figure out my next move.
So, what'd I do?

SECURITY GUARD

(Getting too comfortable) What'd you do?

OYA

I worked on getting into an art school I knew damn well I had
next to no chance of getting in.

SECURITY GUARD

Why you say that?

OYA

It's the best.
But wasn't realistic, being that it was far away from Louisiana
and Detroit.
At my last art show, I told everybody how I was running off to
get married.
I figured I needed somewhere far away to start over.

GUARD

Savannah?
Leaving all that good food.

OYA

I didn't want anybody that saw me, to talk to me with wounded
eyes.
I can't stand to see it.
Everybody knew I was supposed to be in Detroit.
Taking pictures with my man at the Motown Museum.

GUARD

Black folks don't leave Shreveport to come to no Savannah, Ga.

OYA

I needed to start fresh.
And, why did Georgia School of Arts accept me and give me not
one, but three scholarships?
I had two weeks to pack up and get out here for class and
registration.

SECURITY GUARD

Georgia School of Arts!?
Well, I be damn, Picasso!
So, you a badass. One of the best.
They don't just let anybody in there.
So, you must have something.

*Security Guard crosses to the door.
Opens it.*

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

With all that talent.
Know you will get through it.

OYA

I'm so ready to put all this shit behind me.

SECURITY GUARD

How you gonna learn to not do it again?

OYA

I need to forget.
So, I can sleep.

SECURITY GUARD

Deal with it.
I promise you will sleep peacefully.
Maybe you'll even get the hell out of here.
Your choice.

An intercom interrupts.

INTERCOM V/O

Welcome to Chatham Crisis Hospital, where we provide help and hope to people across the state of Georgia. Our confidential and caring environment promotes crisis resolution, positive self-awareness, and personal growth through our mental health services.

SECURITY GUARD

Right on time.
Hear that?
Personal growth.
Now, go on and eat something.

Security Guard exits.

OYA

Me, a badass.
(smiles)
Three scholarships.

Amazed at her accomplishments.

That's big when someone outside of Louisiana tells you that you are a badass - the best.
I left everything I knew to create a life I didn't have a clue on.

To the audience.

I'm boohooing on I-20, and I do mean ugly crying.
I mean, Viola "snot bubble" Davis cry.
And I'm driving and thinkin'...
I'm really on my own.
Damn, I'm really not getting married.
Bitch, you outta' Shreveport.

All of a sudden, I'm scared.
If I fall, who gonna catch me?

The umbilical cord snapped when I saw *Welcome to Mississippi.*

Okay, I'm not too far from home.
And I'm driving and thinkin'...
I can still turn around.

I get to Alabama; damn, survival mode kicks in.
I'm trying to remember everything I was taught.
I can't call home.
It's just you now, little girl.
You got your license?
(Nods, yes.)
Registration?
(Thumbs up)
Insurance?
Yep.
Do you remember how to change a tire?
(Apprehensive)
Ugh, is that jack thang in the back?

Gets up and looks behind herself.

Do you have enough oil in the car?
(Nods, yes.)

I did it.
I made it to Savannah, Georgia.
Safely.

That was some powerful shit driving that far by myself.
Was I ready?

I was turning thirty and things weren't going for me as I
thought they should. Marriage. Kids.

Savannah!
Georgia School of Arts.
The things that got me noticed and praised back home...They're not
impressed. They asking me to forget all that I know and learn
something new.
I'm putting up the acrylics, watercolors, and encaustics.
Creating illusions of movement and non-movement as it generates...
on the COMPUTER.
This is a twist in my art, and it's not giving me the love I
once knew.

I'm lost.

You see, I'm self-taught.
I used to be proud to say that.
But that don't seem to mean much.
I need to adapt quickly.
Everything moves quicker here.
You fart, say excuse me, the quarter is over.
I belong.
I can keep up.
Meanwhile, I'm slowly sinking down a rabbit hole.
Why am I here!?
I miss Shreveport.
I miss my mama.

OYA V/O

This is Oya; leave a message. *Beep!*

AJA V/O

*Bitch, I'm getting worried.
Ma called the hospital, and they told her how you strangled Ole'
Guh'. The nurse couldn't give us any more info on your
whereabouts.
Some bullshit about HIPPA.
But she did say yo' ass is banned.*

You must have fucked them people shit up!
(whispers)
Will you at least kill Lee's ass next?
Serious tho', call us; everyone is panicking.

Click!

OYA

I'm fighting with the professors.
I'm feeling old.

The Professor asks me to write a one-page essay on something or the other.
Here comes fucking *Milton* dressed in creepy-ass Harry Potter gear with TWENTY pages already bonded and cited.
I'm pissed.
I can't compete with this.

(raises her hand)

Why da' hell are we writing in an art class in the first place?
Why did y'all let me in this damn school?
Why y'all let me think I'm the best?

I could be at some abandoned building creating a mural.
I graduated from Grambling State.
I took six-years and created an art studio while my classmates finished undergrad and went straight to their masters.

Here I am, teaching myself the basics they say I should already know.
I'm struggling to keep up.
All I want to do is create stories centered around Shreveport's blues.
That's all I want to do.
Not count seconds.
I draw the line.
I don't know how to feel.
Not being one.
...with my paints.
Colors are my moods,
my strengths,
...my poems.

It's like high school all over again
Turning a polygon into a smooth curve.
My hands ain't steady enough.
I failed geometry. 'Cause I can't count for shit!

My first love is not loving me back.
Why am I here?

*Oya throws her hands out.
The scrim is dark.
No paint. No magic.
She tries it again. Nothing.*

She recites...

Copper and metallic bronze
Deliberately trickle on my canvas.
Sage. Ochre. Sienna. Azure.
A departure from reality to find the truth in my abstract.

She looks at her hands and out to the audience.

My folks want me to stick it out.

*You're strong.
You got this.*

But I don't have it.

I'm not strong; I'm burnt out.
I don't have fumes to run on.
I'm on the verge of a breakdown.

Do Black folks get time off for that?
Breakdowns?

No.

The day I stop and rest, another *Milton* will wake up and take my spot.

