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The Thought. The Force. The Love. The Joy. The Hope: An Ode to the Seldom Heard

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THE THOUGHT. THE FORCE. THE LOVE. THE JOY. THE HOPE:
AN ODE TO THE SELDOM HEARD

by

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DEDICATION

To Mommie, Me Ma, and Nana. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the methods used in creating my original solo performance piece entitled *The Thought. The Force. The Love. The Joy. The Hope: An Ode To The Seldom Heard*. I will describe in detail what specifically inspired the spine of my work, the research performed, the writing process, and how I hope it will grow in the future. Included in the body of the thesis is the script as it was performed on December 2nd thru December 4th, 2015 at the Center for Performance Experiment on the University of South Carolina campus in Columbia, South Carolina.

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CHAPTER 1

TRIGGER

I decided to seek professional counseling after fall break of my first semester of graduate school. Something was cracking, and I didn't have the language to express what it was. The sensations, however, were all too familiar. I had been emotionally triggered. In a letter to a friend written during this time, I admitted to experiencing an overwhelming influx of anxiety when having to partner up with classmates. I'm sure I was not the only person in the room nervous about sharing intimate spaces with people who were strangers just 8 weeks prior. For me, however, the anxiety was rooted in past experiences in which I faced isolation seemingly due to my otherness. I was hyperaware of every time I had to initiate partnership; of every moment I was picked last or presumably the only option left. I was hyperaware of my identity, and how I was the only one of me here: black and woman. Thusly, I was hyperaware of what black and woman could potentially mean to the people in the room.

In retrospect, my anxiety was not entirely unfounded, but certainly the product of social conditioning. I developed the assurance that at some point during the process I would face some type of discrimination due to my race and gender, simply because it happened before and on more than one occasion. Not to the fault of my current cohort, but as a result of America's long existing practice in anti-black womanhood. I had come to the conclusion that I was at the mercy of subconscious biases against black women,

without much evidence to support my argument in this particular situation, only the overwhelming suspicion that accompanies the memory of this being the case once before.

My therapist guided me to the words I physically could not say: that my preemptive reaction was due to the tremendous pressure placed on black women to be perfect. In order to be seen, and appreciated as an equal to my white counterparts in the room, I felt I had to achieve a level of perfection in my endeavors that is not required of them. I had to be perfect – or what the common adage articulates, “twice as good to get half as much” - just to be counted; to be seen; to be heard. Unbeknownst of myself at the time, the spine of my solo show was taking shape as I sat heartbroken and vulnerable in front of my therapist.

This event gave me reason to explore this question: are black women invisible? Are our voices even heard?

Of course we are seen and heard, but in my perception, to the extremes. On the one hand, the coveted style and vernacular of black women are daily targets of cultural appropriation with, for example, popular magazines casually accrediting what originated with black women to whichever Kardashian wore it best this week. On the other hand, black women are historically subject to dehumanizing stereotypes that bind us all together into a single narrative. I often question if there is even normalcy attached to being black and woman at the same time.

I do not intend to use this piece to place blame for the hardships faced by black women. Rather, I seek to emphasize the beauty, the brilliance, the fortitude, and the complexity of our humanity as individuals not subject to a single story. I seek for what I create to be as celebratory and hopeful as black music, but as challenging and alarming as

the missing pieces of black history not included in grade school history books. Instead of blaming America for what it's done to us, I'd rather explore the inquiry. If we were not subject to such a single story, how would we be perceived? If we could leave the world with one detail about what we are and who we are, what would that be?

The Thought. The Force. The Love. The Joy. The Hope: An Ode To The Seldom Heard celebrates the dignity innately possessed by every human, but historically denied to some. My intention is to amplify the often silenced, ignored, or generally unheard voices of black women as human beings. I do not intend to ignore the specific social ills faced by other marginalized women of color. I've lived observing the world through the lens of a black woman; mine is the only perspective I can speak confidently through.

