

## **“Sole/Daughter:” Race, Intellect and the Performative Process of Creating Black Subjectivity**

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*Both the body and the academy are homespaces where intellectual development occurs. This essay offers a performative reflection of the academic experience to highlight the pedagogical potential embedded at the crossroads of race and performance. It first discusses how participation at an academic conference in 2005 raised ethical and disciplinary questions in both the professional and personal realms. Encouraged by the lessons learned from this conference, the second half analyzes my full-length play, “Sole/Daughter,” as an example of how performative writing participates in revolutionary action.*

When August Wilson passed away in 2005, my poems began to appear on the page as philosophical plays. I had spent the previous year attempting to come to terms with the academic ground I was immersed in. At the time I was struggling to understand the definitional differences between depression, repression and oppression. I know that the tense distance between these meanings is a space Victor Turner would call liminal, Gloria Anzaldúa would call the borderlands, or W.E.B. Du Bois would call double consciousness. But I was caught unaware by the Department of Justice’s pursuance of their threat to sue Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, for allegedly violating Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. They claimed men, whites, and “non-preferred minorities” were being discriminated against by the distribution process of minority fellowships—funding that had been designated for students such as me. An insistent itch to interrogate the institutionalization of race as a system guiding my enflashed experiences encouraged me to seek advice from an historical perspective that more fully reflected my worldview.

I had read and re-read August Wilson’s speech to the 1996 Theatre Communication Group, *The Ground On Which I Stand*, where he offered historical reflections on his intellectual development linking himself to the political genealogy of Black nationalist philosophies. I reflected over his declaration of the ground on which

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he stood, where he proclaimed at length that his intellectual tradition was pioneered by his

grandfather, by Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, by Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. That is the ground of affirmation of value one’s being, an affirmation of his worth in the face of society’s urgent and sometimes profound denial...the Black Power movement of the 1960s was in fact a reality...that is the kiln in which I was fired and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness. (Wilson 11-13).

This poignant articulation of his intellectual location changed meaning for me each time I returned to it. And I came to it often with questions, seeking guidance and ancestral answers as I conversed with the page. I understood I was very much a member of the Black community, and so the ground Wilson described was also one I stood on, but what meaning did these figures and their historical eras have on the development of my consciousness? And how might I be able to activate their methods given this particular historical era?

From the Harlem Renaissance until the Black Power eras, Black aestheticians raised proposals of institutional development through the building of Black intellectual centers. As W.E.B. Du Bois recommended: “we need race organizations. Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy” (145). When Black aestheticians invented Black Theatres and performance spaces, they arguably “staged” a social revolution by carving creative outlets for Black communities where they were socially outlawed. Additionally, Black artists went on to “stage” social revolutions in their written performances of self-defined subjectivity. In essence, these artists were simultaneously able to stage the street, as well as bring the stage to the street by performing praxis in unconventional ways.

My mission when I entered the (invisible) Ivory Tower was to use poetic performance to dramatize personal and cultural experiences of difference. With this goal in mind, I objectively set out to expose structural forms of oppression while working toward a communal space of growth. But I kept bumping into racialized borders; boundaries not every literal body was willing to figuratively cross. So I offered up my own body, through performative writing, as a sacrifice to understanding the dramaturgical methods emerging from the philosophies of Black artists. I did this both because I needed clarification of my own performative philosophy and because I knew I could only find it in the traditions and theories of other Black performers and artists. I assume the performative position because I like the way Tejumola Olaniyan explains the performative as “a self-critical model that conceives identity as open, interculturably negotiable, and always in the making—a *process*” (4). I’m comfortable with his selection of words only because I know that the meaning of identity is not the same as culture and that of culture is not the same as race, though they are often conflated in social, political and aesthetic representations.

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As my poetry transitioned from personal therapy into philosophical plays, I began to invest in Ntozake Shange's idea that "we must move our theatre into the drama of our lives/ which is what the artists we keep resurrecting (or allowing others to resurrect) did in the first place/" (Shange "unrecovered" ix-x). I heeded Shange's call first by performing at academic conferences and institutions where other performance scholars shared their insights, and then by writing a series of full-length plays through dramatic poetry. What I discovered, is that notions of belonging and hospitality are bound by social understandings of cultural differences. My essay contributes to these ideas by centering on intellect as a homespace that is often under theorized. As academic institutions are places where people come seeking knowledge, one question that motivated this project was whose knowledge am I receiving? It is my contention that the intellectual figures, theories and paradigms we are exposed to, contribute to a sense of belonging and/or exile within these learning spaces.

