

2017

Obsidian in Sand: A reflection on Tokenism and the fight for visibility in predominately white spaces, and a declaration that Black Lives Matter

Dimitri Jai Woods
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Woods, D. J.(2017). *Obsidian in Sand: A reflection on Tokenism and the fight for visibility in predominately white spaces, and a declaration that Black Lives Matter*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4172>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Obsidian in Sand:

A reflection on Tokenism and the fight for visibility in predominately white spaces, and a declaration that Black Lives Matter

By

Dimitri Jai Woods

Bachelor of Arts
Santa Clara University, 2013

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Theatre

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2017

Accepted by:

Amy Lehman, Director of Thesis

J. Steve Pearson, Reader

Robyn Hunt, Reader

Stan Brown, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

© Copyright by Dimitri Jai Woods, 2017
All Rights Reserved

Dedication

This is dedicated to the mothers,

And to the families of the fallen.

May your loved ones Rest in Power.

And may you continue to Sing.

I pray for you daily,

And mourn with you in reverence.

Know that I'll not stop fighting;

I won't stop standing,

For I know you need time to rest your weariness

From standing and fighting so long.

With love, unconditional.

Abstract

As with most art in academia, the term “Abstract”, as a sort of summation of the proceeding discussion, does not quite fit. What you may experience in the following pages is more akin to my attempt at staying true to the artistic nature of my thesis project, while “reflecting” on it in a pseudo-academic tone. I put the word reflecting in quotation marks, as I do not truly feel as if this project is, or ever will be complete. It is (rather, intends to be) an ever-growing, ever-evolving experiment in expression. Luckily for you, this is being written after some distance has already been created, allowing more of a retrospective approach to the intimate process that was writing, directing, designing, and performing my solo-show, “Obsidian in Sand”. In reading this, hopefully brief thesis—the ultimate reflection in my education, specifically with regards to Acting or being a Performing Artist—you invite yourself to trudge through the depths, however shallow, of my creative process, align yourself with my inspirations that ignited my imagination to produce this work, and from there, do what you will. Hopefully, it will be insightful, if not inciting. Or vice-versa.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Foreword	1
Chapter One - The Who: <i>Me. The Young Man.</i>	3
Chapter Two - The What: <i>Obsidian in Sand</i>	6
<i>Scene 1: Open Mic Night</i>	6
<i>Scene 2: We Play Go</i>	9
<i>Scene 3: What's It Gonna Be</i>	11
<i>Scene 4: Numb</i>	12
<i>Scene 5: No Place</i>	14
<i>Scene 6: Strange Fruit</i>	16
<i>Scene 7: Smoke</i>	18
<i>Scene 8: Sing</i>	20
Chapter Three - The When: <i>The Performance</i>	26
Chapter Four - The Where: <i>The Do Differently</i>	29
Chapter Five - The Why: <i>Because of Them.</i>	31
References.....	34

Foreword

The writing of this piece was something I knew, before even enrolling in Graduate School, that I needed to do. I do not, by any means, consider myself a “good” playwright—or even a playwright for that matter. I often think I have good ideas, but tend to lack the confidence in executing them on page. This subject matter, however, is personal. What I do consider myself, is a poet. The vast majority of my creative writing is in the form of poetry, which is why you might notice the piece is presented as a collection of poems with scenes intermixed.

The stories and events presented in this performance piece are not derived from direct, or even very indirect experience; nor are they even stories of people related to me in any other way than by the color of our skin. These stories are personal because they could have easily been about me. As much as the stories in this piece are fictional, they are truth. And it is for that reason that I knew I needed to write this play. This “play” is about the Black experience in the United States, specifically in regards to police brutality and the effects of White Supremacy and White Violence on Black and brown bodies. You’ll find that it is not explicit in the language of the piece that the aforementioned is what this play is about, but knowing this now, you might read more closely into the images and motifs that are present.