*I can't bring you to an accurate depiction.
Because my emotions are gestural marks, shapes without
shapes...it's nonobjective.*

We just push through, right?

Oya examines her breakfast and kills the grapes.

*She takes off her smock and gets comfortable as
she digs in.*

*Oya looks for a napkin.
Nothing is there.*

Annoyed, she wipes her hand on her black dress.

I'm just messing this damn dress up.

She stands up for us to see the dress at all angles.

This is my wedding dress.

(Chuckles)

My shit was doomed from the start.

Takes in a deep sigh.

June 17th, 2020, it was Lee and me.

Filled with love, nerves, gas, and hope.

Well, on my end for sure.

When we signed in, I forgot how to spell Lee's name.

My hand wouldn't stop shaking.

I was sweating bullets because it was a hot day. June 17th.

Thank God I didn't have a wig on.

It was horrible.

(Laughs)

A terrifying but beautiful moment shared between us.

Lee had on a wrinkled white button-down shirt and wrinkled beige slacks.

Chile' neither of us cared.

But we did us.

All in this intimate court setting.

Yes, it was nerve-racking because the only time I'd been to a court was for my sperm donor and his back pay in child support.

I never dreamed of that being the backdrop for my wedding.

Lingers on that a moment.

I mean, I didn't want no full-out production.

Just a little cute colored balloon here.

Some tassels there.

My mom and Uncle beside me.

People other than the judge's assistant cheering us on.

No family members on either side.

No buffet of fried chicken wings.

Due to covid and us moving so damn fast.

Nobody could make it.

Hell, we didn't even get the judge we were assigned to.

Or our actual date.

She sings...

"God's trying to tell you something."

Two months after we met.
Lee wanted me to be Mrs. James.
Quick.

(smiles)

Shid', let's get married.

At that time, I would do anything for him.. just as long as I was the only one, that got the love.

But I will tell you this.

If I had the money, no bullshit panorama, and a patient husband, my dress would have been a bad motherfuca'

A beautiful high-neck lace black mermaid gown.

Cinched in for the GOD'S.

You damn skippy, it's gone show off all these YAMS.

I'm flat in the back, but these legs, thighs,

Lifts her breasts...

... and pies gone show da' fuck out.

She stands.

Wedding music plays.

Oya flings her pretend long train as she stands on her tippy toes for height.

After we make five years, I will get that dream wedding.

And I'm thinkin'

I'ma give you what you want because you're giving me what I always wanted.

I do!

I do!

(stops)

That, terrifying and beautiful feeling became an alarming, disturbing feeling.

Oya twirls in her pretend dress.

Wedding music.

Missed voicemails from Oya's sister AJA.

Oya pulls out a picture of Lee proposing on both knees with no ring.

So, I'm in Savannah on a whim and a prayer.

Alone.

I don't feel like I belong at this art school.

I'm homesick, missing all that good food and loving.

(sighs)

The one thing I could depend on that brought me joy is now bringing me sorrow.

I felt like my art betrayed me.

Lee filled that void.

I don't have to be superwoman.

Today is enough.

He celebrated the simple things.

I didn't need to change for him.

I didn't need to work at being ten times better.

I could be as natural as I wanted.

Take a pause...

He told me it was okay to rest.

Take a load off.

I got you.

Someone is seeing me for the first time.

(Gushes)

Lee's proposal was so New York, and I loved it.

He played *All I Need* by Method Man.

Oya catches her inner beat and enjoys herself.

She raps the lyrics to herself.

The Security Guard bangs on the door.

She stops and stares...

Then there's quiet...

Oya starts again, hypes herself up as she has a private gangster party.

That's my shit!

That was our shit.

He gave me that rough New York romance.

That, I will kill for you.

That's my pussy.

Don't get that nigga fucked up.

Ummm!

I felt a way I had never felt.

I was a fiend, I tell ya'.

And I had to have more.

When I met him, he locked me in with his accent.

Let me tell you something, it was every mid-2000s teenage Shreveport country girl's fantasy to be with someone from New York.

In high school, all the girls were reading them urban erotic novels that were centered around Brooklyn.

The place where everyone's dreams start.

Wasn't shit going on in Shreveport.

New York is the place to be.

Picture it.

I'm hanging out the window doing oil painting.

Grasping motivation as I see the neighborhood kids running pass my brownstone because the bodega is on the left.

Smoking weed and stress-free.

Those novels belonged to our single Mothers who needed more excitement with their Alize'.

Ma's manmade library was everything I needed to escape the Louisiana Purchase.

The books projects one by one.

She had urban books like Noire's *Candy Licker*, *G' Spot*, and *Thongs on Fire*.

Sister Soulja's *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

I would charge five dollars to act the shit out when I finished reading.

Shreveport is the bible belt.

Many kids were closed off to a lot because of the Lord. That's why teen pregnancy was so high.

Ma' was just happy I could read.

But I was on that hustle.

Oya acts out the books she read.

Guh', Candy fucked Hurricane,' the ex-drug-runner, to get a record deal.

Trust me, she is about to get more than she bargained for.

I came back days later.

More people have joined the crowd.

Chile', Candy ain't shit she's messing with that nigga right-hand man.

His lawyer, bitch.

The next chapter is about to be some shit.

I was the ghetto Young and The Restless.

My country ass was introduced to a world that was gutter and raw.

New York didn't have dirt roads.

It was the land of art, concrete, and some of the best damn hotdogs ever.

I couldn't wait for my second lunch shift to discuss the hood shit I fantasized about the night before.

Oya acts out her fantasies.

My Ole' man drives a charger. The color matches his name, Black.

Before we go home to our shitty brownstone, my baby got to make some plays and collect some debt.

If they didn't have his money, he would call somebody else to fix it.

Black never let anybody sees his hand, and he was too fine to scuffle.

He had goons for that.

We have dreams and don't need anything to get in that way.

My baby is hustling to pay my way through Juilliard because we are getting out of the hood.

(laughs)

I was fourteen...maybe fifteen.

In the urban books, the male characters were thugs that took what they wanted with that *bring yo' ass here attitude*.

They kept their promises.

Yeah, shit ended disastrously.

But they got such thrills.

Shakespeare has nothing on these tragedies.