As the body and the academy are homespaces where intellectual development occurs, this essay offers a performative reflection of the academic experience to highlight the pedagogical potential embedded at the crossroads of race and performance. To achieve this end, the first half of this essay recalls how participation at an academic conference in 2005 raised ethical and disciplinary questions in both the professional and personal realms. The second half analyzes how my full-length play, "Sole/Daughter," (pronounced so-LAH daughter), addresses issues of race by evolving the idea of revolution.

## **Performing (Academic) Diaspora**

*February 2005, Carbondale*

In 2005, I proposed a double panel to the National Communication Association's (NCA) annual conference. The goal was to create a conversation between intergenerational scholars of African or Black descent within the discipline of Performance Studies. Although, race had quickly become a part of my research agenda, it was not by choice. Rather, experiences as one of a few Black students throughout my intellectual development conditioned me to understand race as a primary part of how I operated in these spaces. Additionally, a few months before the conference, Professor Segun Ojewuyi invited students in his "African, African-American Theatre class" to imagine the elements needed to construct a contemporary Black theatre. After a wonderfully heated discussion interrogating the concept of Blackness, Professor Ojewuyi asked, "How can you build a cultural institution without defining what is Black?"

There were nine of us that semester.

Six of us of African descent.

All of us subjected to the American born borders of our body.

I felt bound by the drama of cultural confrontation both in this course, as well as in my reflections of past educational experiences and began to document my

emotional responses as a logical form of therapeutic release. The result was an unpublished essay entitled “Dramatizing the Diaspora: Four Stages of a Revolutionary Nomad Come Undone,” which eventually became the centerpiece of my performance at NCA.

I had philosophically aligned myself with Amiri Baraka’s The Revolutionary Theatre, selected August Wilson’s nemesis Robert Brunstein as the focus of my theoretical criticism and depended upon Wole Soyinka’s the Fourth Stage as a methodological guide. Wilson’s speech *The Ground on Which I Stand*, provided ample historical, political and economic claims pointing to cultural exclusion in the American Theatre. Wilson adamantly opposed color-blind casting claiming that his art stood “squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth” (Wilson 20). I was emotionally, culturally and politically disturbed by the white supremacist undertones expressed in Robert Brunstein’s response to Wilson’s speech entitled “Subsidized Separatism.” He called Wilson’s cultural assertions of subjectivity “the language of self-segregation,” (Brunstein 1328). At the conference, I passionately performed a reading of my response to Brunstein, explaining:

It’s a modern day lynching. A metamorphic moment where the literal is introduced to the metaphor. They dance in tune to language with choreographed steps. The author appears to me as: *The Conductor*. The conductor calls the shots carefully. He says, the forthright methodology of black artists transcending white supremacy is ‘divisive and disturbing’ (Brunstein 1328). He calls their reclamation of self a ‘rambling jeremiad [that] is essentially an effort to accentuate the achievements of black theatre’ (Brunstein 1328). A *complaint* he sneers across the page. He claims Wilson ‘betrays his ambivalent sense of American identity’ (Brunstein 1329). The ideology whip cracks across stretched backs. These days my flesh is raw from being branded with social expectations of race and nationality. With calls for loyalty from a regime that has never honored our beauty, our intelligence, our humanity.

And this is the exit wound.

These modern day plantation owners are sadomasochists at heart.

The big house has morphed itself into discourses that reek of color-blind casting, multicultural rhetoric and patriotic petitions that adhere to imperialist standards. The conductor is unable to see himself. He is unable to see how his accusation of Wilson’s black jeremiad as ‘the language of self-segregation,’ (Brunstein 1328) is really his reflection.

They say those without souls cannot see themselves in mirrors.

I believe them. (Hastings)

I cite this lengthy section of my performance specifically because it is where I began to recognize how the racial “language will be anybody’s but tightened by the poet’s backbone” (Baraka 1387).

My language pumped fear into those who were exposed to it.

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Including myself.

My language liberated those who were unafraid of it.

Including myself.