Seldom Heard ties together five unique black women; each living full lives in five uniquely independent circumstances. The WOMAN IN BLACK /HOPE is the first to enter, sound tracked by Nina Simone's live cover of *Little Girl Blue*, and the last to leave as she approaches a standing microphone to sing *I Gotta To Find Peace Of Mind* by Lauryn Hill. She is the conduit through which conveys the stories of the remaining four women also referred to as their "chapter" titles: THOUGHT, FORCE, LOVE and JOY.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH

I started exploring the idea of black woman invisibility before the writing process for *Seldom Heard* began. In my research, I came across a study published in *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in 2010. Researchers Amanda Sesko and Monica Biernat decided to make a case for the idea that black women were socially invisible. As part of the study, participants heard a conversation between 8 people – 2 white men, 2 white women, 2 black men, and 2 black women. After observing the conversation, the participants, all white, were given a list of comments made during the conversation, and were asked to match the comments with the correct speaker. They made the most errors in identifying comments made by the black women. First, they were more likely to mix up the comments made by the two black women, suggesting they perceived the black women as interchangeable. Second, they were more likely to misattribute the Black women speakers' comments to the other speakers in the group. These results indicate that compared to black men, white men, and white women, comments made by black women are more likely to go unheard when made to a largely white audience (Sesko and Biernat).

These results, though jarring, are not surprising. Nevertheless, what could be the reason? Why is it so easy and so accepted to perceive every black woman as interchangeable?

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addressed in her famed 2009 TED Talk the danger of attributing what she referenced as a “single story” to whole demographics of people. “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the single story.” (Adichie). The single story explicitly denies certain people the fullness of humanity; it says that some can only have one identifiable marker, and cannot participate in the basic human right to be complex, inclusive, and individual. A single story, she goes on to say, is created when people are consistently depicted as “one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” (Adichie)

In her book *The Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women In America*, author Tamara Winfrey Harris argues that the identities of black women have been marred by a “coven of caricatures” since our enslaved foremothers reached American shores.(Harris). Championed by the infamously stigmatizing trifecta of “Mammy”, “Sapphire”, and “Jezebel”, stereotypes depicting black women as subhuman, and in direct contrast to the delicate femininity ascribed to white women have been continuously reinforced throughout history. Today, the black woman imagined as strong, belligerent, oversexed, “ghetto” dependent upon welfare, inappropriately matriarchal, and angry still controls the narrative that is now blasted onto public consciousness through the television screen, radio, and various social media platforms, following black women into our classrooms, our workplaces, and even our own community (Harris).

CHAPTER 3

MICROPHONES AND NINA SIMONE

Unlike what we learn from the Holy Bible, the “Word” did not come first – not in this particular process, anyway. I knew what I wanted my work to represent: the oft ignored and unrealized humanity of black women. I had the aforementioned research and my own lived experience at my disposal. Finding the vehicle for telling this story proved to be extremely challenging. Discovering how to say what I wanted to say was my main concern going into this process. I began searching for visuals to help incite inspiration the summer before the writing process officially began. I decided to start gathering images that not only evoked strong and specific moods within me, but also to potentially inform character – a very specific “someone” responsible for telling the story I’d eventually write.

I found myself gathering photos of staircases, for no reason other than I loved the aesthetic. One of the first ideas I had for a show centered on a black Cinderella. I kept seeing an image of her running down a winding staircase at midnight. Keeping with the original tale, the clock strikes midnight, and as she races down the winding staircase, she loses her shoe. When she turns back to retrieve it, she is accosted by law enforcement, subsequently arrested and thrown into prison. Needless to say, this idea remains on the cutting room floor. Ironically, though, the idea of black Cinderella surfaced just weeks before the death of Sandra Bland inside of a jail cell in Texas after she was wrongfully arrested and detained following a routine traffic stop. Her suspicious death and the events

that followed directly influenced the creation of the FORCE, which will soon be described in greater detail.

While collecting every image of a winding staircase I could find online, I came upon a photo of microphones hanging in space. The question of black women invisibility resurfaced; more specifically the matter of vocal presence. Do we go unheard in the world? Do our voices matter? How do we find amplification? In what way can our stories be heard?

Microphones have been a major staple in my life, starting as child leading the children's choir in song at church on Sunday mornings. Standing in front of a microphone, speaking or singing, the device intentionally fills the room with my voice with every ear inside hearing me, essentially forcing people in the room to listen to what I have to say. And even if they don't listen, if they don't hear, there is a space that is filled with the sound of my voice somewhere.