I tricked myself into making this model be the poster board of what love was to me.

My ass should have been reading *The Nancy Drew Files* or *The Babysitter's Club*.

I'm sure I would have been better off.

Lee is my Black.

His nickname is Blue, and he's from Brownsville.

No brownstone he lived in The Gaza.

Those apartments made my project back home look like fine housing.

I was looking for an out when I met Lee.

I needed to be around someone who didn't know my background and what school I went to.

Regular ass black folk shit.

Nachos and wings with extra peppers from the corner stores.

Where's the candy lady so I can get a freeze cup and a pickle?

I needed to be around that type of Blackness.

That shit is scarce in Savannah.

She sits on the edge of the bed.

Lee was struggling to get his son back when we started hanging.

He was on a visiting trip to New York when his first baby Mama set her house on fire trying to get high and lost their son to the system.

Lee rushed back as soon as he could to Savannah to get his baby from CPS.

Before he found a spot, Lee was homeless, sleeping in the back of his dad's truck at a hotel.

Just to be present for hearings.

The courts weren't having it because his son was mixed.

The mother who died in the fire is white.

To be told he wasn't good enough for his own flesh and blood... that killed him.

But Lee's never letting up.

Doesn't that sound like a man I should keep?

He's hood.

He's a fighter.

He does whatever it takes.

He hustled on the side, and the bonus; I get a kid.

Something I always wanted but couldn't have.

Undying love from tiny humans you create.

(She thinks.)

*The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.
She thinks a long while before she tells us..*

A year before I got engaged to my ex.

He drove us into oncoming traffic, by accident, during an explosive argument.

After having surgery on my back, I was told I couldn't have kids.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

Lee and my brokenness latched on to one another like bed bugs.
Guess, what?

I didn't care.

Just like Candy in Noire's novel *Candy Licker*.

Lee's love...

Written pages from Oya's journal projects.

Oya recites a poem.

Is thunder on a cold stormy night.

Loud lightning strikes my rumbling soul.

It scares so good.

Sizzling darken rain drops

I find my calm

It's dangerous but love looks good in the fog.

I never felt like this before and I'm willing to do whatever to keep that feeling.

Lee's loving is a conflagration. An extensive fire that burns...

The candle to my canvas.

He's funny.
charismatic,
the life of the party.
He doesn't live for tomorrow
he lives for today
and the sex...
I don't know y'all maybe I shouldn't talk about this.

SECURITY GUARD O/S

Talk about it.

Oya doesn't react to Guard.

She shakes her head in thought...

Moans can be heard.

Rough.
Cuffed.
Filthy.
Yearning.

Never passionate.

Throat gripping like how I like it.

Assassin.

Ummmm, I stay horny.

Arguments are a curse.

Sweaty
Biting.
Slapping.
The worse.

*Who cares if it feels like crack.
As long as you there for me to keep coming back.
If he told me no, I would die
Hell, tell me what you want Baby I will comply.*

Whatever I didn't know I'm willing to learn.

*Sensual music plays.
Oya walks out like she's a dancer as she pulls
the chair to the center.*

*Her hips roll in slow motion.
She could create a tsunami with those ripples.*

*Pensively she looks as she hits every beat.
Wave after wave rising.*

Abruptly she stops.

Lee's love was indeed a drug and I made for damn sure I did whatever to get that high.

(recites a poem)

Words from Oya's journal project.

*Yeah, you can drive my car.
You love me?*

*No license.
Covid hit, he gets fired.
Damn, that's my babies pride.*

*My job can take care the both of us until you get on your feet.
Take care of the house and cook.
Oh, he got to love me.*

*That boi' rushed us down the aisle.
Yeah, he loves me.*

*The tv is too small; my baby wants a seventy-inch.
It's not too big, and Hubby deserves it.
(Tone darkens)*

*You just tried to take my car to see another bitch.
Are you sure you love me?*

*I signed off for him to get a Charger.
Just like Black.
I needed him out of my shit.
I fucked up.
This nigga thinks he's larger.
He betta' fuckin' love me.*

*Bitches riding shotgun in the passenger seat.
Chile', he doesn't love me.*

A moment.

Lee lied to me and said he was single and just got out of a relationship with a chick named Danielle.

I didn't think much of it.

'Cause at the time, Lee and I were just smoking buddies, nothing more, nothing less.

But when we did cross that line, I asked the appropriate questions.

Are you in a relationship?

Is there somebody that thinks they're in a relationship with you?

Are you being claimed?

He said, *no*.

I was like, *cool*.

All in his house, getting my back blown out.

Why when I was ready to take it to another level, I found out Danielle was still in their relationship? After he claimed he left?

Dude never broke up with her.

When he had me over, Danielle was at work.

He claims she was out doing her, so he did him.

Just so happened he falls in love while doing so.

When the news got to me, it was too late.

I was in deep.

She means nothing, babe.

I've been waiting for somebody like you.

He had a few slip-ups, I admit.

But when he asked me to marry him, *he had to dead that shit*.

Oh, y'all friends.

Then, you can kumbaya all by y'all damn selves.

I walked out, and he chased after me.

A man is always supposed to chase.

He promised me with tears in his eyes...

Mocks Lee.

I will make mistakes but not the same.

I believed the hype repeatedly.

Lee loves me. That's what I told myself.

A moment.

I tricked myself.

(painful chuckle)

I tricked myself that I was loved.

No matter the cost, I have to deal with it.

You want to know how deep this shit is?

I keep the fucked-up shit in my head and -

Security Guard enters with a clipboard and handcuffs.

SECURITY GUARD

Picasso, Mrs. Geraldine needs you down in the examiner room.

OYA

For what?

SECURITY GUARD

To check... are you a cutter, biter, scratcher, or hair puller?

Making sure you are no harm to yourself.

Protocol.

Guard motions for her to turn around.

She handcuffs Oya's hand in the front and escorts her out.

Instantly, the stage dims.

Missed voicemails from Oya's sister MAWU can be heard.

OYA V/O

This is Oya; leave a message. *BEEP!*

MAWU V/O

I don't know if you will get this message, but Ma managed to get some information. We found out Lee signed you over to the state of Georgia because he claims you are unstable. We are trying everything to get you out. Mama is on the road with Pokey, now.