In his book, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, Tejumola Olaniyan explains that “‘Scar’ and ‘mask’ conceptually delineate the dual-voiced character of the project of black cultural identity; a balance of historical subjection, with all its underlying originary violence, on the one hand, and a bold assertion of subjectivity on the other” (6). He goes on to suggest that “‘inventing cultural identity’ does not refer simply to the *cultural self*-definitions evident in black dramatic practice but also to the fact that subjectivity as such is inaccessible to us except through staging, representation, performance, invention, *work*—self-autonomy is never absolute and the space of the subject is always a contingent one” (7).

In hindsight, I am able to appreciate Olaniyan’s recognition of subjectivity being a social process because of my ability to activate each step leading to deeper knowledge of self. While writing “Dramatizing the Diaspora” my identity was consistently at war with its inventions; unhappy with social signs of recognition it morphed itself into another reality. I traveled through time with my questions of genealogical conception and deception not realizing I was still subject to the understanding of race “solely in the context of race hatred” (hooks 312). As bell hooks explains, race and “racism is usually seen as synonymous with discrimination or prejudice against black people by white people...Consequently, the American woman’s understanding of racism as a political tool of colonialism and imperialism is severely limited” (312). It would be much later that I would become conscious of the fact that to “experience the pain of race hatred or to witness that pain is not to understand its origin, evolution, or impact on world history” (hooks 312).

In the staging of “Dramatizing the Diaspora,” I took a step beyond the margins of identity into the center of myself as subject and came to recognize that subjectivity can only be represented through identification.

On the page slept giant ideas that snored loudly.

I was warned not to wake the sleeping giant.

I staged these nightmares anyway.

November 2005, Boston

Our first panel featured esteemed scholars Drs. D. Soyini Madison, Olga Davis, Joni Jones, Bryant Keith Alexander, E. Patrick Johnson, Myron Beasley, Subrina Robinson and Eileen Cherry-Chandler. Each offered eloquent responses to the performances of race offered by myself, Javon Johnson, Jeffrey McCune and Zenobia V. Harris. The feedback generated from this exchange helped to highlight both theoretical and methodological spaces of inquiry within our current discipline. One question continued to resonate with me deeply. Dr. Davis proposed, what would a Black performance studies ethic look like? I did not take Dr. Davis’ question as rhetorical. Rather, I came to believe that she was proposing a question of representational

credibility in relationship to the subject matter of our performances. For me, this was an amazingly timely question that highlighted ethical and disciplinary implications.

The inquiries of Dr. Davis at NCA and Professor Ojewuyi in the classroom speak to Paul Carter Harrison’s assertion that

The problem of making a valid assessment of African Diasporic performance might be rectified if academic institutions would take on the responsibility for the development of a new critical vocabulary that would serve the objective of deconstructing systems of European logic that have harnessed African creative process, and thereby reconstruct a process informed by African cultural metalanguages. The challenge here is the pursuit of an entirely new scholarship. Such pedagogical pursuit should be launched from the cosmological and social practices of the African Diaspora that lead to the reconstruction and formulation of a critical model erected upon the worldview of the ‘African Continuum.’ (590)

To begin to address Harrison’s challenge, one might ask what is the old vocabulary used to assess African Diasporic performances, in particular those which are marked as Black Theatre or Performance within the United States? Are the metalanguages guiding the methodologies of previous Black scholars integrated to such a point that they have lost their use-value? I ponder this question because Derek Walcott suggests “what is needed is not new names for old things, or old names for old things, but the faith of using the old names anew” (92).

Additionally, in the identification of how European logic has “harnessed the African creative process,” one must also address privatized levels of political censorship taking place within our intellectual spaces. To identify this discourse, is to recognize Suzan-Lori Parks’ assertion that “Black people know there is a war going on against our blackness and somehow we’ve been enlisted to fight on the frontlines” (581). I interpret this to mean that Black people are encouraged to confront the Blackness they wear due to the Others’ lack of understanding of what Blackness is, as well as their (and perhaps our own) inability to define it. In this sense, ‘Blackness’ exists through a continuum of racism, as the history of ‘Blackness’ in the U.S. is rooted in the violent battleground of racial discourse enacted through rhetoric and representations that result in color-coded ideologies.