This play is about grief. Specifically, it is about the grief we [Black folks], as a community, experience as we digest daily images of Black and brown bodies being brutalized because of a societal misrepresentation of who and what we are. This grief is mine to deal with, and I've chosen to process it in the form of my thesis presentation. Be warned: this play is not for you, but for me. It is for people like me. It is not meant to make anyone feel comfortable but the already disturbed.

Make no mistake about it: this piece was written to disrupt the comfort we enjoy so carelessly—to challenge us all to see the dispassionate response we all give whenever we see yet another human being slain, mangled or mauled on camera—whether it be in reality or as part of an entertaining experience. The question this piece hopes to posit is: why do you sit back and hesitate, question, argue whether this human being deserved to be treated without dignity? *Obsidian in Sand* was written because I had no answers. It was written because I was exhausted. And no one could help us deal with the trauma that is seeing your community, day by day, one by one exterminated out of hateful prejudice, and further brutalized by indifference. Because the institution of White Supremacy in the United States allows the majority to be blind to it. Because human nature in the 21st Century is to be mildly apathetic to issues that do not directly affect us. Because society looks at a 12-year-old [Black] boy and sees a grown man who was threatening. Because America is really good at blaming the victim.

Chapter One - The Who: *Me. The Young Man.*

I am Dimitri Jai Woods. I am a cis-gendered, heteronormative Black man, raised in Seattle, Washington by a single mother. I consider myself a Performing Artist (Actor, Singer, Dancer, Poet) and received the bulk of my training from Santa Clara University in The Bay Area, California. It is there that I became Dimitri, the Actor. It was there that I discovered my passion for storytelling. But it was back home in Seattle where I first became aware of my obsession with Social Justice.

I attended Lakeside School, an Independent Private School in North Seattle where tuition was higher than most public universities' in-state tuition (I was on scholarship). Needless to say, I was one of very few Black students at the just-over 500 student college prep institution. Now, I only mention all of this information because I think it is imperative that you understand how vigilant one becomes when they enter a predominately White and *privileged* space as one of very few. I was greeted at my new high school with comments like "I think you're the first Black person I've ever talked to," or "Are you thugging, now" after I put my hair in twists, and my freshman year "The seniors are intimidated by you". That, coupled with instances in which faculty, quite literally, went down the list of other Black students' names in trying to address me instead of just admitting they forgot what mine was.

And most especially when asked to be the spokesperson, master historian, and general model of a “good” Black person, who just so happens to be “so articulate”.

In my tenure at Lakeside, I found myself joining an out-of-school organization called The Seeds of Compassion Youth Ambassadors, where we met weekly to discuss and organize ways to provide positive outlets for disadvantaged youth, inspire compassion, and find ways to become better global citizens. We got to meet and perform for the Dalai Lama, and sit in on talks during the Seeds of Compassion Conference with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and other religious and compassionate leaders the world over. Another Black friend and I mounted a social justice campaign our Junior year for the Jena 6, a group of Black students in Louisiana who were being unfairly punished for unclear charges, most of which were race related.

After being accepted to Santa Clara, I learned of the shooting death of Oscar Grant who was murdered by a BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) officer earlier that year. The Black Student Union at Santa Clara, Igwebuike, had already mounted a performance in response to the incident shortly afterward, but the impact trickled into the next school year when I got involved in the organization’s annual “Cultural Show” event as a writer and performer. From there, I continued to take part in conversations about Social Justice and issues surrounding race in the US, as well as immigration, poverty, and sexual assault on college campuses.

As with most things, you become most passionate about what directly impacts you. As a Black man in America, police brutality and systemic racism are

what directly impact me, and the lives of my family and loved ones. It is a personal fight. A piece of creative writing can be extraordinarily personal. When asked to write a solo show, we were told that it could be as personal as we wanted it to be, or not. I find that disclaimer wildly entertaining because of the inherent nature that is writing, as well as performing. Alone. On stage. Your words. The inner workings of your mind. This entire project, regardless of what the subject matter would turn out to be, would be the most personal piece of work that we would come to produce in our graduate studies. Though I chose not to write about myself, I understood that I could just as easily *be* any of the young men I wrote into existence. In that way, it made the writing process that much more visceral to me.