Once I was absolutely sure that voice was the thematic spine of my piece, I committed. The microphones became a literal symbol of my intent for the piece, and overall wish for the everyday human stories of black women everywhere: we have a better chance at being heard with help, some kind of platform, or amplification. Thus, the presence of microphones was introduced as a major component of the scenic design – from the four hanging from the ceilings, to the hand-held resting on a chair, to the centerpiece that ushered in the final moments of the performance.

Additionally, certain key selections of the soundtrack to *Seldom Heard* came before the words. Namely, Nina Simone's cover of *Little Girl Blue* as performed live at Montreux in 1976. Before I had consciously formed an idea of what my show wanted to

be, I knew this song had to be part of it. The lyrics throughout, some which Simone took the liberty of adding herself for this one live performance, inspired the initial mood I set out to achieve, and eventually became the perfect introduction to the piece. The 42 second clip, ushered in with a sudden blast of microphone feedback, plays as the WOMAN IN BLACK enters, crossing down center to inspect the stage set before her. In this clip, Simone starts by singing the original lyrics of the Rodgers and Hart standard: *Sit there and count your fingers/what can you? /you knew.../Sit there and count your little toes and fingers...*” (Simone). However, instead of ending the phrase with “little girl blue” as originally written, she adds in a simple yet weighted “liberated” to change the meaning of the phrase entirely. “*Little girl blue*”, believed to be a melancholy woman who spent her life waiting for a man to love her, suddenly becomes “*liberated little girl blue*.” (Simone). I believe her liberation goes beyond the sadness created waiting for love that may never come. For the purpose of this piece, the liberation refers to these women, their stories, and their voices. The word “liberated” serves as a reminder that we, too, as black women are free to access the reaches of our humanity beyond the confines created by false narratives. We have the power to give voice to the complexities of who and what we are. Metaphorically, “Liberated little girl blue” is the gun blast signaling the start of the race catapulting the WOMAN IN BLACK into action.

CHAPTER 4

THE WRITING PROCESS

I didn't start writing what would become *Seldom Heard* until less than a month before curtain. My journals were full of words spewed onto the page – stories, streams of consciousness, lists, interpreted dreams, memories – mostly emerged from prompts given during class time. I had so many “what ifs” I wanted to explore; it seemed impossible to stay married to one..

The impulse to commit came unexpectedly around 3am one morning in November 2015. I'd been listening to an audiobook of a title I was recently introduced to during fall break: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine. The poet examines daily encounters with microaggressions faced by people of color in America and their lasting physical and psychological effects. I'm struck immediately by the first few minutes of the audiobook, in which she artfully pens a sequence of racially aggressive encounters, imbuing within each a visceral sense of confusion by the receiver whom I related to instantaneously. Though frightfully aware of the existence of racial biases and discrimination, no one ever expects to come face to face with this reality at the hand of a friend, trusted colleague, classmate, or the like. After each experience, the moment sinks in, and one asks a series of questions, in essence to make sure that what was suspected actually occurred: “What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?” (Rankine). Instead of addressing the situation with the offender, the receiver is suddenly unable to

speak: “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs. Like thunder they drown you in sound, no, like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough.” (Rankine).

THE THOUGHT was born from this sudden inability to speak. “Paralyzed larynx,” she says, behind a desk speaking to an unidentified, though trusted audience. Thus the words were introduced, and the women of *Seldom Heard* finally came into existence.

For the exception of LOVE, the bulk of the words spoken by the women are plucked straight from existing works by black women (author Claudia Rankine, Harlem Renaissance poet/activist Anne Spencer, and singer-songwriter Lauryn Hill), and influenced by a hashtag which trended on twitter following the death of Sandra Bland: “#ifidieinpolicecustody” (@JamilahLemieux). Supporting are snippets of my own personal experiences. LOVE is the only fully original text penned by me, inspired by my grandmother.

THE THOUGHT

I pieced together stories Rankine shared in Part I of *Citizen*, and combined them with recollections of my own encounters. The thought of encountering casual racism in an academic setting struck me, not only as relative, but rather ironically. One would suppose that educated people possessed minds malleable enough to adjust beliefs or even recognize the presence of subconscious biases. To my surprise, and to THOUGHT’s, this wasn’t so. And, even when faced repeatedly with these ever so slight offenses, small enough to be nonchalantly dismissed, the aftermath gives her pause, and she finds room

within her confusion to question her perception of the event. “Is it me?” she repeats to her trusted audience.