Some might argue that appropriation of Western tools has consistently contributed to the survival of African and Black Americans. Yet Harrison’s challenge, which builds upon Larry Neal’s 1968 call for Black artisans to break from Western aesthetics, marks the recognition that cultural appropriation is no longer appropriate because performative practices simply mirror the European logic which harnesses African creativity, thus serving Western ways of life. The application of Western logics through cultural appropriation not only contributes to the suppression of African forms of knowledge, but it also privileges Western standards of performance on both social and cultural levels.

Additionally, Harrison’s challenge exposes the politics of accountability raised when performing in predominantly white, Euro-American structured disciplines. Though exposed primarily to Western theories and methods, Black performance

studies students will still speak from their sensibilities, which Wilson acknowledges, “are African sensibilities—which is the way they respond to the world” (Savran 56). Even if their audiences do not consist of students primarily of white or European descent, the lack of non-Western ideas exposed to students of color turns appreciative questions of concern into critical cultural criticisms functioning on two levels.

First, audience responses may take place within the realm of personal experience, which may or may not conflict with the narratives offered. While these experiences of difference may lead to personal growth and development, they do not automatically address the systems of power that create conditions of difference. Nor do they address how (dis)identification is reflective of one’s cultural positionality. Second, audiences may respond theoretically, drawing from Western philosophies and ideologies as an entry point into discussion. Yet if the material they are learning from is centered in one perspective, then the Black performer is once again subjected to European standards of criticism. This is not to suggest that Black performers only be discussed through the works of Black authors and theories; rather, it is to suggest that if Western ideas were studied alongside other worldviews, students would be offered a wider selection of tools to use in their response.

It is my contention that both personal and theoretical approaches are needed to respond to performances, as well as to learn from performances. While these arguments speak to Olaniyan’s concepts of representation, invention, staging, and work, the following section is centered in the pedagogical question of performing one’s ideas. The following section offers an explanation of the evolution of revolution within the performance script “Sole/Daughter.”

### **“Sole/Daughter:” Writing With Agency**

The opening of “Sole/Daughter” begins with an explanation of an imaginary organization called Small Revolutionz, *The Agency*. *The Agency* is conceptualized as

*a theatre of black academics, seeking to preserve the intellectual contributions of Africans throughout the diaspora. the agency represents ancestral praise singers, shadowing the story as the research agenda and mission unfolds. while the main characters are functioning in a space of realism, the agency collectively expresses itself metaphysically. (“Sole/Daughter”)*

Long before “Sole/Daughter” was conceived, I joined with a sister-friend to form the imaginary activist group *The Agency*. After a 2005 performance at the Marion Kleinau Theatre in Carbondale, IL, we promoted future shows, raised funds for Hurricane Katrina survivors and advocated on behalf of students of color in jeopardy of losing their fellowship funding. It was evident to us that race played a key role in each of these performances of self.

In the aftermath of performing at various academic institutions, performance conferences, west coast venues and mid-western stages, I began to imagine a place that would theorize and enact the rhetorical theories and strategies of Black artists and performers. Perhaps it was my way of chasing down a Black paradigm. But, as I began

to compare historical and contemporary strategies of social change with one another, the vital relationship between ideas, images and institutions became clearer. This comparison encouraged me to view aesthetics as more than simply a rhetorical tool of representation. Aesthetics, through an activation of rhetoric, began to serve as a pedagogical tool used to motivate audiences through a presentation of historical criticism.

Though *The Agency* began as a promotional performance, it continued to manifest in my future writings as an organization for liberatory action. In “Sole/Daughter,” *The Agency* serves as an example of how past, present and future elements of the Black Aesthetic all function simultaneously. Wole Soyinka’s “The Fourth Stage,” is used as a methodological foundation for this process. He states, the

Yoruba is not, like European man, concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time; they are too concretely realized in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of his world. If we may put the same thing in fleshed-out cognitions, life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualization. (439)

Drawing upon this understanding, *The Agency* is representative of the ancestors, while the main characters Rakee, Genesis, and Nemesis function in the realm of the living. Serving as moral guides, the ancestors reveal new understandings and choices as the living contemplate cycles of birth, death and possibility.

The result of this synergy is what I forward as revolutionary.

“Sole/Daughter” makes use of the literary genres poetry, drama and oratory as spaces of inquiry and knowledge. Its cultural approach to artistic liberation is to become conscious of the messages exchanged between self and society. As such, revolutionary artists must be willing to examine both personal and intellectual roots to reach a higher level of understanding. By drawing on both intellectual and artistic roots, the main character of “Sole/Daughter,” Rakee Ogechi, establishes three fundamental elements of revolution that become vital to her artistic purpose.