(sniffles)

Sis, I know you are going through a lot.

(cries)

Hell, I'm sorry for the year you're having.

You don't deserve any of this.

(Pause)

Damn, Oya.

I know your brain is flooded with all types of emotions and you're being forced to face them head-on, but whatever you do don't beat yourself up.

Remember, baby sis, you got to keep pushing.

BEEP!

Lights shift. Time has passed.

*Oya is escorted in, still not dressed in scrubs.
Security Guard uncuffs, Oya.*

SECURITY GUARD

After they do laundry, you will have your uniform.
Good workers are hard to find.

Security Guard exits.-

- Oya tugs at her sore wrist.

She starts to tell us...

OYA

This big, ole' amazon bitch named Ms. Geraldine dares to be aggressive with me and her ass is late.

Mam, your ass was supposed to been here with the rest of the welcome wagon when I made it here last night.

That's what I'm thinking.

Nawl, we not doing this today.

I'm not starting the morning whoppin' ass.

Then her old ass smells like day-old malt liquor.

And her breath...ooh Chile'.

It screamed canned wet food and chitlins.

Funky separate but fucked up entwined.

The room is empty, with one light that hangs over a chair.

Ummm, the cops already interrogated me.

Geraldine takes the handcuffs off and barks...

Strip! Your dress shows way too much cleavage.

Da' fuck!?

Mocks Geraldine.

I only ask once.

She goes to hand me a scrub, and there isn't any.

Talk about pissy.

(laughs)

I was laughing my ass off.

What I do that for?

She barks...*Take that fucking bra off; it has wires.*

Oya is taken back by the tone and looks around to see if another person is in the room. Once she realizes it's just her, she points at herself.

Is she - Is she talking to Oya Eshe Zina James?

What we not about to do is bark at me like a dog.

I am sensitive and need a hug.

Then you blowin' your breath on me again!

Here, take it.

Then she holds up what looks like a toddler's training bra.

Oya looks down at her busty chest, confused.

Lady, I know you fuckin' lying.

My breast is not one size fits all.

You don't see these big ass... she started to move her lips.

They really trying to fuck me over in here.

Y'all, she spoke eight more words to me.

The whole room turned hot.

Just-just hand me the slingshot.

I'll find the rest of the material.

Y'all don't know how bad I wanted to climb her big ass and slide that "poor thing" grin off her face when she passed me my bra.

I don't need your pity.

I need somebody to get me out of here.

Oya plops on the bed and flips through her journal looking for a clean sheet. An ultrasound image flies from between the pages and falls on the floor. The same image projects.

Oya is motionless as she stares down at the picture.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

June seventh was supposed to be the best day of my life.
This baby was going to be the fixings to my mistakes.
The bigger picture of why I am going through so much.
The reason to smile.
There's no balance in my life and that scares the shit out of me. Mainly when I used to be in control.

I noticed a shift within Lee.
He was doing weird shit and thought I wouldn't notice.
Or didn't care, if I noticed.
Like, wait till I fall asleep and sneak out all hours of the night.
Shit, like that.
Then it started gettin' frequent.
I would bring things up to him.
Tell him how he was making me feel.
He would turn it around and make it seem like I was nagging him.

Sir, ain't nobody fighting you. As your wife, I don't like what I see. Being my fucking husband, you should be like, "NOTED. I will start getting in earlier. Sorry, Wifey."
Acknowledge that I see you and I'm paying attention.
Especially when you know my front door locks at 12:30 a.m.

It's amazing how the problem will paint you out to be the issue.

A day before I found out I was pregnant, Lee decided to be a repeat offender.
I'm tired of not being heard or seen.
I'm tired of being walked on.
I'm tired of being the only one that's making this marriage work.
I'm tired of the lopsided ass love.
I'm tired of people thinking I'm stupid.
It's time to see where all my giving has gone.

I look outside; his Charger is still here.
(looks confused)
Oh, this is some new level of fuckery.
Time.
To.
Play.

Let's find Oya's husband. Shall we?

I look at my phone.
It's a missed text from him.

Lee's messages projects: "I'm just going to
smoke."

Hum, motherfuca'. You have a house full of Bubba Kush.

That was at 12 a.m
I went to bed at 11:20.
It's now 1:30 a.m.
You waited for me to fall asleep.
Now I'm insulted.

Oya's voice darkens.

*Welp, that's my cue to kill a nigga.
Oya, get your keys.*

Shakes her head in long thought.

I get in my car with no gas, one working headlight, and drive
twenty minutes in the dark to her house.
Promises, promises.
No one's on the highway, and I still can't get there fast enough
driving with two tires.
Lucifer himself asked me... *what are you gone do when you catch
them?*

A pillow over their peaceful sleeping face and take a bat and go
baseball practice all over their damn head.

*A baseball bat hits the scrim, and it cracks.
Muffles of screams can be heard.*

What if he is giving your dick away?

I'll wait till he is close to a nut. Then, a freshly new sharp
knife will slice his balls down in the middle.

*A sharp knife projects. The blade slices a jumbo
peanut down the middle.*

Tie them up and super glue their ass cheeks together.
When they woke up, I will tase the fuck outta' them.

Electric shock sounds can be heard.

Make them shit all over their selves.
Shooting is way too quick and messy.

Bitch, suffer.

I make it to the house.

Oya stands in the bed.

My fat ass jumps a wired gate, trying to break in. A stick is propping up the window.
I knock it out and slide into the kitchen.
(Jumps down)
The house is a border home.
Each room pays rent and shares the common space.
I head straight to her room.
The room I used to sleep in when I would stay over with Lee.
I put my hand on the doorknob. My hand trembles. I twist it, and it's locked.

Oya screams out frustration, confusion, and pain.

My eyes blink, and I am blind.
I see abstract shapes.
I blink again, and the door is kicked in.
No one to be found.
I'm vexed.

Lee's ass really got me out here looking hella' stupid.

I'd never been this girl.
Popping up at other people's shit.
Because of a nigga who means me no good.
You would think I'd go home, change the locks, and pack his shit up.