Chapter Two - The What: *Obsidian in Sand*

Scene 1: Open Mic Night

"Lost In The Crowd" by Fantastic Negrito plays.

The stage is blank save for a small table with two chairs, a mic stand with a Vintage Mic, a board on the table and few others items as necessary. The stage darkens as a spotlight comes up on the mic stand. The music fades as a YOUNG MAN enters into the light. He goes through a ritual of cracking his knuckles, wrists, elbows, his neck, and swinging his arms wide and then closed like swimmers do before they make their starting dives. He is wearing a black hoodie with a fitted baseball cap. He finally looks up and takes in his audience.

YOUNG MAN

(A Poem)

I am a

Black stone in
the white sand of
an empty beach. I stand
alone
amongst the tiny white grains;
marked as a blemish, because I've
tainted what is pure. I don't fit in,
But I don't know how I got here.
My Brothers and Sisters are few and far between--
s p r e a d o u t
amongst the millions of little white and see through shards.
We're picked up and collected, then tossed back in the ocean
by passersby, who hold no regard--or if any, very little time.
Mother Ocean carries us back,
gently on her tiding waves,
to take our place again amongst our none-too-distant pale-faced kin.
My skin has many scratches along its surface;
long and fat, thin and short
from the everyday struggle to secure my place--
from being trod further into the depths of my white sand friends, and overlooked,
mishandled, and I daresay abused.
But my Sisters call me Beautiful and my Brothers call me durable despite my flaws.

They say I am the way Ancestor Nature and her father intended me to be.

That these scars and cracks are simply proof of my journey and my vitality.

I am proud to be this iridescent me--

for others are far too blind to see the many vivid colors that shade my identity.

The YOUNG MAN melts out of his performance. He comes to face the audience off, and address them.

YOUNG MAN

I speak this peace at an open mic night, as I look out into the sea of shirts that scream "I CAN'T BREATHE" and suddenly this fear takes hold of me, and I can't see-- black out all the Brown faces with tears streaming down in traces of transparent, metallic iron and salt.

And in the blackness of time, my breath comes to a halt, just as my ears cease to hear, and my skin fails to feel in that physical sense we're all so used to.

I'm swallowed into this blank space, which no one would seem able to follow.

Though I've lost all sense, somehow, there's still scent.

I can't actually smell it, but I can tell that it's there.

It's the oddest sensation.

And it's fear.

It plagues us, and grabs hold of us, keeping us hostage, ransoming our collective consciousness.

And WE CAN'T BREATHE:

it's suffocating us,

forcing us, one by one, to submit to our knees,

until only one YOUNG MAN stands, holding on by a single, feeble strand.

And the YOUNG MAN shoots out his voice like a spell of light to drive the shadows back into the night,

but the fear remains,

hovering,

stalking its prey,

waiting for his guard to fall.

The stage lights fade during the last few lines. The YOUNG MAN sits in a chair to catch his breath, keeping a watchful eye on the shadows around him...always at attention, ready to act in a breath if needed.

Scene 2: We Play Go

A YOUNG MAN sits at a table alone. It has two chairs--his and an empty one across from him. He is wearing a black hoodie. There is a board on the table: it's for a game, obviously--wooden with what looks to be a grid of sorts on it. He pulls out a black bag

and empties its contents onto the board and table. There are little black and white stones. He separates them into two piles: black and white. He sits. And waits. After a moment, he gets up from the table and exits. He returns with a small red ceramic cup of coffee. He drinks it black. He sits back down and continues to wait. The man chooses the set of Black stone tiles. He places one on the board and waits. He sips his coffee. Out of a bag or his jacket pocket, he produces a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. He lays the pack on the table, in the space across from him. He sips his coffee again. He speaks.