THOUGHT is an educator –a character immediately accessible, as I was both student and teacher while writing. Though she was the first to come into existence, she was the most difficult to settle. I rewrote THOUGHT entirely the night before our first technical rehearsal on stage. I wanted to create a character that was logical, articulate, and quite confident of her cognitive faculties yet still unable to reason within herself why she is in constant defense of her humanity.

THE FORCE

I will always associate the summer of 2015 with Sandra Bland, the 28 year old black woman found hanging from a trash bag in her jail cell after being wrongfully incarcerated following a routine traffic stop in Texas. Her death is widely suspected to be the result of excessive police force. At the time of her death, Sandra Bland was another name added to the list of young black men and women dead at the hands or under the supervision of law enforcement. Protests denouncing police brutality and calling for gun reform popped up in her honor, as is commonplace after each suspicious, untimely, seemingly avoidable death of a young black person at the hands of law enforcement. People from all different walks of life in solidarity, many carrying signs and chanting “Black Lives Matter” march through the streets, making national news, with reports of these demonstrations filling up online newsfeeds. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, have become sites for social activism. Immediately following Sandra Bland's death, the hashtag “#ifidieinpolicecustody” emerged quickly and became a trending topic on Twitter.

I set out to write an activist whose speech was pointed and unafraid. I married “#ifidieinpolicecustody” with my own words to create her rallying cry. Contributors to the hashtag gave instructions on how to proceed if they should unexpectedly suffer the same fatal consequence as Sandra Bland in police custody. However, in my dedication to representing fully realized human beings, FORCE had to have something to lose in this fight, if it came to that. What if she was a single mother to a daughter? What if she was at a protest and remembered her daughter in the moment? What would that do to her language? To the story she tells? The FORCE’s speech takes a sudden shift, which in performance is represented by a change in her tone, and the use of a cordless microphone. Her tone softens immensely as she gently pleads with her audience to take care of her daughter if she faces the increasingly real possibility of dying at the hands of police.

THE LOVE

LOVE is the only purely original text in the show. What better way to represent the character based on my beloved grandmother than to pay tribute to her legacy of love with my own words?

As an 11-year-old girl, my grandmother would visit dying elderly neighbors to read scripture, sing hymns, and pray for them as they prepared to transition from this world into the next. I didn’t know this about my grandmother until the day she died on April 12, 2014. The revelation left me speechless. How does a child encompass not only this level of self less compassion, but also the mental and emotional maturity to watch people die? LOVE’s conversation with the audience seeks to answer that question, but also stresses the importance of community, and practicing love free of conditions.

LOVE was a selfish endeavor, not only because it allowed me to find comfort in my grandmother's embrace once more. LOVE metaphorically represents who I am as an artist. Like LOVE, I grapple with the fear of what I've been divinely inspired to do and the importance of what it means on a grander scale.

THE JOY

Before the writing process began, it was important for me to somehow include an element of unbridled joy. At this point, the women have been subject to a bit of heaviness: THOUGHT's struggle with mounting daily racial aggressions, FORCE with the fight for justice and the chance of dying in the process, and LOVE with witnessing mortality at such a young age. I made sure to insert relief within each story, but there had to be a moment of absolute peace. Serenity.

I came across Anne Spencer's poetry during a haphazard Google search for Harlem Renaissance poets. A human rights activist first and foremost, Anne didn't consider publishing any of her writing until mentor and friend, James Weldon Johnson encouraged her to do so. Much of her writing ceremoniously expressed her deep love for her garden.

JOY is not Anne Spencer, but inspired by her life, her relationship with her husband, and the adoration she had for her garden. JOY peacefully tends her garden just before sunset. Her text is composed almost entirely of Anne Spencer's poetry. She finds delight in her garden, and in the normal, everyday niceties of being a black woman. So much is said about the burden black women bear, even within *Seldom Heard*. It was important for me to give room to what I believe to be lovely, especially in its relative normality.

THE HOPE

I am HOPE.

I never intended to write myself into *Seldom Heard*, but as I began to piece together excerpts from the song chosen for this section, I was thrust back in front of my therapist, remembering the trigger that eventually prompted much of my solo show.