Nope, I became a concerned wife.
I called him.
Straight to voicemail.

I'm driving back out of breath, thinking the worse.
Did something bad happen to him?

Still knowing deep down he is doing me dirty, and he is with her.

I taught him how to treat me.

Six o'clock, his phone not even ringing at this point.
I'm checking the precinct to see if he got locked up for drunk driving.

No Lee James here.

I'm calling the hospital to see if he was there unconscious.

No, Maam, there is no patient here by that name.

I'm hurt and still giving.
I get home, and I'm beyond tired and too scared to close my eyes.
I just knew something terrible happened.
I walked past the mirror and saw myself for the first time.

Her reflection hurts her feelings.

*I didn't like it.
I look sick.
Beat and overwhelmed.*

She uses the audience for a better view.

*Where you at, Oya?
Come on, baby, I know you in there.*

I have a lot on my plate.

Will I graduate in time?
School is time-consuming, and these bills need to be paid.
Drastically losing weight.

Steps back and looks at her angles.

My marriage and masters have taken me through sleepless nights and ugly cries.

Here I am trying to infuse everything, my education, new location, job, and marriage... all while trying to maintain.
All that burns ALOTTA calories.
Then there are those delightful and imaginative humans with invasive questions while I'm doing my best to adjust...
Oh my God, you look great! You have lost ALOTTA of weight!

Damn, did I give them an impression of the Exploding Whale? Now, I would be insensitive if I asked about the tummy tuck that has never been tucked.

Mocks the imaginative human.

Ooh, girl, I need to take what you are taking.

Loading their gun.

Are you doing that belly slim tea?

With no bullets.

No, I am doing a little coke. Want a sniff?

Oya sits on the bed, grabs her doll, and lies back.

She cries.

After a long while.

She slowly sits up...

I don't recognize myself.

I decline.

I'm crying at my laptop.

I can't even keep up with the days of the week

...or remind myself to eat.

Usually, when I have a setback, I sleep in for a day or two and bounce back.

I'm thankful the elastic hasn't broke; it's just not retracting, which scares me.

I could pour in his empty cup and still have enough for me.

I'm drowning, and all I wanted was a kiss on the cheek and reassurance that everything would be okay.

Like I do him.

I'm crying all the damn time.

Like I'm doing now.

Struggling like hell in my classes.

Every day the thought of quitting haunts me.

Lee doesn't have time for me.

He doesn't have the sweet words he had before.

Hell, I don't even think he notices how small I have gotten or if he even sees me.

Feeling invisible in your fucking marriage is like a hollow whole you can't get out.

Y'all, I forgot how to draw.

Oya tosses the doll and rises.

There have been plenty of times when I wiped his tears.
When the court wouldn't give him back his son.
Almost dying from Covid.
When his punk ass father died.
I was there helping this nigga get rid of his demons.
They never left.
When it was my time to be vulnerable and in need of a refill, he
turned his back on me.

Fuck!

*Oya drops to the floor, hands pressed on her
head.*

*Security Guard rushes in and tries to help Oya
off the floor.*

SECURITY GUARD

Look I'm about tired of picking your ass up. One more breakdown
you will be picking me up off the floor.
Now, why didn't you ask for help?

*Guard pulls the chair and sits beside her.
After awhile...*

OYA

I was taught to figure that shit out.

SECURITY GUARD

By yourself? Good luck with that.

OYA

I didn't see my Granny cry. Not over no man. Not once.
The men would disappear and she's smiling and cooking.
Was she hurt?
Did she care?
She's singing old Negro spirituals making pound cake.
What she do, pray?

*Loses her shit!
The Security Guard holds Oya.*

OYA (CONT'D.)

I've been praying!

*A moment. While she cries.
The Security Guard holds Oya.*

OYA (CONT'D.)

I asked my husband for help, and he wouldn't help me.
I only felt like I belonged when I created.
When it was just me, I was invisible.
Lee use to see me.
Nawl, all I want to do is set his other arm on fire.

SECURITY GUARD

I didn't hear that, Picasso.

*Oya starts to cry, and SG is over the tears.
No sympathy.
SG pulls out her phone and Forged in Fire tv show
projects.
In mid cry, Oya stops.*

OYA

Are you really watching..

SECURITY GUARD.

Shut up the good part is coming on.
I missed my show last night and I need to see if Lyle old ass is
going to win.
You got some snacks in that bag? I ate all of mines.

*Oya is lost as she shakes her head, no.
SG turns the volume up, and we hear.. Zulu Iklwa,
introduced by the famous Zulu King Shaka, reigned
over the Zulu empire's expansion through southern
Africa from 1816 to 1828, a celebrated warrior in
his own right.*

OYA

I care about this; why?

SECURITY GUARD

Hush, they are about test the weapon on that slab of meat.
(SG waits.)
Overall, sir, your weapon will cut.
(Cheers)
Oooh, good shit, Lyle.

OYA

You can't watch this mess outside?

SECURITY GUARD

Shut up, girl, and learn you something.

Before you get those powerful weapons of mass destruction, they are just a piece of raw medals, junk, discarded nails, and bolts. These medals are beaten, hammered, and shaped in this hot lava-type fire. When those blades come out of the fire, they may be brittle, bent up, and withered anything. Will your weapon survive all three tests?

Look, look, look, they are about to cut through those ballistic dummies.

One stab to the gut, and all your bowels are loose!

Fuck, right through the gut!

That's some potent shit.

Picasso, are you looking at this?

(to herself)

Over there crying, and this dummy is bleeding internally.

Look at Matt; he is scared as shit.

(laughs)

Oya covers her head with the blanket.

SG joins in on the famous saying of the show.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Your weapon will kill!

Aww, shit he didn't win.

Damn, his weapon wasn't strong enough!

Can your weapon stand the fire, Oya?

The lights dim.

Spotlight is on Oya.

Guard freezes.

Oya eyes darts to the ultrasound. She stares at it for a long time before she addresses the audience.

OYA

I bought a pregnancy test.

By this time, I had stopped calling Lee.

My ass was in my stomach, and I couldn't draw water while on the toilet.

I'm counting back trying to remember my last period.

