SKiNFOLK: An American Experiment
The Role of Open Process and Collective Dramaturgy in Nonlinear Theater-making

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What is **SKiNFOLK**?

In the second year of the dramaturgy program, I requested permission to take a visual arts class broadly titled, “Concepts in VA: Performance.” My interest in the class stemmed from both a personal desire to create my own projects and a deepening interest in the recurring questions concerning form and content in several of my theater classes: What were the possibilities and limitations when introducing unconventional form and content into theatrical work? How does moving toward form and content labeled “non-linear” or otherwise non-traditional\(^1\) impact audience reception and engagement? In my own way, I was eager to explore how far the limits of “a play” could be pushed. I knew little about the world of performance art, but suspected that an introductory course would provide new context and applicable, transferrable content and form ideas I could use in my own work. Through several exercises and assignments in the class; including monologue-writing, score-building, and mixing media, I began creating a play that is the crux of this thesis: **SKiNFOLK: An American Show**. Large elements of the piece remain performance art-inspired including the use of unconventional props (hair accessories as microphones, for example), overlapping or seemingly disconnected dialogue, and myself as both the creator and main performer of the work. As is common in performance art, much of the material for the play was inspired by a real and personal source: my very own family photos and records. Without knowing it, I was building what I now call an *open process*--one in which

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\(^1\) Unpacking the root of how a piece of theater is labeled “non-traditional” is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would be remiss not to mention the great influence of Western imperialism on theatrical “tradition.”
(partly due to aspects of my own identity as the source material), audiences are invited to allow a more intimate and vulnerable theater experience. The direction of the personal was a partly conscious decision, but mostly it sprang from instinct, my own desire for healing, and the deep challenge it would present me as a writer and performer to blend and otherwise explore the limits of perceived dichotomies including but not limited to: poetry and fact, real and imagined, the theatrical and the mundane, individuality and collectivity. I chose to intentionally push my boundaries to see what was on the other side--if indeed, there was only one other side to see.

Without going too far into the rabbit hole of dimensionality, my theoretical and dramaturgical suspicion was that by intentionally pushing my personal boundaries as well as the boundaries of what is traditionally accepted as a play, the “other side” would contain many sides. I suspected that the audience would have more freedom to participate, not through superficial means of placing their bodies or voices in the “right place” at the “right time,” but in a process of collective dramaturgy. In this process, individual audience members are invited to choose several of their own points of interpretation in the complex web of themes and ideas presented in the work. Attempting this feat continues to keep the SKiNFOLK writing process buoyant, alive, frustrating, and (in alignment with the project’s impulses) not at all linear.

The complex web of themes and ideas present in SKiNFOLK: An American Show, exist partly as a concert, a theatrical experience, and a familial love letter. Despite its lyrical style and lack of direct “conflict” between characters, I still hold its overall categorization as a play. The stories of the play are told through the main characters: ME, YOU, AVERY NOLASTNAME and RICHARD NIXON (also known as “SMILING TUXEDOED MAN”) all of whom

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2 Another question might be, how does dimensionality shift in non-linear work?
individually and collectively discover, weave and retell narratives and thematic echoes concerning blackness/personal identity, class, trauma, perception, familial and societal dis/connectedness, and national identity in an underground portal where all times are present. As suggested by the part-concert description, music (provided by the characters of BAD BAND) upholds the momentum of the play in real-time. These original compositions also serve as an anchor by weaving in and out of the play’s stories and co-signing on themes or providing more subconscious ideas for the audience’s consideration. On the whole, SKiNFOLK: An American Show is certainly a thematically driven, poetically written experiment; aiming for texture and complexity that ideally steers the audience away from the expectation of a singularity of meaning and toward a fascination with multiplicity and their own interpretive power.

**Defining my key terms: Open Process and Collective Dramaturgy**

I first began thinking about the social, intellectual and creative limitations of linearity and singular meaning when reading what theorist Jacques Rancière describes as “the presupposition of theater.” In his 2004 talk (and eventual essay), *The Emancipated Spectator*, he states that “the presupposition of what ‘theater’ means always runs ahead of performance and predates its actual effects.” He goes on to argue that spectators possess different, yet equal intelligences which they can bring to the theater to actively participate in their own observance. These spectators, he says, possess a “power to translate in their own way what they are looking at. It is the power to connect with the intellectual adventure that makes any of them similar to any other insofar as his or her path looks unlike any other.”

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3 By “real time” here, I mean theater as a time-based medium where the concept of time is perceived as linear.
5 Rancière, Jacques., pp. 2.
The multiplicity of one path of interpretation intersecting and diverging from another is *SKiNFOLK*. The play is my attempt to take Rancière up on his charge to make use of the equal power of spectators’ intelligences by creating performance that works “through unpredictable and irreducible distances [and through] a play of associations and dissociations.” I believe that when performance works in this way, it gives birth to an environment of *collective dramaturgy*. This is a framework where many individual intelligences are participating in a singular and collective experience of connection. Collective dramaturgy can allow an audience to “learn things and become active participants in a collective performance instead of being passive viewers.” The action on the part of the spectator to individually consider their power through their perceived association and dissociation—i.e., their “points of interpretation”—is also what I would call collective dramaturgy. It demands that the work (and the performers of it) exist symbiotically with audience to help to deepen or expand an opening (or series of openings) where numerous meanings may enter.

Rancière also writes that in the ideal theater, the viewer “must change the way he looks for a better way of looking.” How can a play assist in that process? In the writing of *SKiNFOLK*, I attempt to bring the act of “looking” to the forefront in order to acknowledge/expose the theatrical process, encouraging an open process with the audience. (This encouragement may also not be pleasant: I actively work to disrupt the spectator’s traditional theatrical expectations, which is quite possibly upsetting.) This current draft of the script contains a repeated refrain of “I look at YOU/YOU look,” a vulnerable exchange between ME and YOU intended to call attention to the action of the *play*, thereby reminding the audience to

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6 Rancière, Jacques., pp. 2.
7 Meaning may also not enter.
8 Rancière, Jacques., pp. 2.
challenge or otherwise explore new and better ways of looking. Any new ways of looking are, in my theory, the result of the collective dramaturgy between the audience, the performers, and the play itself.

Collective dramaturgy functions best when it is preceded by an *open process*. *SKiNFOLK*’s subject matter and the original exercises from which it is derived, embody what open process looks like. As I define it, open process, is not determined for the spectator in advance of their experience of the work. It is, instead, a making derived from the writer or writers of a play that requires a continuous conversation with audience to make itself. In the case of *SKiNFOLK*, I aim to achieve an open process by following the impulse to leave unknown space in what I am making. In other words, the script of the play only connects the dots of meaning from an intuitive place, leaving purposeful gaps (or “openings”) and creating room for the “knowing” of the work to happen in the sharing process. Both the form and the content of the play are so far written to invite the audience to consider themselves an integral part of the interpretive space necessary to a collective dramaturgical experience.
SKiNFOLK provides cues as to the audience’s necessity by presenting them with a specific, yet not clearly defined role. At the beginning of the script, the audience is literally cast as the character YOU. I employ second-person address in several parts of the play, establishing a direct relationship between the ME and YOU characters. Several of the other characters in the play also direct the audience emotionally at certain points in the script (i.e. “YOU feel anxious.” or, “YOU are amused.”). These directive moments are designed to envelope an audience in a story that challenges expectations of linearity and passivity without calling for what we normally think of as theatrical audience participation (i.e. doing “the wave” with the characters or standing

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9 An original **collective dramaturgy** sketch.
up to deliver a line), and is also different from the common device of direct address present in more traditionally written plays that acknowledge a fourth wall.¹⁰

The script is written to elicit engagement. The beginning of the play immerses the audience into their character(s) by enticing all of the senses (touch this: bobby pins, see this: tree roots/the other characters/the jook joint, hear this: whispers/music/voices, taste this: neon “sippie” drinks, smell this: earthworms and dirt). The setting is an immersive environment that engages the audience differently than in a proscenium theater. Ideally, staging exists in a non-traditional theater space such a gallery, whitebox, bar, or concert hall that can be transformed into the environment excruciatingly described in the setting notes. These elements are all written to assist the audience in their transformation from themselves to the YOU they imagine in the world of the play.