## **Fundamental Change**

Revolution is about the desire for fundamental change. Moving beyond reform, fundamental change must occur systemically, structurally, and/or institutionally. This change is two-fold in that it must happen externally and internally. Externally, the change must be a part of a collective struggle for self-realization. Internally, the change must produce the desire to know more about the territory being struggled over. In “Sole/Daughter,” race is the concept that must be fundamentally changed. The scene ‘Race Rage,’ exposes the difference in how the characters conceptualize race. For the main character, Rakee, confronting socially accepted understandings of race is a revolutionary act. Her public performance is an unapologetic, if not a frantic, call for others to examine race as a social system.



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**rakee**

this is the end  
of a twenty-seven year old suicide letter  
to the current version of Platos Academy.  
it is not an apologia.  
it is an ode to Audre Lorde n Nikki Giovanni,  
who taught me that anger can be used as a source of communal growth.  
it is in the margins because thats where it belongs.  
in the crevice of some black abyss  
where the praise singers can honor the creative struggles  
of those have been pushed to the limit by Atunda  
n are no longer afraid of embodying Ogun.  
is anybody even listenin'?  
this is our lives  
we live this  
how long are we gon' live like this?

*agent 1*

there she go  
standin on  
her soapbox again

*agent 3*

preachin her  
crazzzzy agenda

*agent 4*

why dont  
she jus accept that the text is BLK  
the page is WHIT  
n SHUTTHEFUCKUP????

**rakee**

what does that mean?  
what does it mean  
to accept be-ing a silent text?  
what does it mean to you?  
that you cant interpret the meaning of your/self?  
is blk bein silenced 'cause  
they dont wanna to talk about the logic of racism?

Rather than continue to see race as a series of discriminatory acts, Rakee has come to view race as embedded in symbolic identifiers of being and existence. Ontologically, race functions as the 'metalanguage' that manifests through identity. As Rakee explains her subjectivity:

i sit in a classroom

*“Sole/Daughter”*

dont matter what topic  
the discourse is the same.  
its me in this space  
a dark dot on a fresh page  
a dark woman on a brite stage  
n its important to note my female subjectivity  
cause its not the same as the brothas i stand in solidarity with  
our stories overlap  
but i'm not tryin to tell their story  
even though i know angela is right  
that an attack on blk men is also an attack on me.  
so, i sit in this classroom  
knowin i'm the 'pinay for your thots'  
embraced as representation of multiculturalism  
but know my story is not a conversation that everyone is comfortable hearin'  
n so i'm left with two choices.  
be silent or speak anyway...  
my passport into racial reality  
is constantly being stamped

In its entirety, this poetic monologue underscores the racial differences between Rakee and her performative situation through sex, gender, spirituality, socio-economic status, and ethno-geographical locale, all ontological factors embedded in the philosophy of race. Her intellectual struggles through rhetorical debates and the sharing of philosophical perspectives begins to (re)center social relations as the focal point of metaphysical importance. As a result, much of the confrontations in “Sole/Daughter” are experienced through the body, which reflects the materialization of social borders. The negotiation of social relationships, witnessed in struggles over power, are expressed in performances of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, spirituality and linguistic imagery that very quickly begin to function as epistemological factors of race.

### **Performing Pedagogy**

Revolution is about performing your pedagogy. Evidence of this change in beliefs is expressed through performances that put on display the artist's political position. Artistic members believe that performing their viewpoints in public spaces allows for the exposure of alternative ideas. These performances also provide spaces for feedback, criticism and ultimately, for the Rastafarian revolutionary goal of a “change of heart and mind” (DeCosmo 154).

Epistemologically, if we are to accept the Black experience as an intellectual tradition, we must also acknowledge that it produces its own knowledges and methods. This is to say that if narratives of the Black experience are being retold, performer, professor, and audience should be prepared for how to interpret this perspective. While each person will experience the performance in his or her own

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way, if the performance asks the audience to measure it on its own terms, it is much more likely that audiences will use those guidelines in their response. In “Sole/Daughter,” both historical and lived knowledge is used to help explain the positionality of each character. Rakee’s conversation about ‘poemplayz,’ is one example of how shared information can reveal new methods of be-coming subject.