Is this shit even possible, or am I psyching myself out because I'm stressed?
Hell, when the last time me and this nigga had sex?
Besides, I can't even have kids.

When I struck the water I prayed.

Jesus, Allah, Jehovah, Universe, I need thee now! We all need to come together and hear my humble cry.

The bills are trying to move in and take over.

I'm always constipated when I try to draw or go to class.

(Pause)

If I'm pregnant by this man, what will our life be?

I can't keep going on like this.

It's killing me, and I do not want to bring a child in this mess.

It's not healthy.

Just give me strength in Jesus's name.

Amen.

Oya sings the southern hymn "I love the lord."

"I love the Lord, he heard my cry

I love the Lord, he heard my cry

Security Guard joins in.

And pitied ev'ry groan.

And pitied ev'ry groan

Lord, Long as I live why troubles rise,

Lord, Long as I live why troubles rise,

I'll hasten to his throne."

Oya breaks down more. She turns to Security Guard and cries in her arms.

DING!

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

OYA

(to Guard)

Guess what my husband's response was when I told him I was pregnant? Take a wild guess.

SECURITY GUARD

(thinks)
It's not mine.

OYA

Close.
He told me he got somebody else pregnant.

The Guard's face drops.

SECURITY GUARD

You fucked him up?
(Remembers)
Oh, shit that's why you are in room 32.

OYA

I couldn't even enjoy it.

SECURITY GUARD

Well, that explains a lot on your paperwork.

OYA

Yeah, I'm not crazy.

SECURITY GUARD

We never are when you look at the full picture.

Oya cleans herself up and sits on the bed beside her.

OYA (CONT'D.)

Sorry, I know I've been making a lot of noise.

SECURITY GUARD

It's fine.
After your striptease, I went on my break and bought some headphones.

Oya chuckles nervously through sniffles.

OYA

Thank you for being here for me.
Just your presence means a lot.
(Guard smiles.)

SECURITY GUARD

Do you at least feel better?

OYA

A little bit, maybe more so when I get to wash my ass.
Guard remembers.

SECURITY GUARD

God damn it!
Mrs. Geraldine old ass hasn't strolled down here?

Oya shakes her head no.

SECURITY GUARD

I'll be back!

Guard exits.

Oya takes a deep sigh and falls backward on the bed.

She pops up and takes her sketchbook out.

The stage dims.

Missed voicemails from Oya's mother, RUBY

OYA V/O

This is Oya; leave a message. *Beep!*

RUBY V/O

Baby girl, I'm coming.

Lee may be your husband, but I'm your Mama. And there ain't shit me and MY God can't undo.

Lee thought I wasn't gone find out, but he forgot you came from me.

I birthed you.

I got the original copy so if anything goes wrong, I can pull up whatever data is associated with MY CHILD.

Lee, don't know who he fucking with.

Me and your cousins just made it to Birmingham.

They can drop me off and find Lee's ass.

RUBY sings a melody personally made for Oya.

(Sings) Oya, I love you.

Oh, my powerful one.

I just want to tell you how much Mama loves you.

Oya Eshe Zina White

Remember who you are. BEEP!

*Oya sketches as she addresses the audience.
Powerful African Orisha's projects as Oya names
them. Aja, Mawu, Oya.*

OYA

Mama named me Oya Eshe Zina White!
Ummm, ain't that something powerful?
Mama wanted her girls to come out strong because the world hits
quick.
She named us.

Image: MAWU; the moon goddess.

Mawu.

Image: Aja; the goddess of healing.

Aja.

*Image: Oya; the goddess of thunder, hurricanes,
and rainstorms.*

And Oya.

I used to love practicing my strong black name in the mirror.
The female warrior who fights ferociously and is fearless.

Those last words haunt her.

Ma' was super excited her baby was finally having a baby.
To be honest, she thought the only grandchild she would get was
a puppy and my dissertation.
She drove the greyhound from Louisiana to be by my side when I
got the ultrasound and listened to the heartbeat.
Lee and I was living together, but we weren't on speaking terms.
He stayed in a hotel while Ma' was here.
Smart!
I had to change doctors to make sure that Danielle wasn't at the
same place, so when they asked who the baby's father was, we
wouldn't say the same damn name.
So, Ma' and I went to Chatham's family clinic and we're ready to
get the real confirmation.
I have proof from the pregnancy test and the constant throwing
up. But I need to visually see that I'm about to be someone's
mother.
The nurse put the serum on my belly, and I was bursting with
joy.
Like a preview to a new movie.
I can finally enjoy.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

Oya looks down at her stomach and rubs it.

Your heartbeat should be thriving at this point.

The nurse gets on the computer and does her thang.
Quickly, we see a sac.
The nurse's face changes as she looks at my womb.
Very uneasy.
I stop looking at her and start to count the tiles on the ceiling.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus can be heard.

Each second, the silence gets louder and louder.
Ma' didn't look in my direction.
I read the tech's body language; she was locked on the computer, studying whatever isn't going right.

Be optimistic, Oya!

We can't see the baby or hear the heartbeat.
The nurse rushes me across the street to the hospital.
There are better tools to pick up the baby's heart.
I am numb.
I don't want to breathe.
I am motionless.
I feel if I do anything, I will miss them telling me I'm okay.

*The baby probably hiding, Oya, my mother said. It's probably just small; you know that bastard you married is skinny as hell.
(Laughs)*

The first and only laugh I had that day.

We're in that hospital room for hours.
Fear sneaks through my numbness.
I can't take it anymore.

Can somebody please tell me if I'm carrying around a dead child!?

*Oya hides her face to not show a sign of weakness.
She calms herself and removes her hand.
Tears are revealed.*

*I just want to know if my baby is okay.
You don't leave patients with their thoughts when dealing with
something detrimental.
This is my first experience in all of this, and I already feel
like I did a lousy job.
Don't leave me in the dark.
Give it to me straight, no chaser.*

My blood work shows a high HCG test, giving us hope.
An hour later, I'm told my baby didn't make it past six weeks.

The fast heartbeat of a fetus STOPS.

How?!

Did my last argument with Lee stress the baby out?
Was I not eating right?
I knew I was throwing up too much.
Did I take the wrong prenatal?
Tell me what I did wrong!