Of course, part of the SKiNFOLK experiment is for each audience member to feel free to respond to their “casting” however they so choose. Rebellion or compliance are two responses, but what might others be? The role of YOU and how it is received currently remains relatively unknown until the play is fully performed. This, again, is also a part of how open process functions. It is important to note that the mutual process of creation I attempt in SKiNFOLK is not meant to lead the audience to a particular/singular conclusion about the work. Casting the audience as YOU is in large part to diffuse and distribute meaning to the many you’s viewing or reading the play. The goal remains to invite audiences into a more emancipated role where it is up to the individual bodies involved in the collective process to decide which conclusions to reach, if any. This is to say that the process of summation of collective

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¹⁰ Because dimensionality is opened up in SKiNFOLK, the “fourth wall” constructed by more traditional play forms does not exist.
interpretations/meaning-making/information in the play is more the point than the meaning itself.
The process itself is the point.

SKiNFOLK Influences: Jazz

I have not been writing SKiNFOLK specifically with jazz in mind, but I cannot deny its artistic influence over the work’s structure, language and themes. Jazz helps bring to life my envisioned experiential map of the play--it can be thought of as both script and score. Jazz is most often not linear in structure, providing its audience instead with “points of interpretation” necessary to the process of collective dramaturgy. The 1959 documentary The Cry of Jazz, articulates that jazz was “created from the special slant the negro has on the American dream...[it is] the musical expression of the negro’s eternal recreation of the present.”\textsuperscript{11} SKiNFOLK’s songs also demonstrate this recreation of the present through their frequent repetitive structure. While the characters speak language moving through various episodes that could potentially move the story forward linearly, the songs can be perceived to “repeat endlessly without getting anywhere”—another common characteristic of jazz.\textsuperscript{12} This endless repetition is meant to convey emotionality in the piece, as well as leave space for audience interpretation and dramatic effect. The Cry of Jazz also refers to this seemingly circular repetition as the musical expression of the “futureless future” offered to African-Americans by the American project, but here, my script diverges into other possibilities discussed later in the paper.

Jazz can seem intentionally complex or void of a central “message”. Yet, the complexity

\textsuperscript{12} The Cry of Jazz.
emerges from an authenticity of expression and the clash of theory and practice. The center of jazz, in fact, is created by the whole as is the “message” of SKiNFOLK. The series of meanings possible in jazz music are a reflection of the creative and theoretical impulses of this play.

The Context of SKiNFOLK

There are other more conscious artistic influences also present in the current script. The intentional disruption of linearity, construction of a new audience-performer relationship, and a particular investigation of personal identity within a larger American context, are elements of SKiNFOLK that resonate in the work of three other writers: Adrienne Kennedy (1931- ), Suzan-Lori Parks (1963- ), and Marita Bonner (1898-1971). These three writers’ work contain both structural and thematic elements that specifically contextualize SKiNFOLK’s open process and collective dramaturgy concepts. The expressions of these concepts are of course varied, from writer to writer, but they are present and influential on my own playwriting process.

An examination of Suzan-Lori Parks’ writing style provides a structural reference for SKiNFOLK’s current draft. She has noted that her own work is also heavily influenced by music (especially jazz) and begins many of her plays with her own “Elements of Style.” In her essay of the same name, she states that by using her own stylistic elements she is “working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score.”13 Through her artistic choices, Parks is also working to consciously disrupt linearity and tradition in playwriting, creating a new kind of dramatic structure. Here, in scene

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13 Parks, Suzan-Lori. “from Elements of Style,” The America Play and Other Works, pp. 15
eight of *In the Blood* (1998), Parks demonstrates her disruption through one style element-- “A Spell”\(^{14}\)--which she describes as follows:

> “An elongated and heightened (Rest). Denoted by repetition of figures’ names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look. This is the place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit.”\(^{15}\)

**REVEREND D.**
...Dont ever come back here again! Ever! Yll never get nothing from me! Common Slut! Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I’ll crush you underfoot.

  He goes inside.

**HESTER**
**HESTER**
**HESTER**

**JABBER**
Mommie.

**HESTER**
**HESTER**

**JABBER**
The moon came out again.

**JABBER**
**HESTER**
**JABBER**

(Rest)

The description and architecture of Parks’ spells are her way of achieving her own open process in her work. She leaves more space for exchange than is found in a traditional structure, as I do in *SKiNFOLK*. The language notes that begin my play share my own elements of style with the reader/audience. These elements (different from Parks’) emerged from my own relationship to

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music, disrupting linearity and the language of the play shaping itself. The hope, however, is that these elements also demonstrate open process.

I think Parks would agree that the exchange/process itself is the point. She shares in her “Elements” essay, that her style choices are meant to invite fellow artists and audiences not to ask playwrights “what their plays mean: rather, tell [me] what you think and have an exchange of ideas.”

Parks is a model for SKiNFOLK’s use of style as a theoretical and artistic tool.

Marita Bonner also provides more stylistic elemental influence in her work, The Pot Maker: A Play to be Read (1927). Bonner’s command of audience relationship to the text was very striking and intriguing to me, and lead me to experiment specifically with the stage directions in SKiNFOLK. The current draft of my play contains two types of stage directions: a set that create the world of the play (which will likely not be read in performance) and a set that direct the audience in mood and action (which will likely be read in performance). The second set of directions I employ were inspired by The Pot Maker’s opening scene:

“As the curtain is drawn, see first the mother; a plump colored woman of indeterminate age and an indeterminate shade of brown, seated at the table. Luke, the father, whose brown face is curled into a million pleasant wrinkles, sits opposite her at the left.

Lew stands by the stove facing the two at the table. He must be an over-fat, over-facetious, over-fair, over-bearing, over-pleasant, over-confident creature. If he does not make you long to slap him back into a place approaching normal humility, he is the wrong character for the part.

You must think as you look at him: "A woman would have to be a base fool to love such a man!"

Then you must relax in your chair as the door at right opens and Luanda walks in. "Exactly the woman," you decide. For at once you can see she is a woman who must have sat down in the mud. It has crept into her eyes. They are dirty. It has filtered through-- filtered through her. Her speech is smudged. Every inch of her body, from the twitch of an eyebrow to the twitch of muscles lower down in her body, is soiled. She is of

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16 Parks, Suzan-Lori. “from Elements of Style,” The America Play and Other Works, pp. 15
a lighter brown than the mother and wears her coarse hair closely ironed to her head. She picks up each foot as if she were loath to leave the spot it rests on. Thus she crosses the room to the side of Elias who is seated at the window, facing the center of the room.

It is hard to describe Elias. He is ruggedly ugly but he is not repulsive. Indeed you want to stretch out first one hand and then the other to him. Give both hands to him. You want to give both hands to him and he is ruggedly ugly. That is enough.”

Here, her directions obviously push the form of a play through her use of prose. They also literally direct and employ the imagination of the audience/reader in a specific way as in, “as the curtain is drawn see first the mother.” The psychology and emotionality of the reader/audience as in, “you must think as you look at him,” or, “then you must relax in your chair,” also create a different kind of interpretive space than a more traditional play form. By employing second-person stage directions, she acknowledges her audience and casts them into a new configuration of participation.

It is important to mention that Bonner’s inclusion of such vivid and specific detail directed at her audience can be interpreted not as an open process, but a limit of freedom to her audience’s imagination (the opposite of Rancière’s challenge). Part of the intrigue of Bonner’s choice is the inability to know her own intention. In SKiNFOLK, I chose to take a similar approach to Bonner, including extreme detail with the intention of bringing a high level of comfortability to the audience. I consider it a generous act as part of my open process with the work to welcome the audience into this created world, where they are needed in order for the story to unfold. (Another important note here: I am still experimenting in each evolving draft with which stage directions and descriptions in the play are shared with audience and which are

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not. This is something I hope to explore in great detail during the upcoming rehearsal and performance phases.)

While Parks and Bonner’s work have more resonance with SKiNFOLK through their structural elements’ connection to collective dramaturgy, Adrienne Kennedy’s work resonates more thematically. Kennedy’s play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) holds significant thematic influence for this play. A personal quandary through my writing process has been the dilemma of “writing Black.” Here, I am referring to the function of race that requires non-white writers to address or attempt to avoid the inescapable realities of their socio-cultural context. I believe this dilemma is especially present for black women writers. I interpret *Funnyhouse of Negro* to be a crowning achievement in responding to this predicament. Kennedy successfully transforms her real-world context into dramatic content. She makes the decision to fully embrace her own racialized existence; using it, in fact, to construct her theatrical world. *Funnyhouse*’s language, themes and imagery directly name the challenges of her Black identity and open the door to personal predicament as theatre spectacle:

"NEGRO. My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself. My white friends, like myself, will be shrewd, intellectual, and anxious for death. Anyone’s death. I will mistrust them as I do myself, waver in their opinion of me as I waver in my opinion of myself."