YOUNG MAN

We play Go on Saturdays. It's kinda like that thing you see in movies, where these old dudes play chess in the park on weekends. We got the idea by watching this movie from like the 90s where these real gangsta cats were always playing chess in the park on weekends. We thought that shit was like the epitome of hoodness, right there. So we started with chess. But dawg, man... that shit's boring. Checkers ain't much better. Then we learned about Go. That shit's crazy, man. You gotta like, create space for yourself and protect it, but like the other dude's tryna do the same thing. And like, when he's tryna create his space, he's simultaneously taking up your potential space, so you gotta like take space back from him, while he's doing the same shit to you! It's crazy man.

He goes back to staring at the board, waiting. He takes another sip of his coffee. He sets the cup down. He looks off to his left. He's wearing a watch. It's analog. He examines it. A moment. He takes another sip.

YOUNG MAN

Real relevant shit.

A moment. He takes off his hoodie.

Scene 3: What's It Gonna Be

En Vogue's "Don't Let Go" plays as a YOUNG MAN dances to the chorus. He is in loose fabric pants that allow for great movement, and a muscle shirt. His dance is wild, but oddly beautiful. It doesn't feel complete. He barely recognizes that anyone is there; his only goal is release. As the chorus fades, he takes his time to melt out of his trance--breathing hard. He goes toward the table and presses pause on his iPod/Phone. He takes a long draw from his water bottle that has been lying in wait in his little black bag. Finally he speaks.

YOUNG MAN

Throwbacks, man. She and I would jam out to old 90s records and just... be. We'd forget about everything else and just breathe each other in, keeping time with the beats of our heart, we'd be so in sync. We never had to say nothin' when we were alone together, cause all we'd need to do was listen to the language of each other's dance. Trust. That's what made it all work. She could throw herself into the air and never worry about comin' back down, 'cause she knew I'd be there to catch her. But really, I just loved holding her in my arms. Tell the truth? She supported me more than I felt I did her. She could perform the most spectacular lifts without a single flinch, and I'd be floating on relevé in arabesque like there couldn't be anything less. And she'd do it all en pointe with so much ease in her neck. And life together was a seamless dance--man and woman, but without any stereotypical macho convention of gender; just two people loving each other, creating together, for each other. I lifted her and she me, and we'd just simply... be.

The YOUNG MAN finishes his stretch (maybe it's a hurdler's stretch? Sitting? Standing?) He takes another pull from his water bottle. He presses play on his iPhone/iPod and John Legend & The Roots' "Hard Times" blares through the speakers. He puts on his black hoodie and a fitted baseball cap.

Scene 4: Numb

The YOUNG MAN returns to his spotlit mic stand with the Vintage microphone. Once again, he performs his pre-show ritual: cracking knuckles, his neck, elbows, wrists, stretching his arms and swinging them in and out of hugging himself like swimmers do before they dive in. He lifts his head and once more takes in his audience. When he is ready, he speaks.

YOUNG MAN

(Another Poem)

I'm trying not to go numb.

Because numbness is a by-product of mis-perceived consent, which would suggest that your killing of me is or was permitted.

You know, it's hard because statistics I heard show that in 2015, a year of quote-unquote progress, every 28 hours, a black man, woman or child is brutally shot and killed--by a cop, vigilante, fanatic, white supremacist, or any idiot with a gun and something to prove.

#BlackLivesMatter,

but with each waking day, our newsfeeds saturate with the fact that this police state don't quite think that way.

It's a myth:

something irrelevant--a dream half spent, or perhaps deferred.

Which would you prefer?

I can't remain silent, because I'm valid, as much as some would try to tell me otherwise, either directly, or with the all-inclusive phrase, "not just yours, but ALL LIVES".