I didn't experience any spotting.
I looked it up; you are supposed to have cramps and spotting.
I didn't have those symptoms.
My baby could still be alive, right?
The doctors talking about it's natural; you didn't do anything
wrong.

Lies?!
It's my fault.
As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I should have left Lee's
ass.

Why did I stay in the house with him?

My grandmother had all her kids.
Ma' had all her kids.
This was my first.
No diseases.
My health is up to par.
Show me where this shit is natural!

Ma' looked over to me with an "I'm so sorry, baby girl" look.

Don't look at me like that.
Please, cause if you look at me, I'm gone cry.

*Oya whispers to her stomach as she aggressively
wipes her tears.*

Mommy is sorry.
Mommy is so sorry.
Forgive me.
It was my responsibility to take care of you.
I should have song more and yelled less.
Should I have laughed more and cried less?
Maybe danced more to show you Mommy was going to get through
these trying times.

The doctors made me wait a week before they could remove the
fetus.

What?!
No! Take me out of my misery, now.
Don't send me home like this.
Take the baby now.
There's no need for me to walk around like this for a week.

I had movement but no hint of feelings left inside me.
I cried until I dried out the swamp.
Talk about dead inside.
My dreams every night were me sitting in a dark gravesite,
motionless.
Reminders of my kid floating around lifeless when I threw up.
I wanted to scratch my insides out.
I reeked of day-old vomit.
I couldn't eat a thing.
The cramps finally started.
Then the spotting.
It's one thing to deal with this shit when a baby is on the way,
but it's another to go through this *SHIT* because my baby is
dead.
I was disgusted with myself.
I wanted the doctors to call me and say it was a mistake.

Oya feels around on her stomach.

Come on, move around.
I know you are in there.
I need you.
You may not need me, but I sure as hell need you.
Move!

*She waits.
Nothing.
She hits her stomach.
She screams.*

COME BACK!
The Doctors lied. You are here.
You are alive and flourishing.
You are the size of a strawberry.
Wake up!
Move!

Oya goes mad and destroys the entire room.

*Oya is done, she lays on the floor and pants.
That shit felt good.*

*A moment.
She sits up and addresses the audience.*

Now, the hospital.

Oya makes a face

Yesterday, at 8:30 a.m., my husband dropped me off at the emergency entrance at Chatham hospital. I walk through another set of double doors as my name was being called for surgery. When I enter, I see happy mothers holding their newborns. Newly exhilarated fathers screaming into their phone *it's a boy*. Baby's first shrills indicate their new lives have begun. Excited family members hide behind the curtains to surprise their loved ones with congratulatory balloons. Joyfulness flows throughout that ward until it gets to me. I don't have shit to be joyful about. The doctors are going to remove my unborn child. So, no balloons. No congratulatory cards. No happy father. I don't know where that motherfucker at. Just me and the silence.

Outside the curtain, I wait for Lee. A girl who could be one of my sisters walks past. She is full of smiles and has a glow that beams up her aura. She is ready to pop. A mirror image of what I could look like.

Oya looks down at her flat stomach.

How many times did her husband or boyfriend rub her belly?
Did he make her feel alone, or were they in this together?
How many kicks did she feel over the term?
The first time she heard her baby's heartbeat, what was it like?
Did it confirm she was doing a good job as the carrier of that
unborn child?
I want to change places with her because Lee never touched me.

The surgery goes smoothly, and when I wake up, there's still no
Lee.

I sit in recovery for hours, waiting.
This bitch never showed up and ain't answering his phone.
The nurses can't wait any longer. They wheel me to the front
because they need the bed for another patient.

I'm sitting in the lobby watching pregnant women coming in for
their appointments or checking in to be induced.
Anxiety creeping in like never before.
I need to go, and I'm done waiting on Lee's ass.

I download Uber.
As I confirm my ride, I hear a familiar voice on someone's
random phone.

My ears perked like a Pitbull puppy that's ready to lock. I
survey the waiting room, and there she is, walking in, talking
to Lee on speaker, Danielle.

I call him, and that bitch sends me to voicemail, and they are
on the phone still talking.
My skin IMMEDIATELY turns scorching hot.

Two rows are blocking us at the hospital, and Danielle's back is
towards me.
Ahh, a seat just opens up across from her.
Let me go say *hi*.
My heart is on some type of tribal rhythm.

African drums can be heard.

I can hear her tell Lee how much she loves him and is excited
they have a lifetime to share.
Damn, it must be nice.

Is it the same life he promised me?

I'm moving through other pregnant bellies to get to her.

*Oya mimics squeezing in and out of other's
personal space.*

Excuse me.

Excuse me.

Damn, she looks like she's having an elephant.

Ooh, cute shoes.

How far along are you?

Excuse me.

I need to get to that bitch right there.

I can hear Lee saying he loves her the most.

I plop my fat ass right in front of her, and her eyes get big.

Don't be rude tell my husband you love him back.

Go on, tell me.

Lee asks, *who the fuck is that?*

Oh, bitch you don't know my southern charm when you hear it?

Danielle jokingly laughs and says softly... *your wife.*

The row of pregnant women parts like the red sea.

Yep, that's right, gone and get out the way.

You too Mama. Would you like some help?

No, you're fine.

Okay, good.

Danielle sitting pretty with a smug on her face.

She rubs her belly to indicate she is pregnant, and Lee is her
Baby Daddy.

She looks every bit of three months to what was my two.

I hear a click!

Lee hangs up.

Now I have your undivided attention, and I can snatch that smirk
right off your damn face.

Did he tell you I was pregnant?

She shakes her head no and plays on her phone.

Hoe, SPEAK!

You weren't this quiet when you were fucking my husband!

*My husband!
Not yours.*

All eyes are on me.

Damn, Oya, you are doing this right now?

In front of all these damn people.
My uber notifications going off.
Lee's calling.

Nope, I don't have time for you now, Nigga. Decline.

My fingers unknowingly play in her red, freshly done braids.

Did Lee pay for these?

I wish I had a blunt so I could ash it out on her
She snatches away and stands.

Let's go!