Kennedy readily admits that *Funnyhouse* and her other plays are autobiographically-based. She has said that she sees her plays as “an outlet for inner, psychological confusion and questions

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18 In “An Equation for black people onstage,” Suzan-Lori Parks refers to this context “as a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature. This reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression.” pg. 20
stemming from childhood” and a way to “figure out the why of things.” Instead of moving away from or otherwise masking her confusion about her race and gender, she embraces the very thing she cannot avoid and uses the inherent drama of her black and female identities to create a lasting piece of theater. *SKiNFOLK* embraces the themes of my own black womanhood, even going a step further to include historical documents that transform lived context into theatrical content. Like *Funnyhouse*, *SKiNFOLK* also weaves an other-worldly environment and blends boundaries often held in opposite regard (poetry and fact, the quotidian and the extreme, nightmare and reality).

Though Kennedy’s blending process is personally and thematically motivated, it also creates a disruption of meaning-making that holds promise for emancipated spectatorship. Scholar Jenny Spencer writes, “Kennedy effectively challenges the binaries and hierarchies of viewing that Rancière describes with situations that expose their effects and characters who imagine their individual escapes with, not for, their audiences.”

Collective dramaturgy emerges from the space of challenging these binaries and hierarchies of viewing. Using similar themes, *SKiNFOLK* also seeks to challenge these same boundaries while holding that the seeking, rather than the creating of meaning is paramount.

**Black Feminist Aesthetics**

I’d like to mention an important aspect of black feminist aesthetics that is an integral part of my current script: speculative personal history. “In black feminist drama,” scholar Lisa M. Anderson writes, “the function of imagined histories fulfill a very different role. [They]...fill in a

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gap in history by imagining what has not left a physical record”21. In this play, the collective dramaturgical process with the audience is meant to assist in “filling in the gaps” of both personal and shared history that has been lost or otherwise untold. Part of the dramaturgical function is what Suzan-Lori Parks calls “hear[ing] the bones.” “Theatre,” she says is “the perfect place to ‘make’ history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out.”22 The audience is an intrinsic part of this process for SKiNFOLK. My intention is that re-membrance also carries through in the work with the re-membrance process belonging not only to the characters but to all in the theatre.

Making My Own Black Feminist Aesthetic

Though the creativity and ideas of other writers and theorists I’ve mentioned here have greatly impacted my play; the songs, subjects, and imagined world of SKiNFOLK is completely my own. I did not begin the play by thinking about how to fit the work into a lineage of black feminist aesthetics or any other kind--I was only driven by my dramaturgical curiosities and the relentless impulse to create of myself. My decision to place myself as a main performer in the work is a primary element that makes SKiNFOLK different from other plays I have explored. Through the character of ME, I am in direct exchange with the audience in the process of collective dramaturgy. In some ways, I see this as a step beyond Kennedy’s work which is also autobiographical and transparent, but does not include the actual body of the writer in its own script--only the psychic body is present. Through my roles as writer and performer, the center of

22Parks, Suzan-Lori. “Possession,” The America Play and Other Works, pp. 11
SKiNFOLK are the narratives that emerge from the storytelling experience and, on another level, my own body’s meta-performance of reading and being read as dramaturgical object and subject.

It remains to be seen whether this builds on the black feminist aesthetic tradition or whether it is simply a contribution. I would have to be more well-versed to make any claims about the history of meta-theatricality in black feminist aesthetics, which is outside of the scope of this paper. However, SKiNFOLK’s uniqueness does “confront [the spectator] with the spectacle of something strange,” and I would say that its enigmatic quality “demands [the spectator] investigate the reason for its strangeness,” as, according to Rancière, the ideal theater would require.23 What the spectator determines as the origin(s) for the show’s strangeness are of course, up to her. What the play contains are blueprints, suggestions, or topographical maps for exploration—not to intentionally mystifying audiences, but to provide possibilities of configuration for the exchange of ideas I hope the work will bring forward.

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What Makes this Play and Play?

Throughout the course of its development I have described SKiNFOLK in a number of ways. In this paper alone, I have mentioned the work as an event, an experience, a partial concert, letter, and piece of performance art. These are all true. What is also abundantly clear in my view is SKiNFOLK’s overall rightful categorization as a play. This is due to the current script/score, which through the time-based event of its reading or viewing, creates a drama of accumulation. My intention is in a certain amount of time as experience outside of the world of the play, the characters and the audience go on a journey most evocative of what I would call a play (as opposed to an art showing, concert, or otherwise titled live experience). Conversely, the play works to shift relationship to time by creating a drama of accumulation rather than an

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24 A process sketch of SKiNFOLK’s structure.
25 The time-based feature of the work is my first reinforcement of its category as play, as theater is a time-based medium.
Aristotelian drama. To quote Parks, “in [dramas of accumulation], we are not moving from A—> B but rather, for example, from A—> A—> A —> B —> A. Through such movement we refigure A.” The refiguring of “A” is at once the drama and the result of the dramatic action that lead the play, players, and audience to conclude its reconfiguration. My own drama of accumulation (echoed in jazz as defined by Cry of Jazz) obviously intentionally disrupts the linear structure in part to echo the themes of identity, grief, trauma, hope and healing as integral parts of the continuous present. The aim here is for writing to model the contradiction between forward movement and memory. With that, the play contains the possibility of resolution without the presence of a full resolution often found in traditionally-structured play. Yet, I believe some shape of an “arc” present in most plays remains through the accumulation of language, imagery, sound and power of SKiNFOLK’s world. The arc is built of many elements interweaving and supporting each other and not the actions and consequences of one character at the center of the play, yet a play remains.

Quickly, it is worth noting that both Suzan-Lori Parks and Adrienne Kennedy use the drama of accumulation in place of (or in addition to) forward linear progression in their works. Parks ends In the Blood with the main character, Hester, unable to escape her circumstances of a welfare mother. Hester repeatedly cries out “Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me” as the conclusion. Hester’s predicament remains unresolved, circular, and the indication of the futureless future promised to many African-Americans.

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Similarly, a pinnacle moment of Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of Negro* reveals what is possible in a drama of accumulation. Imagery, theme, and repeated language build throughout the play leading to the inevitable conclusion of Negro-Sarah’s suicide. Moments\(^{27}\) before her death, all of the parts of herself repeat together:

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\begin{align*}
\text{ALL} \\
\text{But he is dead.} \\
\text{And he keeps returning. Then he is not dead.} \\
\text{Then he is not dead.} \\
\text{Yet, he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door.}
\end{align*}
\]

In her stage directions, she writes that this section is “repeated several times, finally reaching a loud pitch and then ALL rushing about the grass. They stop and stand perfectly still.”\(^{28}\) This is a climactic moment of accumulation shared by all of the characters who represent Negro-Sarah’s selves. What has accumulated (her exploration of herself) leaves nowhere for her to turn. The recognition of a futureless future, therefore, ends Sarah’s life and the play itself. I mentioned earlier that I diverge from jazz’s futureless future philosophy in *SKiNFOLK*. This may be another feature that is my own contribution to the black feminist aesthetic line. Unlike these Parks and Kennedy plays, *SKiNFOLK* does not currently embrace the idea of a futureless future. Instead, it builds a drama of accumulation on the promise of a future unseen and untested. The writing aims to create a dramatic effect through possibility.

**Conclusion**

\(^{27}\) “Moments” as in stage moments as experience by the audience and performers in perceived “real time”.

The play is in a state to be tested, as it was never intended to solely be a dramaturgical experiment. In my mind, SKiNFOLK is theatrical praxis. When I speak of praxis, I mean *theory in action*. I mean praxis as in “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” I also mean praxis as in meditation, as in speech, as in acting before readiness. This is what I believe our current world requires. This is also what I believe fuels the engine of *SKiNFOLK: An American Show*.

In other words, my theoretical interest in this play and in all things, is rooted in the very real desire for both personal and collective liberation. The theater is my testing ground and incubator for these desires. Theatrical structure is a useful guide for experimentation, reinvention, and the search for a way of artmaking that create emancipating effects for all people. Underneath my specific questions about form and content that began this paper, are these ideas, which sparked my passionate inquiry into the limits of the theatre and birthed the current draft of this play.

*SKiNFOLK*, therefore, must be performed for an audience. Ideally, it will be performed for many audiences. I do believe it holds potential to achieve a broader or different kind of audience because of its challenges to traditional linear theater-making. I have read through drafts of the play with others over the last year, which has led to varying discussions about the content’s meaning (Is it mythology? Is it “about” identity? Pain? Family? ME? YOU?). I have had debates about the form or lack thereof, the frustration with grasping “the meaning” and the disruptive eruptions of information not making enough “sense.” This indicates to me that the play is on its way to working. It is raising questions similar to my own, and provides few

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29 Theatre is the perfect medium for praxis.
answers that cement a central authoritarian viewpoint, leading people to think and conclude for themselves--sometimes days or weeks later.