I chose *I Gotta Find Peace Of Mind* by Lauryn Hill. Like with THOUGHT, and JOY, I pieced together specific lyrics of the song to create the tune that HOPE, or the returning WOMAN IN BLACK, sings a cappella into the standing microphone center stage. In the original version, featured on Hill's 2002 *MTV Unplugged 2.0* she starts performing the song not realizing that she's being recorded. What follows flows out of her like a prayer. HOPE is imploring her audience, to listen: "*I need to tell you all, all the pain that's caused...I need to tell you why I'm undone...*" (Hill). HOPE is an every woman in search of "impossible" peace; a peace in which comes with equity, understanding, and love, things black women have often been the last to receive. Nevertheless, she holds fast to the possibility, knowing that such a thing can be found, even if only through a higher power ("*You are my peace of mind...*") (Hill). HOPE is vulnerable, freely admitting her shortcomings, and imperfections. Sometimes the greatest act of resistance against systems designed for your destruction is the audacity to live, not seeking perfection, but being broken, and fully human.

CHAPTER 5

SCRIPT

Following is the most recent version of *The Thought. The Force. The Love. The Joy. The Hope: An Ode To The Seldom Heard*, last updated on November 30, 2015.

Enter WOMAN IN BLACK (WIB). WIB enters and walks downstage center. She sees the audience, but turns to take in the stage set before her. To her right, a wooden desk adorned with papers and a pair of eyeglasses. Upstage right sits another wooden chair draped with a black hooded sweatshirt accompanied by black combat boots beside the downstage left leg of the chair and a wireless microphone on the seat. Just upstage of her is a ladder resting on a slight diagonal, serving as home to a headband and bible. To the left of the woman lies a small, makeshift garden, complete with soil, bulbs waiting to be planted, a basket of freshly picked flowers, and an apron. Directly in front of the woman, center stage is a microphone stand. Above her, lingering over what will soon become the homes of the women she'll embody are microphones hanging from the ceiling.

WIB sits at the desk s/r. She puts on a pair of eyeglass, transitioning into THOUGHT.

I have these moments where I stop and literally ask myself, out loud, seemingly out of nowhere: is it me? Is it me is it me is it me is it me?

The root is always associative. Sometimes, it's smell. My hair moisturizer, for instance. It's a blend of shea butter and oils, including lavender. Same hair moisturizer

I've used since I was a child. Smells good. My mother would press my hair 'til my coils were bone straight, cascading passed my shoulder blades. Kelly Devine sat behind me in 4th grade. I thought her to be my best friend. Pleasant little white girl with auburn pigtailed and freckles. Every day before the morning bell, she'd lean over and play all kinds of ways in my hair. Comb her fingers through it, plait it, French braid it, brush it into a ponytail. This one day, she leaned in real close, and smelled it.

When she finally came up for air...

“You smell good. And your hair is not bad like all the other black girls. Your hair is more like mine. That's why we're friends...”

This time...it's (*reads name from a paper*) Austin Fitzsimmons. Not this particular Austin. He shares the name with a young man I've never met, though I did have pleasure of meeting his mother a few years back. She's an alumna of the university, as am I. She requested to have lunch with me one afternoon. I can't remember as to why, but I obliged. We sat down and ordered our food, and dove right into reminiscing about our undergrad experiences. She proceeded to tell me that she, her husband, her father, and her daughter are all alumni, but that her son, Austin, wasn't accepted because of affirmative action or “minority something. I forget what it's even called these days. Aren't they supposed to be getting rid of it?”

Or, it's the sound of raindrops beating on a windshield. Like the rain that fell that day I was in the car with a colleague who complained about the dean forcing him to hire a person of color when there are so many other talented applicants.

Or it's the flicker of a dying florescent bulb, like the one in the room where my Calculus tutor told me that she wanted to tell a girl in her Sociology class, a girl she

didn't know I knew, "that if you hate it so much here, you should go back to Africa. But I didn't say that."

Memory isn't a place I like to linger. With every trigger the cacophony of questions I wish – I should have been strong enough in the moment to ask: "What did you just say to me? Did you really just say that? Why would you say that to me? Can you hear yourself? What makes you comfortable enough to say this to me? Can you even see me? Do you even know that I'm here?" Every time. Paralyzed larynx. Out of sheer disbelief. But, my throat unlocks just in time to ask myself.