But Mr. Hughes, I know what happens to a dream deferred.

It doesn't dry up like a raisin in the sun,

nor does it fester like a sore and run.

It won't stink like rotten meat.

And it damn sure ain't nothing sugary or sweet.

Yeah, it'll sag like a heavy load.

But most disturbingly: it will implode.

The YOUNG MAN fades into the darkness away from his mic stand, to once again, take a seat at the table.

Scene 5: No Place

The YOUNG MAN sits studying the Go set. He sits back in his chair. He reaches for his red coffee cup, and takes a sip. He sets the cup back down.

YOUNG MAN

It's easy to get overwhelmed when you're playing black. I don't know why I keep thinking that I'll find a way to win. Guess you can say I'm resilient. Or at least persistent. He's a lot better than me at this game. That's part of the fun, though-- tryna figure out a way to get ahead. I place one tile here, and before I know it four of his appear and then mine is gone. That's how it usually goes. You get put on defense real quick playin' black. Like, I'm always tryna band all mine together to just create a huge space, and keep him from surroundin' mine. But some kinda way I always end up with these small lil' pockets of like three or four until they're surrounded by like six white tiles or somethin' like that. And then all I can do is be happy that at least they ain't been disappeared, you know?

The YOUNG MAN goes back to studying the Go board. Throughout the last speech, he's set the board up as he's described: a pocket of a few black tiles surrounded by a wealth of white tiles.

YOUNG MAN

You never seem to know how it happens, either. You try to go on offense and like attack their space, but you got troubles at home! So it's a matter of "Do I protect my own, or do I head over there to try and put them on defense?" It never really makes sense. Why you gotta choose? It'd be cool if you could change the rules. But I guess it ain't so much about changin' them, but learnin' how to work around 'em, huh? Like,

I can't just sit here knowingly playin' a side that has been proven to be disadvantageous for me and act like that's jus' how the game goes, you know? Like, I'm sure people win playin black somewhere. I just ain't figured it out yet. But I'm workin' on it. Meanwhile this fool playin white just gon' keep beatin' my ass, I guess.

(beat)

Where is he? Damn.

The YOUNG MAN hovers over the Go board again, studying the pieces. He is earnestly trying to figure out some sort of strategy. He stands up to stretch--tight for all of the waiting.

Scene 6: Strange Fruit

A YOUNG MAN takes off the black hoodie he is wearing. He stands there in a black tank and loose sweats. At the table next to him is an iPhone/Pod. He picks it up and scrolls, then taps. The song "Strange Fruit" plays. As it does, he begins to dance. Each move he attempts seems to be stopped by some sort of invisible force. A turn jolts to a stop at 90°. A tilt starts, but the leg stops horizontal to the floor before the YOUNG MAN snaps back into place. He stares at his limbs in confusion. The song fades as he comes to stillness, but continues playing as he speaks (maybe it's the instrumental?).

YOUNG MAN

I remember when I got the news. I stood there. Just still. I had been trying to start the choreo for this song. And I just stood there as it played. I kept trying to start, but my body wouldn't move. Or when I did move, I'd start to cough. Not like you're getting over a cold kinda cough. I'd be hacking. And it'd grow to this violent choking, like on bile, or black tar, or something nasty like that. We don't smoke. That shit'll...

He stops himself before he can go further. He returns to the table and takes his water bottle out of the bag he left there, and takes a long drink.

YOUNG MAN

We didn't know what exactly the piece would look like; we never do...did. But we knew it had to be to this song. There's this eerie beauty to it, but it's also horrifying. You get all these disjointed, distorted images, and our bodies just seem...seemed to know what to do in the moment, building off each other--responding to one another.

(beat.)

Where is she, now? I can't create if she's not here. She's more than just... She's... She was... If there's no her, then there's no us, there's no art, no dance, no language, no... meaning. I could only really dance for her. It's not worth it, otherwise.