Me and Danielle are eye to eye.
I have been waiting on this.
I'm jittery and beyond pissed.
I'm finna fuck Danielle UP!
And no, I don't give a fuck she's pregnant.
He married me, so you had to get your one
Her lips parted...*Lee will never leave me. I was there before you
and will be there when you leave.*

Oya acknowledges Danielle's statement.

I'm witnessing every truth she's spitting.
That shit burns to have a little girl tell you about your man.

My Uncle would constantly preach to us that love is blind, deaf,
and dumb.
Hump, can't see that shit when you're knee-deep in love.

Lee left me at the hospital because he knew she would be here.
What kinda stupid am I?

I couldn't have one day to myself.
There are other hospitals,
St, Joseph.
Memorial.

She picks Chatham Hospital, this motherfucka' in particular.
There are four other hospitals in this bitch.

*Oya looks crazed.
She snaps.*

So, you're taunting me.

Yeah, that's exactly what it is.
This bitch is fuckin' taunting me.
She comes waddling in here with this belly.
The same day my baby is removed from ME.
Ain't no way that long-eared motherfucka' didn't tell you his
wife will be at the hospital TODAY.
You're fucking taunting me.
Then you parade your ass around here with my nigga on SPEAKA'.
Telling him how much you love *him*.

Mocks Danielle.

*Ooh, Lee.
I can't wait for us to raise our baby.
I didn't think I could have a baby.*

This bitch all cute and shit on the fucking phone with my man!

*What about his wife?
What has he been telling you?
That should be me!
I should be planning shit with my motherfucking husband!
That should be my life!
Y'all killed my baby.
You killed my baby!*

*Oya is hysterical.
The red lights flicker.*

She asked...*What happened to your baby?*

*Oya is frozen.
She is spaced out.
Ding! Ding! Ding!*

My hands were full of braids.
I politely drug her ass across the floor.
I'm on the ground, pounding her face in.

*Audio of girls fighting can be heard.
Oya is animated as she acts the incident out.*

Sloop!
I fall to the floor.
Everyone is minding their business.
We tusslin' back and forth.
I climbed on top of her neck and choked her out.
Danielle breaks free, swings in the air, and gets a good lick
across my lip and nose.
I'm finna maul that baby out of her.
She's kicking me.
I'm throwing unlanded punches.
She's biting.
The hospital security guard and one of the nurses that
discharged me broke us up.
I'm being yanked up by the Guard.
Nurses running out to check on her.
Danielle's screaming; she's okay.
Police officers come running in, ready to mace me.

Oya wildly takes a swing in broad strokes.

Let me go!

Swing

Get your hands off me!

Swing

The Guard bobbing and weaving.
A nurse that discharged me whispered in the Guard's ear, and he
finally let me go.

*The light stops.
Oya drops to the floor.*

*Why does she get to go full term?
Why does she get to experience those different stages of
pregnancy?
It's not fair!
Hoe's always fuckin' winning.*

*I did it right; I got married before getting pregnant.
Got an education.
Lived a little.*

*Why am I being punished?
I did it right!*

The guard told me to carry my ass home and don't come back.

My uber was outside, and I went home.
I'm sure Lee came rushing to the hospital when she called him.
Inspiration for creating took over me, and that's why room 32 is
my new residence.

*Oya picks up the chair and sits.
She looks at everything she destroyed.*

A moment.

I didn't get to grieve.
This was different from losing your Uncle or your cousin.
My baby is gone.
A baby I thought I couldn't have.
Somebody that would love me unconditionally.
Real love.
That elastic finally broke.
You want to know what's worse, knowing you did your best and it
still doesn't work out.
All I have left is my art.

*She tries to put on a smile. It doesn't
work. She breaks.*

This shit hurts, mane.
A hurt I have never felt, and I don't know how to get over this.
Why can't I get back up like before?

Who went through this type of fuckery?
You can't read about it.
Nobody is talking about this.
This is not in an issue of Essence.
I'm hurting.

I'm supposed to accept what comes.
I just want to die.
How am I supposed to live? Today?

SECURITY GUARD O/S

Like you're doing now.

OYA

I'm tired of failing.
I feel like I have failed at so much.

The Security Guard enters

SECURITY GUARD

Black women don't recognize when their body tells them they need rest.
To purge.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

It's more than sleep.
It is shutting down your mind.
You are struggling with death, school, bills, and marriage. I know stress, anxiety, and depression when I see it. You are not well, and that is okay.

Images of the strong black women projects. They look healthier and alive. They are still patients.

OYA

How do you be okay with it?

SECURITY GUARD

Go easy on yourself.
Oya, you lost a baby, honey, that's major. I'm still not okay after losing mine, and I lost two back-to-back.

*Oya looks at the Security Guard for the first time.
She needed to hear that.*

Oya thinks about her next statement.

OYA

I tricked off my love for a man that didn't respect me.

SECURITY GUARD

Baby what prostitute respects their trick?
They're just there for the money.
They perform and go on about their business.

A word!

Oya has found a friend.

Security Guard looks at her watch. It's time to go.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

It's bedtime for me.

She gets up.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Get some rest.

Oh, I got you something.

*Security Guard walks out the door and walks in with Oya's scrubs.
Oya smiles.*

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Oh, one more thing.

Guard pulls out Oya's paint brushes.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Here.

Create.

Oya is teary-eyed.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Come on.

Oya holds her hand out to be handcuffed.

SECURITY GUARD (CONT'D.)

Nawl, you don't need it.

They exit.

The lights dim.

Images of the strong black women projects. They are now fully back themselves. They are in their regular clothes, ready to be released.

The padded cells open they walk out in bliss and ready for a new start.

*Oya walks in now as a "Chatham Crisis" patient.
She's fresh out of the shower and is okay with
her new choice of clothes.*

She sits in the bed and writes in her journal.

Words are projected.

I wanted love.
Not a lesson.
But my lesson was to love me.
That way, I will never look for it in anyone but me.
That day will eventually come.
Until then, I rest.

Oya name projects in cursive.

Sincerely, Oya Eshe Zina White.

*Oya closes the journal and drifts off into a
peaceful slumber.*

FADE TO BLACK

End of Play

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