"Is it me? Is it me? Is it me?"ⁱ

WIB puts on boots and a black hoodie, transitioning into FORCE. She listens to the sounds of people in protest around her. As the protests fade, she stands on top of the chair upstage left.

If I die in police custody, know this – I DID NOT COMMIT SUICIDE. I'd do everything in my power to get home to my daughter.

If I die in police custody, I did not resist. I was not combative. I did not go for the Taser or the gun.

If I die in police custody, do not believe the story law enforcement slings out to the media like crack rock to a fiend. Ask every question.

If I die in police custody, do not preface my story with "she was a good kid." Because good behavior is not the factor that gives value to human life. Nor does it protect it.

If I die in police custody, tell them my name ends in EESHA. E-E-S-H-A-. Tell them I had my daughter out of wedlock, collected food stamps, and wore hoodies everyday. Ask them if those things warranted my execution.

If I die in police custody, don't hold no vigil for me, or make a memorial out of teddy bears and thoughts and prayers. DEMAND ANSWERS. Set it OFF. BURN EVERYTHING DOWN.

If I die in police custody make sure they know I lived. Make sure they know I was murdered by the systems.

If I die in police custody, don't let them tell you who I was. YOU tell THEM who I was...*(speaks into cordless microphone)*

If I die in police custody, make sure my family is taken care of. Make sure my daughter knows whom she comes from. Where she comes from. Make sure my daughter continues to love her skin, and her hair. And, the sound of her voice. Make sure she understands that I would never chose to leave her...*(lets down microphone)*

IF I DIE IN POLICE CUSTODY...I did not commit suicide. I have so much hope to live for.

WIB *takes off the hoodie, and puts on the headband resting on the ladder, transitioning into LOVE.*

LOVE *knocks on the standing microphone as though it were a door.*

Good afternoon, ma'am. My sister Janey and me come to sit and pray with Mother Wright for a little while. We heard she doesn't have long. My mother sends her regards *(steps into the house. Looks around. Whispers)* Is she upstairs? Is it ok to go?

(She is granted permission. She starts for the ladder. Half way up, she stops and looks hesitantly up the ladder.)

This is the scary part. Sometimes they're so sick, they don't look alive anymore. Sometimes, their skin is so gray and thin, it's like you can see through them. And their bones stick out real sharp. Most of the time, they sleep. And breathe real heavy like *(heavy breathing)*. Deacon Johnson died in the room when we were there. We heard him take the last breath. We were singing to him. Janey was holding his hand, because I had to hold the hymnal with both of mine. He took his last breath around *(hums trying to remember the verse...sings)...*"the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend. Even so, it is well, with my soul." I like to imagine that actually happened. That Deacon Johnson heard a trumpet sound, and the great heavenly chorus of angels singing. And that the pearly gates opened and soon he was standing in front of the Lord of hosts singing "Holy, holy, holy." *(Looks hesitantly up the ladder)*.

Mother Wright was sweet to me and Janey when we first started coming to the church by ourselves. She always made room for us in her pew. Our mother doesn't go. She believes, but she doesn't think it necessary to believe inside a church building. She'd rather believe at home where nobody is looking to see if she catches the holy ghost and rips and runs down the aisle. She doesn't like that. Not the holy ghost part, just that she's expected to catch it and act a fool. Plus she smokes cigarettes and likes to play cards and drink Southern Comfort. She doesn't think Jesus will forgive. But, that's not what the bible says. It says *(opens the bible. turns pages)*, 1 John Chapter 1, verse 9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Amen. *(Looks hesitantly up the ladder)*.

Sometimes, if they have enough breath in them, and they can talk, and their mind hasn't gone all the way, they confess. Sister Roberts told me she cheated on her husband, and their oldest son, Junior, wasn't his. Brother Sweets told me he used to steal out the collection plate at Cornerstone Baptist. And, Sister Greene? She told me she never missed a bible study or a Sunday service for 57 years and never believed. Not once. Not until we come to pray and sing with her that day. (*Looks hesitantly up the ladder*).

This is scary. No, I don't like this, I don't wanna do it. But, if I turn around, I hear God say to me, "What I say?" He kinda sounds like my daddy, so I know I should listen (*Grabs bible. Recites Deuteronomy 31:6. Closes bible*).