(beat.)

The YOUNG MAN attempts the dance once more. This time we see something begin, unimpeded by the invisible wall. Maybe the beginning or the majority of a phrase. It has taken much effort. His breathing is heavy.

I think I need a smoke... Take the edge off...

The YOUNG MAN puts his hoodie back on. He sits in the chair at the table. He picks up the pack of Marlboros, and taps it against his palm.

Scene 7: Smoke

A YOUNG MAN sits at a table with two chairs, wearing a red fitted cap. He sits in the chair with the pack of Marlboros in front of him, and the white Go tiles. He looks off to his right. He checks his watch. He places a white tile on the board. He waits. He checks his watch again. He takes up the pack of cigarettes, tapping the pack against his palm as smokers are wont to do. He knocks loose a fag, begins to pull it out further, then

stops. He contemplates his decision for a moment. He looks at the empty chair. He gives a small smile--his eyes don't.

YOUNG MAN

(A Ghost)

I'd always play white when we played. Black starts, but it don't have much direction. Or, well, Black might have an idea where they wanna go--what space they wanna make theirs, but see, white gets to roll up here and decide like "Well, I'mma make my space over here," or "Naw, I think I'm gon' take your shit right there" and BAM! Invasion. See, if you get four of your tiles to surround one of their tiles, like so--

He demonstrates, placing more tiles around the single Black tile.

YOUNG MAN

--Then you get to disappear their tile. And now you've successfully claimed the other guy's space. So I guess you could say the goal ain't just to make your space and defend it; it's to have the overwhelming majority at the cost of the other guy. Civility be damned.

He sticks the fag back in his mouth and reclines back in his chair, eyes stayed on the board. He checks his watch again. He looks off to his right.

YOUNG MAN

Looks like he won't have no problems beatin' me anymore.

(beat)

He shouldn't have to keep waitin'.

Scene 8: Sing

"Confrontation" by Damian "Junior Gong" Marley plays. It fades as the YOUNG MAN ends his ritual.

The YOUNG MAN reappears at his mic stand. He performs his pre-show ritual, once more.

YOUNG MAN

(Another Poem)

I just wanna sing,
but I can't keep from crying,
and you wonder why.

I've got Brothas and Sistas
dying by the wayside,
forfeiting their lives
in the way of enforcement's eyes.

Ideas in our heads
after contemplating our dead.

Notions of a more perfect nation:
America, the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave?
Except freedom is a privilege as we've found, not a guaranteed right,
just as much as is the ability to feel safe.

When the body sworn to protect and serve
would rather harass and humiliate,
use excessive force, and demonstrate cowardice.

How hypocritical.

But who takes blame?
Or is it equal parts shame?

My dear Brothas and Sistas,
we need an insurrection to keep us from falling in this direction,

in which only waits destruction.

So here's my instruction:

muster up your gumption--expand it wide as the Hudson,

and let us sing!

Sing for our Black Men and Women, our Sisters and Brothers, Sons and Daughters.

Sing for their safety.

Sing for their Freedom.

Sing and Stand.

Stand for your right to be treated with dignity and respect.

Stand so those who have stood for years can, not sit, but rest their weary bones in the strength and support that your strong legs provide.

Stand knowing that you're not lying down on your backs with the realization that that is how you'll end buried in the ground.

Stand knowing that you stood for life;

not just yours, but ours.

Sing again for the future.

Sing for progress, and the continuation of a dream.

Sing for hope that 'This Too Shall Pass' and that 'trouble don't last always'.

Sing that others can hear you, and our mighty voices may raise up in harmony, awakening the dead and tired that they too may stand again and walk.

I implore you.

I beg of you.

I fucking command you.

To hear the words of our collective souls,
un-articulated in simple poetry, policies and ads.

Listen to your hearts and the hearts of the mothers and fathers who've outlived
their children.