These largely theoretical conversations have mostly taken place with colleagues--other writers and dramaturgs, theate-makers and insiders--and not with general audiences. I am curious as to what the script brings forward the audience’s who may not consider themselves “insiders” or well-versed theatergoers. I am curious as to the intersections of audience-making--who will be drawn to this work and why? Who will be repelled?

As the script goes into performance, I also wonder about the audience’s own histories and memories intersecting with and through the play. What collective dramaturgical processes may take place through variations of audience? Who and what is re-membered? These are questions I feel can only be answered through the sharing of the work in performance.

And, of course, I wonder about myself. How will I be affected by performance? Will the sharing of these stories and ideas have a healing effect, or will they reinforce trauma? Can these stories be trusted with strangers? As I continue rewriting the play, these questions begin to disappear and are replaced with my own excitement about the world of the play. Will they resurface anew in the rehearsal room when the writing phase has ended? This remains to be seen.

There are questions upon questions I have about that room. How will the process of collective dramaturgy work with other performers, musicians, and others on the creative team? What sorts of challenges will SKiNFOLK’s “score as script” approach present in rehearsal and production? Is it best to have different scripts? One for reading? One for rehearsal? What changes can be made to the script for it to maintain its idea of open process yet also convey my intentions and be easily entered by others without my assistance?
Through the coming months, as I perform the show live with a full cast, I am confident that the process will assist me in further defining the scope and parameters of collective dramaturgy. The ideas articulated in this paper are the beginning of my exploration, but again, my praxis is incomplete without the action of the stage.

I will end with one more question that emerged through the writing of this paper: categorizing SKiNFOLK as a play has a liberating effect, insofar as it allows for production cues that will actually make the work. But, what are the limitations of categorization of any kind? How/where/when can work be made that needs no categorization and where are the audiences for that kind of work?

I have and continue to deepen my engagement with questions about expression of self, my intellectual, and my artistic identities. Through SKiNFOLK: An American Show, I have blended my mind, heart, soul and body in an attempt to live my liberatory ideas. The dramaturgy of this play speaks to the dramaturgy of myself. The call for open process and collective dramaturgy are reflections of my wish to play the play. Through song, story, imagery, sound, feeling, and exchange, I believe it does play. Or so I hope.
SKiNFOLK:
An American Show
By Jillian Walker

CHARACTERS

You - Yes, you.
Me - Yeah. Me.
   The Band has names:
   Odetta - Alto/Tenor BG Vox
   Coretta - Tenor/Bari BG Vox
   Jovetta - Keys
   Francis - Guitar
A couple of ancestors:

Avery NoLastName - a mythic-level, light-skinned starlet. Larger than life in the most elegant way possible. Her anger may fuel her, but it only bubbles on the surface. Smiling Tuxedoed Man/Richard Nixon - an extremely awkward dude yet, a charismatic navigator, host and bringer of information. Larger than life in the most awkward way possible. He is always accompanied by a rolling chair.

* Songs can be performed with BG vox only, but obviously, a full band is preferred because it’s badder. BG vox can also double in this way: BG vox/Smiling Tuxedoed Man/Nixon, BG Vox/Avery

The entire cast is female and black.

TIME: is. Transcended. sometimes.

PLACE: a jOok joint, with You. The roots and under the roots of a tree. The middle passage. The ocean.

SOUND: Envelops and immerses US on the ground.
And if I made a fool, it doesn't matter. No expression of love, Pure Love, ever hurt anybody.

-For my ancestors, seen and heard, unseen and unheard.
Setting:

A hole? A cave? A portal. A portal underneath the roots of a tree. Mahogany, cinnamon, cacao dirt surrounds YOU. Roots weave in and around YOU--some the shade of Ginger, some darker like--Clove. All warm, enveloping. YOU feel safe. Protected. Able, perhaps, to go to sleep in a nearby tangle, though you will not because YOU are excited to be in this place.

To see.

It all looks delicious. Even the Earthworms undulating in the cayenne-caked walls are sexy. Are YOU attracted to Earthworms?--And rollie pollies: here, they relax, stretching out each plate. No need to keep themselves tied up tight like they must above the surface. No, here, it is all well and good to be shell-less and out of control of their segmented parts.
There are tables and tablecloths—white. Small, round tables that make room for dates, new and old, and all kinds of romances: with touch, smell, with light and sound. With whomever YOU may meet tonight.

YOU are in a jook joint. A classy jooky joint.
There’s a pulse.

Glass mason jars sit at every table, glowing a soft light. YOU may think the light is giggling it’s so bubbly about somehow getting air underground, in this dirt, in this portal. It’s so happy. Elegant Jerricans lantern the space. Inside some of these containers YOU see fireflies. Fireflies? Yes, fireflies. The American Southern kind. Or the Midwest ones. For sure, a part of the country forgotten by most streetlamps and reflective traffic drums. Pre-filament fireflies. Other jerricans around YOU contain magic light that look like the laughing candles, but they aren’t. They’re someone’s country kitchen secret. Burnin Pig fat? But there’s no smell, just a soft yellow glow.

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
YOU taste
YOU taste…!

Projector screen says: The Descent

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN (Cont’d)
YOU walk around circularly because this is how the space moves YOU. YOU walk and walk.

Somehow, you are now in an arched limestone hallway—dimly lit.

YOU hear cloudy water—trickling.
YOU hear voices.

BAD BAND
YOU see faint white walls (curves)

BAD BAND
YOU see figures of women (curves)
YOU hear the figures talking

Back in the jook joint, a lovely person serves you something neon. YOU receive it. YOU smile at one another.

Before too long a stage appears. A stage.
SMILING TUXEDOED MAN (Cont’d)

YOU are happy, like the light.

The BAND, the BAND!!! A BAD BAND appears.
Yes, that BAD. THAT BAD BAND begins to play.

(chimes)
(the tatter of a tambourine)
(a guitar wah)

THEY are warming up. YOU sip your neon item.

More Setting:

This jOak joint serves its drinks right on stage when YOU run out. Sometimes BAD BAND serves YOU, sometimes others do. BAD BAND is crucial to everything. The magic of the whole night. Where they came from, how they got here, who knows. Another portal? Other-worldly sound suggests, but no one can be sure. No matter what or who may get confused tonight, BAD BAND plays on.

They are, obviously, all women or women-identifying. That’s a Bad Band.
YOU meet some CHARACTERS. But, before you do:

Language Notes:

- **CHARACTER NAMES** are written THIS WAY, indicating that they are speaking.
- Grey, indented words are not spoken aloud. **Everything else is.**

The words in the charts are spoken simultaneously.
The characters' language flows. Ideally, the piece is a sonically smooth, Shange-esque, shared. Experience. Let’s go.

a SMILING TUXEDOED MAN enters with a silver tray of neon sippies. He says:

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN

Follow me

YOU follow him through low-hanging roots. And--
Hands open some vines to clear your path
Hands hands more hands
And

Image: YOU are back in the arched hallway--limestone. Whitewashed. Clean lines. YOU walk and walk
Forward.
YOU hear
Nothing.
Nothing.
Water surrounds your ankles.

BAD BAND plays like Water
waater

Do YOU panic? Do YOU?

YOU keep walking down the hallway.
Two rows of Black women line the hallway on either side of YOU. They whisper things. They do not look at YOU. They look straight ahead—one eye on the face of the woman across from them. The other on the wall behind that woman.

It looks like this:

Except YOU are in water. They are in water. Water up to YOUR ankles.

**SMILING TUXEDOED MAN (Speaks to YOU)**

Pass down the middle
Pass down the middle, please
Won’t you pass down the middle?

You pass down the middle.
You pass and you pass and
YOU see a sign that reads “Please hand her a bobby pin at your Leisure.”

**BAD BAND (odetta)**

YOU feel anxious
YOU wonder if you remember what a bobby pin is.

A bobby pin?

You don’t wanna be wrong.

Bobby pin, safety
Bobby pin, safety

Which picture is the right one in your mind?

YOU walk further in.
YOU see a table filled with tools and hair devices:

YOU see a hot comb on a burned white towel
YOU see snapping barrettes of

multiple colors, rainbows, mythical creatures

YOU see two-balled barrettes of gold and of silver

And zoo animals.

YOU see silver metal industrial duck mouth hair clips
BAD BAND (coretta)
YOU see blow drier parts--tubes, cords.