**rakee**

poemplayz iz playin  
wit poemz to create that emotional battlefield/ that helps to reveal  
who we iz/ by our own definition/ you know...  
...its carvin outta place to BE/so we can  
BECOME sumpthin  
otha than what they wanna us to be...

**nemesis**

what who wanna us to be...

**rakee**

them.

**nemesis**

them who?

**rakee**

them who tell us poetry dont spk no truth  
them who wanna limit us  
to iambic pentameter type shit  
with no intention of eva lettin us be free

**genesis**

like sonia?  
*(pauses, as he catches rakee’s surprised eye)*  
who teaches us to be disciplined  
when we’re free  
esp. when we’re free

**rakee**

*(with a soft smile)*  
yes. like sonia.  
very much like sonia,  
who teaches us about  
them who dont want us to play wit poemz

Rakee not only defines what a ‘poemplay’ is, but she also explains its goal of creating an “emotional battlefield” for the purpose of uncovering “who we iz/ by our own definition.” Rhetorically, her explanation also leads to an anti-supremacist use-value

embedded in dialogic poetry. By noting that the writing of poemplayz would lead to a definition of self “otha than what they wanna us to be,” Rakee begins to shed visibility on what was once considered invisible. For in order to write outside of the social definitions confining the self, the self must study those imposed definitions systemically.

### **Illegal Imaginings**

Finally, revolution is illegal, (or outside of the system which the artist is trying to change). As Amir Sulaiman poignantly explained on his spoken word album *Dead Man Walking*,

If there is no outlaw in you, then you are not a revolutionary. Revolution and outlaw are synonymous. Now, when I say outlaw, that is outside the law of the system that you are trying to change, but always within the universal law of virtue over vice, right? So this is the only way to really be free. (“Revolution”)

The fundamental change artists are suggesting is situated outside of the imagination of current laws, discourses, and belief systems. Given that these changes would radically alter, if not in some cases completely transform the system in place, the gatekeeping mechanisms of the norm will resist any attempt to change how it functions. As such, revolutionaries must be armed symbolically, theoretically, methodologically and critically. The illegal imaginings of artists make it necessary to understand the current norms, previous forms of resistance and strategies of negotiation between power holders. They must also know which tool will best serve the overall purpose of the artistic project.

While race and color are significant to Rakee’s narration of self, it is her intellectual search for Black love and Black unity that qualifies as an illegal imagining. A series of narrative voice-overs explain Rakee’s goal of collective racial death through intellectual suicide. These points of information reveal how change was both internal and external; collective and personal; and spiritual as well as material. In the second voice-over, specifically, it is explained that Rakee attempted to commit intellectual suicide by devouring the works of Black intellectual leaders. It is in the recognition of an intellectual tradition that Rakee’s revolution can be nursed and freedom can be born. Though there are consequences for Rakee choosing to move outside of the intellectual traditions of her academic arena, the choice of asserting her ideas through the ideologies of Black intellectuals becomes a backdrop to the self that she conceives.

Historically, the writings of Black women and their male comrades are typically not represented side-by-side, even with their differences on display. Rather Black women and their ideas, regardless of their own narrations of positionality,<sup>1</sup> are

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<sup>1</sup> In separate personal conversations and public presentations hosted at University of Urbana-Champaign’s “Race, Roots and Revolution: Revisiting Black Power” conference in 2006,

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theoretically couched within dominant feminist perspectives and gender politics. Rakee reveals her awareness of the historical relationship between European and African perspectives of gender politics when she explains

**rakee**

think Maria Stewart  
Frances E. W. Harper or Ida B. Wells  
was writin' jus to please themselves?  
what about Langston, Locke or DuBois?  
they was at war, baby.

*agent 2*

some of them jus didn't know  
how to admit it

*agent 3*

or didn't want to

**nemesis**

wit who?  
who were they at war with?  
thot they was writin' prose

**rakee**

wit the man who reigned supreme.  
n then  
they was fightin' prose  
for their men who continued to dream.  
coz them liberal girls was actin' up again.  
the WLF you know?

What becomes significant is how Rakee never provides a complete image of her 'self' as individual. Instead, the personality of Rakee is narrated through her memories of past relationships, miscarriage, masculinity, and motherhood. Rather than offer a unified representation of self, Rakee presents necessary parts of the past to her audience and asks for a reinterpretation of actions based on a different perspective. The result is a layered personality constructed through social interaction, where the individual subject recognizes the self through community.