Let not your fear cripple you, nor the expectation of pain, resistance, or difficulty
paralyze you.

No road worth traveling, nor cause worth fighting for ever was without, or will be.

I desperately want to sing because I'm happy, free and safe.

But the storm is raging, and the sound of my voice alone cannot pierce the waves the
lightning strikes create in their wake.

So sing their names

And don't forget to say her's

*The YOUNG MAN starts to rip away at his hoodie. Maybe we're noticing for the first
time, but it is covered in gaff or duct tape stripes. With each name he rips off a new
stripe.*

Tamir Rice

John Crawford

Trayvon Martin

Mike Brown

Erik Garner

Oscar Grant

Aiyanna Stanley-Jones

Rekiya Boyd

Sandra Bland

Freddie Gray

So sing their names

And don't forget to say her's

*He is no longer ripping off tape. He stands there reciting the following names. An
impossibly slow fade to black, and music fades up (Alicia Keys' "As I Am (intro)"?
Maybe something else. Definitely a hard hitting instrumental).*

Walter Scott

Emmett Till

Medgar Evars

Mary Turner

Dontre Hamilton

Ezell Ford

Dante Parker

Tanisha Anderson

Eric Harris

Tarika Wilson

Laquan McDonald

So sing their names

And don't forget to say her's

Lights.

End of play.

Chapter Three - The When: *The Performance*

Getting to the performance portion of my solo show was probably the most convoluted I have ever felt about a single acting process. This was not the first show that I had written, directed, choreographed, and acted in. Never had I performed a “solo show,” but I had worn multiple hats, as they say. Perhaps it was because this particular project was *all* on my own that I felt so conflicted. I did not enjoy playing director, lighting designer, costume designer, scenic designer, actor and choreographer for myself. I did not feel I had anyone to bounce ideas off of, or give me polite suggestions, or tough criticism when needed. There was no one with whom to collaborate other than myself. So, I found myself unmotivated to rehearse. I wasn’t able to see or listen to what was happening, or determine objectively, because I could not separate myself from the *thing*. As is the case with most people, I assume: I am my own worst critic. I began to feel very self-conscious in how it would be received; a feeling I had not even considered worrying about in the writing process. And a relatively foreign concept to “Dimitri, the actor” altogether.

It became a struggle with myself about how I liked the words and the stories on paper, but did not connect with the performance of it in rehearsal—mostly because I was still playing writer, tweaking lines here and there, rather than

discovering meaning or motive. I liked my choices as a director-writer to include these songs/sounds here, or to use these props there, but they were all lost on me, the actor. The writer-choreographer in me wanted to add another Young Man character that was a graffiti artist/muralist, who would serve as another transition character, and we would see him creating his art, like a dance, to be revealed at the end of the play on a drop screen. But Producer-Dimitri knew there was no time to fit it in, no budget, and no talent for the art. And costume designer-producer in me wanted a black hoodie that would rip away to reveal the names of the fallen in the last piece as if a piece of the Young Man's soul was being torn away with each name; or a long black strip of fabric that would wind or unwind around my body to reveal the names that would symbolize either my arming myself to fight, or disarming myself in exhaustion—I wouldn't know which until I tried both ways. But alas, Costume Designer-Dimitri did not have the time, budget, or technical proficiency to execute any of these ideas.

At the time, I longed for the input of my peers at the very least. I wanted their feedback as to what was working, what stood out to them, etc. I really wanted a director's touch to ask me questions I already knew the answer to but had not articulated. I needed a director to look me in the eye and ask me, "Why are you doing this?" Instead, I had myself who knew the answers to the questions, and had quietly answered them. I had myself who does not like to be vulnerable, and quite honestly does not know how.

Thus, I was not surprised when one of the first comments upon review at the end of semester was “I think it was better written than rehearsed”. I thought it a fair assessment. It felt that way to me. During the two days of performance, I did not quite feel that I was in the mode of performance—I felt I was still rehearsing.