BAD BAND (odetta)
YOU see tiny black rubber bands

BAD BAND (coretta)
YOU see tiny transparent rubber bands

BAD BAND (odetta)
YOU see big bobby pins

BAD BAND (coretta)
YOU see small bobby pins

ME:

em ees UOY
rorrim ta a

ME
I come toward YOU. I walk through water, too. Straight down the aisle, singing/chanting “Oh, Oh-ooooo…”
SHE looks long in the mirror. Facing out to the audience or 360? It’s pulsing, revealing HER and obscuring HER. Revealing/Obscuring/Revealing. The mirror is breathing as SHE gazes into its face.

I say:

I'm not supposed to talk about this
Until my grandmother is dead
She's not dead
She's very much in Michigan
Attending Kiwanis meetings
And sorority boules

But since I hope she lives long enough to meet my children
(And that won't be for a while)
And since I came into some good good genes
With great grandmothers who knitted me quilts and told me stories and looked at me with wonder-rimmed eyes
And since I do this thing
Upon stages
Speaking words
Sharing tales
Hoping
Healing
Since I already do all of that

I'm gonna talk about it now
I'm gonna tell it now
Because my skinfolk gave me this story
And hopefully my grandmother won't be mad
And the skinfolk who've been silent
While the other ones yell over each other inside me

WALKER 35
Won't be too mad
The greatest war a granddaughter can wage
Is the one where she tries to make everybody happy
And buries all her own whispers
in the folds of her tongue

I roar mine through the lining of my throat
And hope not to trip on my spit
because my greatest fear is being a bad granddaughter.

I look at YOU
YOU look

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN collects bobby pins from YOU, like Sunday Offering.
Meanwhile, BAD BAND plays a New Orleans funeral march version of ‘BLACKNESS.’
SHE put them in HER hair, pinning it up in an elaborate-looking updo. Then--

Beat.
Beat.

ME (cont’d)
YOU like?

BAD BAND’s version of BLACKNESS speeds slightly. Sound changes. ME sings:

ME (cont’d)
VERSE
I am the greatest myth
that ever lived
ever lived
ever lived

And you
When you speak my name
I watch your lips
watch your lips
watch your lips

WALKER 36
I was around before Plato
I was alive before Time
I was defined before Nothing
So you can’t recall me in your mind

All the attempts to contain me
don’t make it none but too far
No matter how far the light stretches
Forever I’ll be right nearby

CHORUS
What does my blackness have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my blackness have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my body have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my body have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

POST CHORUS
Hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
The hallway, the  *hallway*,
YOU hear voices now.

**ODETTA + CORETTA**  
*(curves)*

**CORETTA + JOVETTA**  
*(curves)*

YOU see figures of women
YOU hear the figures talking
YOU hear

**SMILING TUX MAN + ME**
A List of Weapons:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ME</th>
<th>PROJECTION?/SOUND? DESIGNER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A mouse trap, tiny nunchucks, land mines, AK47, ICBMs: intercontinental ballistic missiles.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lipstick. Stilettos- both on and off the feet. A baby stroller. A mother pushing a baby stroller.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mimosas, sassy, nappy, snappy, feminist.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bless your heart”  “Bless your heart”  “Bless your heart.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[a street harassment vamp improved by STM]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You hear songs about hoes, you hear songs about niggers. You hear songs about niggers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fucking hoes. You hear the word fuck. You feel shrapnel, bullets, NYPD officers, Ferguson officers, LAPD officers, any officers who are afraid of black people which is pretty much all of them. Even the black officers.

ME *(to the mirror. Which grows transparent through the speech. Meanwhile, imagery of hot combs, hair clips, and barrettes is projected on the white walls:)*

You think about over-simplification. You think about over-sophistication: high saddity surviving. You see the Atom-bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki—how that doesn’t come up more baffles you. How short our memories are astounds you. This happened, that happened in real life to real people. We vow never to forget 9/11 and maybe we shouldn’t, but it seems unfair to you that we’ve forgotten Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Hands. You feel hands. Eyes. You feel cut. You feel broken a million times. You smell chemicals, medicines, anthrax—space junk. You feel leather whips...hot oil, skillet heat, a barbecue skewer. You see a candlestick in the library, a wrench in the parlor, “if it don’t fit, you must—”, you hear a set of keys. You hear your mother. You feel a bath that’s too hot. You see your own mind. Filtering itself, over and over.

BAD BAND’s begins a reprise of BLACKNESS in the background.

You feel really cold water, you jump. You hear a pair of dangly earrings, a fallen tree, a burning fire, a willow branch. You taste a piece of coral dried out in the sun, you lick a swing-set, a bucket of sand. You feel patent leather shoes that are too tight. Scissors. You see scissors you used to keep under your pillow to cut the tape and suck your thumb. You hear people laughing. Laughter. You think about prisons.

Beat/BAND break.

STM
YOU see the end of the hallway

ME
YOU fixate on that end. Is it time for a sippie-sippie?

BAD BAND plays the full reprise of BLACKNESS. ME sings with ODETTA/CORETTA with hotcombs for mics:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ME</strong></th>
<th><strong>ODETTA/CORETTA</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What does my Afro have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo | What does my wormhole have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo |
| What does my magic have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo | What does my lacefront have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo |
| What does my hairgel have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo | What does my accent have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo |
| What does my suburb have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo | What does my project have to do with you  
Have to do with you  
Boo boo boo boo boo |
| Hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey | Hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey  
Hey hey hey |

SHE pulls out a mason jar, glowing with light. SHE toasts YOU and drinks the light.

YOU turn a corner,

YOU enter a party at a jook joint.

BAD BAND PLAYS. YOU clap—(confused?), Then—

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
In their competition for sunlight, trees evolved a way to defy gravity. Before trees, the highest vegetation was only about waist-high and then something wonderful happened:
(beat)

A plant molecule evolved that was both strong, and flexible; a material that could support a lot of weight, yet bend in the wind without breaking.

beat.

What? What the fuhhhhhhh???, YOU think.

This amuses YOU.

Oh, you are supposed to be amused.

YOU are amused.

ME (cont’d)
I’m one-hundred percent African-American.
which means
Which means what?

When you’re “African” and “American”
people usually want to know what you’re mixed with
especially if you look like me
A billowy high yellowy carmely sect of skinburnt sun
Dripped over lean bones
And people usually want to know what you’re mixed with
so that that can become the topic of discussion
so that you can talk about the Indian part
or the Bajan part
or the German part
you become more interesting, ya see
because everyone already thinks they know
everyone thinks they know your story
when you’re african american
unless you’re creole or
one of your parents is from Jamaica:
“My great great great grandaddies were slaves
and then they were practically slaves
and then they were mud-poor
and then they were a little, little less than mud-poor
and then they were dust poor
and then there was the projects
and then there was the suburbs
And den dey wasuh slaves to da capitalism
slaves to da capitalism
slaves to da capitalism
Lism lism lism lism…"

(As if there’s nothin more to learn about)

AVERY
As Zora Neale Hurston wrote:
“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a stark white background”
Stark?
Sharp.
Sharp white background.

You can imagine what it was like
GROWING up in a suburb
SUB
URB.
The richest county in Illinois
Lake--
County.

Really, it’s the Agony of the echoes
Not so much the growing up part
But
What it leaves behind.

Not so much what it’s like at the sleepovers
Or the ice skating parties
Or swimming in someone’s pond--

The echoes.

Did she say that because?
Did he look at me because?
Was I?
Did they?
Did I?
Did we?

What was that?
The Agony of the echoes.

The yes
The no
The was it?
Did it?
Did I?

What was that?

It's a curious thing to feel out of place

ME
and there might be, yes there might be some Native American in my family
the favorite myth of 88.8% African-American families
all claiming one shared Cherokee ancestor we keep a picture of on our eldest family member's mantle
Cherokee being the only tribe black people remember
Our one hope out of blackety blackness-
Anything to get away from black
Away from that color
That oil
That leaks onto
Clear pristine waters
sits
Away from shame
Or so we think.

AVERY
Returning to the lip of the pond
YOU lost YOUR jump rope in
That time you and your sister went
“Fishing”
It's a strange thing to feel
Out of place
To feel
How did I?
How did we?

What was that?

In your own backyard
On the ground broken for you
ME
YOU look over your shoulder
Hoping no one is peeking at you
Through their curtains
Wondering who you are
And what you are doing
With your nose an inch from the
Muddy up water of your color

A frog jumps
Reminding YOU to get out of dodge, too.