Maybe if they know something about heaven, how beautiful it is, like the bible says. If they know that they won't be sick no more. Not ever again. And they will never, ever have to die again, but they will live in heaven forever. Maybe if they know the He will never leave them, and that I am his good and faithful servant, then maybe...they won't be scared anymore.

WIB transitions into JOY. She begins to dig in the soil.

(*Slight chuckle*) He said: "Lady, my lady, come from out that garden, clay fingered and dirty smocked."ⁱⁱ And I answered back: "This garden is half my world."ⁱⁱⁱ Who do he think he is?

"Being a Negro Woman is the world's most exciting game of "Taboo": By hell there is nothing you can do that you want to do and by heaven you are going to do it anyhow. We do not climb into the Jim Crow galleries of scenario houses. No, we stay away and read. I read garden and seed catalogs, Browning, Housman, Whitman, Saturday

Evening Post detective tales, Atlantic Monthly, American Mercury, Crisis, Opportunity, Vanity Fair, Hibberts Journal, oh, anything. I can cook delicious things to eat. . .

We have a lovely home. One that money did not buy. It was born and evolved slowly out of our passionate, poverty- stricken agony to own our own home. . .happiness.”^{iv}

“If ever a garden was a Gethsemane, this, my garden has been to me. . . Peace is here and in every season a quiet beauty. . .”^v

I like to come out here. . .round ‘bout purple. Gets too dark, I just head on into Edankrall. He built it for me. He knew if I had my way, I’d fall asleep right here in this dirt. Edankrall means “Ed and Anne’s Dwelling place” in the language we speak.

“What is sorrow but tenderness now in this earth-close frame of land and sky what is pain but happiness here amid these green and wordless patterns. . .”^{vi}

“Earth, I thank you for the pleasure of your language. You’ve had a hard time bringing it to me from the ground, to all the way feeling, seeing, smelling, touching- awareness. . .I am here!”^{vii}

WIB strips back into all black. She walks around the set to the microphone stand, center stage. She stands behind the microphone stand in complete silence. She sings.

“I’ve gotta find peace of mind. . .

I’ve gotta find peace of mind. . .

They say it’s impossible

But I know it’s possible

Some say it’s impossible

But I know its possible

I need to tell you all
All the pain that's caused
Mmmmm
I need to tell you I'm
I'm undone because
Mmmmm
They say it's impossible
But, I know it's possible
Some say it's impossible
But, I know it's impossible
Cause you love me despite myself
Sometimes I, I fight myself
I just can't believe that you
Would have anything to do
With someone so insecure
Someone so immature
You make my desire pure
You make my desire pure
Just tell me what to say
I can't find the words to say
I wanna walk with you
How do I talk to you?
Touch my mouth with your hands

Touch my mouth with your hands

Oh, I want to understand

The meaning of your embrace

I know now I have to face

The enemies of the past

Now that I know the truth

Now there is no excuse

You are my peace of mind

You are my peace of mind

You are my peace of mind

You are my peace of mind^{viii}”

CHAPTER 6

THE FUTURE

THOUGHT, FORCE, LOVE, JOY, and HOPE, though connected in humanity, womanhood, and blackness all deserve their own platforms. *Seldom Heard* is a work in progress. I intend to expand each of the women's stories into 5 independent solo shows. Each will still find inspiration in the existing works used to shape them, however, I hope to create original text or music for them in the future. I am especially interested in exploring further Anne Spencer, her relationship with her husband, Ed, and the formation of her beloved garden.

In the coming years, I hope to continue creating art that transcends entertainment and has the power to cultivate change. I will continue to combat anti-black womanhood, and hope my works aid in dismantling social demons that keep the single story alive. I will continue to use black women as the instruments for human stories. My work will stand like the microphone center stage. Through me, the voices of black women will be heard.

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- ⁱ Contains excerpts from *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine.
ⁱⁱ Excerpt from "To A Certain Lady, in Her Garden" by Sterling A. Brown
ⁱⁱⁱ Excerpt from "Any Wife to Any Husband" by Anne Spencer.
^{iv} "Taboo" by Anne Spencer.
^v Excerpt from "For Jim, Easter Eve" by Anne Spencer.
^{vi} Excerpt from "For Jim, Easter Eve" by Anne Spencer.
^{vii} "[Earth, I thank you]" by Anne Spencer.
^{viii} "I Gotta Find Peace of Mind" by Lauryn Hill.