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Kathleen Cleaver and Frances Beal, both spoke candidly about their disidentification with the dominant white women's feminist movement. Each stated that they did not call themselves feminists, nor did they align themselves with the ideologies of the White women's feminist movement.

While some may disagree with the use of revolution as the activating myth of the Black Aesthetic, the overall dedication to the search for liberation through knowledge cannot be disputed. Revolutionary artists must research their ideas, as well as their emotional response to these ideas, so that the images they create symbolize their point of view. In the implementation of these ideologies through performances, the overarching goal remains to raise the consciousness of audience members through an exposure of the self.

## **Conclusion**

Both “Dramatizing the Diaspora” and “Sole/Daughter” helped me to recognize that there is a level of intellectual rigor and cultural righteousness that I write/perform with—a level that reminds me that I own my ideas and do not wish to have them read through a colorless lens. Yet I am also reminded that once my voice joins the academic conversation, there are cultural consequences, both professional and personal, for the (in)actions of my words. This is not to suggest that my righteousness is always right. Rather it is to offer reflection upon how the choice to expose institutional (mal)practices came with a panicked realization that Black authors, ideas, theories and methods were offered to me in specialized fragments of courses, rather than as a paradigm of performance.

Throughout my tenure as student, from my first college class at 15-years old, into my undergraduate experience, all the way through my post-baccalaureate programs, the fragmented exposure to Black intellectual figures frequently felt like a dysfunctional homeplace. It often felt as if my theoretical father-figures were incarcerated by culturally-rooted performance standards, while my mothers struggled to voice spiritual, political and economic control over our historical household. When my intellectual fathers were present, their ideas were often dismissed by classmates as inconsequential or unimportant to the canonical conversation, simply because of the levels of emotional authority and/or trauma driving their cultural theories. Meanwhile, my mothers were discussed through aspects of sex and sexuality, as if each were identity markers that were not impacted by racial ideologies drawn by the colorline.

When I think of belonging, I think about how it is often discussed in the first person, as if the individual has the desire to belong while the community of choice is placed in the powerful position of either extending hospitality or exiling one to the margins. Yet, what I desired was to co-exist in the communities that had invited me to join their ranks, without having to sacrifice or hide any part of my intellectual family. I also did not wish to have the figures I spoke with (to, through and perhaps, even for), subjected to cultural and/or historical criticisms that could not (or would not) see the colorful spaces between our lived experiences. When I read Robert Brunstein’s response to August Wilson and experienced the U.S. Department of Justice’s attack on minority fellowships, I recognized the attempt to close off an epistemological territory that offered me a cultural playground of performance possibilities.

And so, I offer these cultural criticisms not to finger-wave at those who have offered me much to consider, but because I have been testifier, witness and willing listener to many who have felt the weight of intellectual pressure being rubbed onto their thoughts at the explanation that white or European writers were needed to add theoretical justification to scholars of color; that pledging to American nationalism was preferable to seizing ownership over the skin that houses your spirit. These have been soul-destroying experiences harnessing the creative will. These are also experiences that encouraged me to engage in the investigation of the performative relationship between race and color.

It is through the staging of racialized performances, both on the page and through the body, that I was able to learn how I was simultaneously disconnected and intertwined with Western theories and ideas. After 25 years of studying Western ways of being, I began to view performance as a therapeutic battlefield where I fought for Black liberation.

But I grow weary from being at war. The post-traumatic stress takes its time departing from the war zone I once recognized as my body.

Recently, I began to understand that the poet disagreed. The language cannot be just anybody's. It cannot marry its images to the ideas of just anybody. The development of a new critical language must recognize that in the deconstruction of white supremacy, power must be redistributed so that the ontological corrective takes place both theoretically and methodologically. It is then that the intellectual artist begins to feel at home in her skin.

These days I am less interested in fighting against white supremacy and Eurocentrism solely through performing political discourse. These days I am aware that in order to be prepared for that type of confrontation, true revolutionaries must first address the sedimentation of these ideas within the Black imagination. A true revolutionary understands that "revolution is about change, and the first place the change begins is in yourself" (Shakur 203). For if one can conquer white supremacy within the self, then one can most definitely change the world.

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