YOU get out of dodge.
People hunt deer around here
Deer of your color

Suburbs were built for an Other kind of folk
To escape
The carnage they left behind when they refused to live next to niggers
YOU don’t know any niggers
Except for the ones that poverty made
That hopelessness
That liquor made
That asbestos and broken science beekers
That crack
The FBI
That the systematic black holes in leadership made
That rage made
That grief

Grief


Smiling Tuxedoed Man walks around himself in a circle. He somehow presents a black leather rolling chair. He rolls himself forward to greet the audience with joy--

BAD BAND (Odetta)
Smiling Tuxedoed Man enters like you already know he has always been Richard Nixon. YOU do not know he is Richard Nixon. He wrings his hands, then, he smiles. It’s. On--
RICHARD NIXON
In a world…
Where blackness is everything
And nothing.(beat) Naaaaaawwww! Ladies, Gentleman, Those of all genders and
semi-genders, Welcome to the party! Tonight, we have a special guest--rare, like actual
grass-fed meat Can’t beat What a treat. We’re not gonna eat her raw, though. No, no. Tonight.
Tonight we will Cook her, slowly under these lights til she’s brown and tender. Browner.

(He snaps his fingers. No lights come on. Tries again. No. Recovers:)
Tonight we will eat her in parts--Delicious parts: Devouring legs, Eyes, Her wings--If we can get
to their meat. I am your host, Richard Nixon, your guide, your trusted ally. Please put your
hands together for your well of entertainment, your favorite piece of joy: Averyyyyy
Nolastnaaaaame!

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Avery enters as she’s done a million times on a million stages seething with contempt for being
the simultaneous object of ravenous animal desire and most despised body on the planet.
Either way, Just a body. She’s a glamorous, glamorous drunk--like Billie!--with a killer voice that
she actually uses to try to kill members of her global audiences, though it has yet to work.

Where do we locate Avery? In the 30s? In Paris? Marrakesh? Next to the Nicholas Bros. in a
segregated Fox picture? Underneath the shoe of a white record label in the 60s? 70s? 80s?
90s?

Floating her yellow skin for attention on youtube? In a shoebox? The CERN hadron collider?

AVERY banters with YOU like a pro always with an edge of danger because she loves
YOU. And she wants to kill YOU.

AVERY offers the audience more neon drinks, purple smokes, and some kind of Rx pills.

YOU drink
YOU smoke
Don’t know what YOU decide on the pills.

AVERY
So lovely, so lovely SO lovely to be here tonight.
You know, I was born in Natchez, Mississippi. Right near the river. I came from the river, actually, just emerged. Me and the Mississippi the same color.

**AVERY** Drinks!
**AVERY** pins up her hair.

I was--Am? Was--Am! *Was* named after my great-grandfather: Avery Clifford Beauxregard. A fighter in the confederate army and upholder of the peculiar institution. “*How peculiar!*” you might think--Considering (she runs her hands along her body) hahahahaha! Well, nevertheless he fell in love and promptly broom-jumped with a freewoman named Sadie and that made my grandmomma who then made my mother and uncles and thangs that then made me. And here, here I am! On *this* stage and ACB (that’s what I call ‘im: A-C-B) would think, I think he would think, he has never seen such a glorious thing before in his life. Me! On this stage. For All of--*with* all of YOU. My true joy in life is performing for YOU.

Breath-beat.

This is one I wrote for my ex-husband, Claude. He was 30% Swiss.

**BAD BAND** Plays a neo-souly mid-tempo romp called ‘I can't do it anymore’. **AVERY** sings.

**AVERY**

I wish I could go
Where I wanna go
Do what I would do
Still stay true to you
But
I can’t do it anymore

I don’t wanna know
Where you wanna go
I just want you to show up and be true
Oh
I can’t do it anymore

I’m tired of lies
on your side and mine
I just know
that I don’t wanna do it anymore

**WALKER** 46
I’m tired of trying halfway
and getting far enough to know
that you and I have gotta make a change

Gotta make a change

I just wanna know
Where I gotta go
Still I want you
to show up and be true oh
But I can’t do it anymore

I just wanna fly
High up in the sky
Still i want you
To show up and be true
Oh
I can’t do it anymore

I can’t do it anymore
I can’t do it anymore
I can’t do it anymore
I can’t do it anymore

AVERY bows. She’s a little drunk so it’s an event.

AVERY (cont’d)

Ya see, ya see, ya see. People don’t understand. The difficulty. Because everything’s sposed to
be equal now you see. And I’m pretty! Which is sposed to cancel out everything. But it
don’t--doesn’t it does not cancel out everything. Anything. I was blacklisted, you see. For--the
list is all black. The black list is black. It has something to do with me being from Mississippi and
I have--had--have the wrong kind of accent, I think.

RICHARD NIXON
One more time for Avery! She’ll be back in all her deliciousity after a short scotch break.

Is she a hostage? YOU feel uncomfortable. YOU want to help her. Or, YOU are already
consuming her, just like everyone else, YOU can’t see her.
ME
My black friends too quick to point out where they
Ain't black
Because their great grandmother wore her good hair in pigtails
So she was definitely a Cherokee
Or their grandaddies people from Baton Rouge and the last name creole
Last Name
Last Name
Name
Last name
Not black not black nooo, not black
Not-a-black-name
Or the slave that was freed
that willingly married the white man and lived
happily cabinned after
These folks too quick to point it out
I’m not not black I’m from the islands
I’m not black I’m
My grandfather was
My people
We have
I’m puerto rican
We traced our line to
We not black
No I’m not black
I’m
I’m
I’m a moor
I’m
I’m post racial
I’m new
I’m a human
I’m Raven Symone.
I’m
I’m
I’m not into that

Come back to the mirror with me
Link your bronze arm
Around mine and stand
Next to me
Please.

I Say:

This is my great-grandmother.

**CORETTA**

You see her great-grandmother on a projector screen.
ME
This is my great-grandmother.

ODETTA
You see her great-grandmother on a projector screen.

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
What to do with all those dead trees.
It took the fungi and bacteria
Millions of years to evolve the biochemical means
To consume them
Meanwhile
The trees just kept springing up
Falling
Dying over
And getting buried by the mud that built up over eons.

Eventually
There were hundreds of billions of trees
Entombed in the Earth
Buried forests
All over the earth.

ME
This is my great-great grandfather.

CORETTA
You see her great-great grandfather on a project screen.

ME
And this is my great-great grandfather.

ODETTA
You see her great-great grandfather on a projector screen. The same classy-ass one.
SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
When plants die they decay and this reverses the transaction. Their organic matter combines with oxygen and decomposes, putting carbon dioxide back into the air. This balances the books for the chemistry of earth’s atmosphere. But if the trees are buried before they can decay, two things happen: They take the carbon and stored solar energy with them and leave the oxygen behind to build up in the atmosphere.

ME
A few years back, my parents took one of those DNA tests
African ancestry things
a valiant effort to recover rituals

buried in the Atlantic bottom.
I hear them faintly sometimes
when I’m near water.
There’s some Igbo (in my family)
and some Irish roots much to my father’s horror
Since the Irish are white--now.

We can’t find the results now
they were not locked up in the vault with our American passports
They probably got thrown away

Or my father burned them.

It’d be nice to have some numbers

math
grounds things in the world
this material statistical space
We’re all obsessed with creating
where we freely start conversations with: “I’m fifty percent Thai, thirty percent Hungarian and 20 percent bored with you.”

I rely on
the less statistical
No percentages
less real
the ephemeral
the abstract
the might have been
could have been
Likely was.

I do have one number:
I am 85% stored with grief.
which is hard to justify.
.
.
.
We had a three-car garage

ME writes a song in front of YOU.

I won’t apologize for my
Chicken pox scars
My parent’s three-car garage
I won't apologize for my
Hmhm-hmm-bee-bee
This is my destiny

I won’t apologize for my
Chance to be somethin
This is my legacy

Is clinging to the Cherokee
and the Seminole
and the Arawak and Taino
is your, “I’m not black, I’m caribbean.”
so that you don’t gotta be with me?

ME sings:
This is a call to my next of kin
This is a call to my next of kin
Do you know who’s skin you live in?
Do you know who’s skin you live in?
In in in in in in in in in in

ME
The only conspiracy worth anything out here for Skinfolk is the one that says “they don’t want you to know who you are.”
beat.
You don’t want to be my sister?
You don’t want to be my sister?
You’d rather be from Neptune?
You’d rather believe you are a leftover severely oxidized alien than the child of a negro earthling woman.
A black mother.
You’d rather have anything other than a black mother.
A me.
Anything.
You’d rather be made of terrycloth, wouldn’t you?