Chapter Four - The Where: *The Do Differently*

If afforded the opportunity, I would definitely like to perform my solo show again. Ideally, I would have everything at my disposal: a director not myself, a choreographer, a costume designer and constructionist, a lighting designer, and a scenic designer. Essentially, I would love a chance to mount a full-scale production of my solo show that fully supports the vision I had/have for the piece.

Provided this chance does occur, I would want to expand it past the fifteen-minute time limit we were given. The piece feels, to me, as if it wants to be closer to thirty minutes. There are only a few sections that were cut that I would like to reinsert, but in general, there are additional ideas—some things that have happened since I initially started writing that I would like to work on including. But most importantly, the list of the fallen continues to grow.

I would like to incorporate my idea of the graffiti artist who adds an extra element of movement to the show, as well as another element of art. This desire most likely comes from my obsession with Saul Williams' collection of poems, *The Dead Emcee Scrolls*, which I read in high school. It was a fascinating read that talked about the interconnectedness and importance of Black art in the Hip-Hop movement. That book has always stuck with me in my own writing, and inspired me

to think about the work that I create as multi-dimensional rather than a singular genre. I can, and often try, to incorporate all aspects of performance art into my pieces—poetry, music, movement, acting, etc. I'd even like to consider including video projections.

I'm not sure if I'll ever be granted the opportunity to mount a full-scale production of my solo show. Nothing is necessarily preventing me from at least expanding out the writing, but I would like to do so under a creative and collaborative environment rather than continue to work it on my own. The art that I want to continue to create is inherently collaborative, so I would like to think collaboratively as well.

Chapter Five - The Why: *Because of Them.*

I wrote this piece because it was a requirement. Not an academic one that I needed to complete in order to graduate with an additional three letters behind my name. But as a requirement to help me deal with my grief.

I wrote this piece because Oscar Grant was shot in the back by a BART officer while lying face down on the cement. Because he was “resisting arrest.”

I wrote this piece because Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a vigilante for walking home at night in a hoodie.

I wrote this piece because Aiyana Stanley-Jones was a seven-year-old girl, asleep who was shot and killed by SWAT police because they had the wrong apartment.

Because Rekiya Boyd was asking for help.

Because Tamir Rice was a 12 year-old boy playing with a toy gun by himself in a park.

Because Philando Castille was wearing dreadlocks, and his “taillight was out”.

Because Michael Brown was shot execution-style six times in the back for allegedly stealing a pack of cigarettes.

Because Eric Garner was choked to death by law enforcement with an illegal chokehold.

Because Freddie Gray was beaten to death by a gang of cops and tossed unsecured in the back of an ambulance with a broken neck.

Because Black Trans Women are murdered almost everyday simply because they're Black and Trans.

Because I hold my breath every time I walk by an older white woman. Because I fear that she will be threatened by me.

Because living as a Black man in 21st Century America is terrifying.

Because to be Black and relatively conscious in America, is to be in a rage all of the time.

Because we're left to grieve silently, but expected to go on as if nothing happened.

Because America doesn't think it has a problem.

References

- "The Case of the Jena Six: Black High School Students Charged with Attempted Murder for Schoolyard Fight After Nooses Are Hung from Tree." *Democracy Now!* N.p., 10 July 2007. Web.
- The Counted*. The Guardian, n.d. Web.
- Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- India.Arie. *This Too Shall Pass*. 2006. CD.
- Quah, Nicholas, and Laura E. Davis. "Here's A Timeline Of Unarmed Black People Killed By Police Over Past Year." *BuzzfeedNews*. Buzzfeed, 1 May 2015. Web.
- "Rules of Go." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 13 Mar. 2017. Web. 14 Mar. 2017.
- Williams, Saul. *The Dead Emcee Scrolls: The Lost Teachings of Hip-hop and Connected Writings*. New York: MTV /Pocket, 2006. Print.