AVERY on a talk show with Richard Nixon. She’s dressed in a 70s disco jumpsuit. She and Nixon use hot combs as microphones and a hot comb stove as a microphone stand:

AVERY
(Laughing maniacally) Well, Dick, I was born in Lebanon but during very sexy persecution. My half-Jewish/half-Irish part South Indian mother whisked us off to Bangladesh while my father stayed behind in Java to take care of his mother who is part Balinese and part Swedish. My father? My father is 15% Lithuanian 10% croatian and 35% western himalayan. Oh, and he's 23% emotionally available

Audience laughter and applause. I laugh and applaud.

I'm brown because when we came to the United States I tripped over the tip of Manhattan and my body hit the liberty bell and my bruise never quite healed. It's sexy to be from somewhere, iddn't it? Isn't tit, hahah, I mean.

laughs slowly at first. She laughs and laughs. Harder. Harder. She laughs. AVERY scans YOU, looking out at YOU. She says to YOU:

Where are you from darling?
City or country?
[She waits]
Mmmmmmm.
But where are you from?

Your people, they're from....?
[She waits]
How lovely.

And where are you from
In your Bones.
You're from __________
Don't think.
Sit.
Listen. In your bones.
You're from __________.

Now,
I'm gonna borrow from church for a minute

BAD BAND plays a baptist fellowship song. ME, NIXON, and BAD BAND fellowship with folks in the joint.

Though Lord forgive me
I haven't been to church since it was excusable to wear lace
Round the top of my socks
Ahahahahahahahahahahahaha!  [she takes a drink.]
Now, turn to your neighbor now
Turn to your neighbor
And tell them where you are from.

[YOU do.]

Now, how was that?
Fun?
Terrifying?
Something else?
Well, have a drink to celebrate!

**ODETTA**
Some of YOU are drunk and YOU think you hear angels.

ME plays ‘Jerrican’ beat.
The following words are projected and a recording plays:

Claylee Washington.
That’s all I knew.
Cuz I
I remember
I know she was married to this man named Earl Washington
And uhhh
He kinda
Was a like a father figure to me
You know

We used to go someplace on the westside
I guess
I guess his brother’s place err
But I couldn’t
I couldn’t
Tell you where it was now
You know but I remember it being on the westside of Chicago

I knew my mother
cuz
The lady that raised me
She knew I had brothers
And she say she didn’t want me to
You know uhh
come up
And start
Start courtin one of my brothers  
So I  
When I was six years old  
My grandmother tried to get me back  
She took us  
took  
this lady to court to try to get me back you know  
To their family  
But  
The judge asked me  
Where did I want to live  
And I just tol em I wanted to live wit my foster mother  
Cuz I had been with her all those years  
You know  
And but uhhh  
Mother would come around some time  
But you know  
I  
I didn’t like her  
It’s a shame to say  
I didn’t like her then  

Like I say  
After I got grown  
Actually before I got grown  
Cuz this lady that raised me  
Was movin down to Mississippi  
And I didn’t wanna go down theh  
Cuz I had heard so many negative things  
And I  
I just couldn’t see myself livin down there  

So  
When I was fourteen  
I went to live wit my real mother  
But see  
I wudn’t there long  
I was only with her for two years  
then I got married  
So  
Yep  

Everybody say we look just alike I don’t know
But I never did know my
My
my father
whoever
You know
It's a shame to say
Whoever he was
But
I never did know my father.

AVERY sings 'Kerosene'

Hot fire always on
Ready to burn up the place
Never gonna damp me out

I will combust through your walls
Make a case for the cause
I am Kerosene
Don't come for me

I am Kerosene
Don't come for me

I am Kerosene
Don't come for me

I am Kerosene
Don't come for me

I am Kerosene
Don't come for me

Burn like gasoline
Don't come for me

WALKER 59
Don't come for me

ME sings 'Jerrican'

Jerrican
Jerrican
Jerrican
Jerrican
Burn me down to wax

Jerrican
Jerrican
Jerrican
Jerrican
Burn me down to wax

Take my plastic
And make it tan

ME
I walk
With my head turned slightly up and to the left.

Because I'm usually afraid someone
Is going to tell me I don't belong there
There
There
Even when I have a key

Making eye contact
I hold my breath
Still
I feel the sound coming in

WALKER 60
That says I am in the wrong place

I hold my chin a little higher
And I smirk.

I walk around with a backpack of water
I barely drink
But it’s there in case
There’s no There
there
Or I get stuck underground
On the train
Trying to get “home”.

(( BLACKOUT. ))

BAD BAND plays ‘Ah-oh’ Reprise...

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
YOU are in a vine, in the breathing, meshy mess of the vine water racing to give life, to make life worth the cost. YOU are tiny, small, so insignificant yet integral for if you move over in the smallest measure you change the fate of a branch, a bird, a flower, a funeral, a wedding. You change the color of the next dragonfly hatching thirty feet from here.

Here
Here.

Here we are.
:
:

Meanwhile, back on the talkshow. WE are all in complete darkness. So, this talk show is happening in complete darkness:

AVERY
This is my Auntie - Whitney Houston

These are my cousins - Dorothy, Lena, Ella, Janet, Mariah

This is my great grandmother - black pegasus
This is my great grandfather - Prince

And this is my great great grandfather - Elegba

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
YOU hear nothing
Then--the sound of water rushing in.

Lights!

AVERY
AVERY removes herself from flirting with Nixon: I’ve been to the ocean many times: the atlantic ocean, Maine (Skip the vineyard), (skip the outer banks), Virginia Beach, Hilton Head (skip gullah), Florida. (beat) Never much paid attention to what I was rubbin against, or what was rubbin gainst me. Never much paid much attention.

(beat)

When I was 12, I was stung by a jellyfish--a regular one. Just spawning season. I didn't know then, that things needed to come close to shore to mate, to be with one another, huggin on the shore in their way. I just played and played, squealin and squallin around in the waves--and I got stung. I thought somethin had ripped through my flesh Coral, or--but the flesh wasn't broken. Just a little purpler in places. It was just barbs of poison that in the end, didn't do too much. It hurt, for a moment, and once I got a hold of what was happening--in my mind I mean--I saw that they had been everywhere. Jellyfish. All over the beach the whole time. They had told me they were there plumply huggin and blubber just blurting through the sand.

I just wasn't looking for 'em before. I didn’t see ‘em ‘til it stung. So I thank them for making their presence known.

They’re not my favorite anima, thoughl: I like the sabertooth tiger! but I respect all creatures of the sea. We still don't know all the things that's in there.

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
To understand water, you need to know what its atoms are doing.
Every molecule of water is composed of two tiny hydrogen atoms attached to a larger oxygen atom. If it's not too hot or too cold, the molecules can slide and tumble past each other. There is still grip between the molecules, but not enough to lock them into a rigid solid and that's what gives us water--atoms that hang around each other, but not too tight.
M E
in front of an opaque mirror *pics of white family flash by, wavy like water and dissolving.

M E
I am also white. The percentage
I’m not exactly sure
but that’s for another show
Unpacking that would have us underground
Until we all suffocate
but owning whiteness is on my to-do list
As I’m sure it is on yours.

The last frontier isn’t the ocean bottom or space
The last frontier is the mind
Where WE can do all kinds of things to
Ascend our pain
Or keep it all the exact same.

My great grandfather gets me, here. Here, he stands apart from everyone--presumably sisters, cousins, brothers, nephews--no one I know. But he stands. Was he pulled in to the frame? Did he insist on placing his body here, to say “I am here, was here too, don’t let no one tell you different.” Or, “I am here because I have to be here because this is how things go and if things didn’t go they way they go, I would be somewhere else.” Or, or, or.

By now my great grandmother, his wife, has already given birth to 3 black children. By now his black children have black children, and their black children will bring more black children. In five years and a couple of seasons, my mother will be born.

Here he stands in--separation? Obligation? In happenstance? Here he stands on the edge of a shadow, the edge of the structure, the edge of the group. Looking at someone with a lens…

I look at YOU.

NIXON twirling a barrette around his fingers:

RICHARD NIXON
What does my whiteness have to do with you boo, boo--

AVERY
Nixon, no.
NIXON
But my role’s so small.

AVERY
Would you like more lines? Introduce my next song.

NIXON
That's it?

AVERY
Yes

NIXON
No speech?

AVERY
No.

NIXON
No--

AVERY
No. Introduce the song, Dick.

AVERY + NIXON exchange.

NIXON
Ladies and laddies, Daddies and babies, awkward and tall, she's black--oops!--back for more spectacularity she’s a rare-ity and if you can sparrre...itty your eyes from your third glass of Happy, please welcome our unending Source of the Force back into the center of the light--Averyyyyyyy Nolastnaaaaaaaaaame!

Short AVERY banter.
AVERY sings ‘what chu lookin at?’ while ME and the BAD BAND back her.

AVERY
VERSE
Whatchu lookin’ at
Whatchu lookin through

People talkin but

WALKER 65
Nothin’s comin through
And all I’m hearin is confusin
And it makes me blue

Nothing’s making sense
None of it is true

And so I go
Eh eh eh eh eh eh
And so I go
Eh eh eh eh eh eh
And so I go
Eh eh eh eh eh eh
And so I go

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Family trees look neat
Knotted in the right places

But this is how they feel

ME
This is my Great great grandmother:
SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
The process of how a tree takes water is thus:
Water mostly enters a tree through the roots by osmosis and any dissolved mineral nutrients will travel with it upward through the inner bark’s xylem and into the leaves. These travelling nutrients then feed the tree through the process of leaf photosynthesis.

ME
And another:

*picture of Mama Tutti

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Photosynthesis is the process by which plants [looking it up] some bacteria, and some protestants, oops! Protistans use the energy from sunlight to produce sugar, which cellular respiration converts into ATP, the "fuel" used by all living things.

ME
Like many Skinfool,
I have parts
that look at other parts
like they’re a communicable disease
Can’t stand too close to one another
For fear of catching
Poverty again
Catching a smaller and more colorful vocab
Catching music that might be
A little rough
“No, no done with that now.”

there are parts of skinfolk
planning to come back for other parts
when the smoke settles
when the shame dissipates
but it never does
and so we never come back
we don’t
shame is black smoke
And sprayed soot
That grows over so thick
hardens and refuses to budge
and all I can do to keep breathin
is push
push on
push away
work
work on
work toward
play
play on
don’t stop
keep on movin
don’t stop no
don’t look back

Guitar wahs start up. **Bad band** gets funky. They being to play ‘Black is the Color of Everything Combined.’ Tambourine!

**BAD BAND + ME** sing (props, here?):

Black is the color of everything combined
Black is the color of everything combined

*Making the darkness better than fine*
Black is the color of everything combined

Black is the color of everything combined
Black is the color of everything combined

The Blacker the berry, the sweeter the vine
Black is the color of everything combined

Black is the color of everything combined
Black is the color of everything combined

*We make you look for our magic inside*
Black is the color of everything combined

ME (Cont’d)
YOU and ME have a disco party. You drink, you laugh.

YOU forget things.

But light-skinned girls don’t feel no pain
Light-skinned girls don’t feel no pain
We shine like the sun
And fend off the rain

Light-skinned girls don’t feel no pain
Hey hey hey
Look at me
Hey hey hey
Isn’t she
Isn’t she

So--

Black is the color of everything combined
Black is the color of everything combined

The Blacker the berry, the sweeter the vine
Black is the color of everything combined

ODETTA
YOU see this

CORETTA
On a projector screen.

RICHARD NIXON
RICHARD NIXON tells you to hang out for while and "Enjoy more food and drink." Sippie?

Richard is a great host. The best.

BAD BAND vamps. The chords of BABLYON ROAD disintegrate into single-string picking. Then breaking strings.

ME
[Quiet.]

CORETTA
[Quiet.]

ODETTA
[Quiet.]

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Protists
Protists
[laughs]
Related: Protists. Protists are the members of an informal grouping of diverse eukaryotic organisms that are not animals, plants or fungi. They do not form a natural group, or clade, but are often grouped together for convenience, like algae or invertebrates.

ME
Do Protists protest?
their grouping of convenience--
like the algae?

The Igbo
who didn’t know the yoruba
Before they were joined in a bed of
Algae
Algae
Too tired, proud, or manacled to work for strangers
deciding to rest in the Algae
Algae
that does not form a natural group, or clade,
but is often grouped together for convenience
Like
the Protists
and
Invertebrates.

Trees
Look
Very neat.
With their regal rings
and their ranging wrangling that gives us just the right kind of shade
But they have dying branches
and they have sugar addictions just like us--

Sugar!
makes them fan out in the sun
And be themselves.

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Scene FOUR. The jook joint is a 125th St. African Braiding Shop

ME speaks (at once):

AYER speaks (at once):
The woman.
She is braiding my hair
I ask her her name
Aisa
Aisha
One of them.

She may have said both.
One to me
And one to someone on the phone
Calling to see if she can get her weave fixed

She is
Putting my kinks--
Wrapping them in long blonde ropes
(Long blonde ropes)

She's on the side
And a girl
A tiny girl from Senegal
Is on the back
Working through my kinks with a
Dollar store comb

Ripping

Ripping
Young girl ripping

Senegal, Senegal, I hear.

I smile.
I wish I could do more
For the young girl
Braiding my hair while
She waits to start school
Hopefully in two weeks, Aisha says. (Aisa)

Everybody's worried about their

A white girl walks in
and asks for box braids
“On your own hair?”
-Yeah. How much?

And just like that no more talking/shop quiet
No more:
Dot-dot-dot! (dot!)
Harlem/colony.

But then,
I remember,
Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.

A white girl walks in
and asks for box braids
“On your own hair?”
-Yeah. How much?

And just like that no more talking
No more:
Dot-dot-dot! (dot!)
Harlem/colony.

But then,
I remember,
Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.

A white girl walks in
and asks for box braids
“On your own hair?”
-Yeah. How much?

And just like that no more talking
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edges</th>
<th>No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Edges)</td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everybody on they edges.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ODETTA</strong></td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Please don’t snatch my edges</em></td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CORETTA</strong></td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Leave my edges</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STM</strong></td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Be careful with my edges.</em></td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone has concerns about edges</td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four women</td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four women</td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Four women)</td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On my hair</td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then three</td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Three)</td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry more for my ends.</td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>[PAUSE FOR FIVE SECONDS]</strong></td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ends are the elders edges are where it begins (where it all begins)</td>
<td>A white girl walks in and asks for box braids “On your own hair?” -Yeah. How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The young girl won’t speak Won’t tell me her name I wonder what she worries of: Her ends in Senegal Or her beginnings, here Or maybe whatever is playing in her headphones</td>
<td>And just like that no more talking No more: Dot-dot-dot! (dot!) Harlem/colony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>But then, I remember, Her braids will be fuzzy by Sunday.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While she darts dark eyes around her steady fingers
And Aisha (Aisa) Pays her son’s college tuition

BAD BAND plays prelude to ‘The Ruler of All Things Real.’ In neo-souly style. They’re so badass. Bom-bom-bommmm!

ME + BAD BAND plays ‘The Ruler of All Things Real’
L- Amaj (right below middle C)/R- B

**ME**

*Why are you so elusive?*

*Keepin me close*

*Then making me go away*

*What is that makes you feel so damn special?*

*What makes you think you push me around*

*I don’t know why*

*You think you have Control*

*Control Over Me.*

*What makes you so elusive?*

*What makes you think*

*You can just stomp right through*

*What makes you take up all the Oxygen?*

*I wish I knew so that I*

*Could do the same*

*I wish I knew so that I*

*Had*

*Whatever it is your smokin*

*Whatever it is your drinkin*

*Whatever it is that has you thinkin*

*You rule the world*

WALKER 75
**You** rule the world

*What makes you so aggressive*

*What makes you love*

*When you’re just hanging out?*

*What makes you blend in out here?*

*I don’t know how your sharpness blinds me out*

Hanging round ounnnndddd

Ahhhhh ahhhhhhhh ahhhh

*What makes you think you own me?*

*I wish i knew that thing that makes you so so so*

*The ruler of all things real*

*The ruler of all things real*

*The ruler of all things reaaaal*

*The ruler of all things real*

*The ruler of all things real*

**NIXON** *(clears his throat. He reads from sheets of jumbo end papers)*

**NIXON**

An Other list of weapons:

So, you’re just black...That’s it?

Is that your real hair?

No, but where are you from?

Can I touch it?

Hey...Girlfriend!

If I was black, I’d totally wanna look like you.

You look just like insert [any black person at all.]

I’m so jealous. I totally want to be black. No, seriously. I do!

C’mon girl, you know I didn’t mean it. You know I’m joking. You know, you know, you know, you KNOW.

**ALL**
There is a suburban smirk you wear
When you are black
And in suburbia
It is made of one part fear
One part internalized dominance
Courtesy of your GMC SUV
That gulps the road on the way to your office

And there is One part animal instinct,
a protective device
better than the airbag that swears to keep you safe
Though you know it will snap your neck the first time it feels
Threatened by the sudden move your finger makes
To change the radio from smooth jazz to lite FM
You know the airbag will say it didn’t mean
To snap your neck
But it was scared you had a needle
And were planning to steal all its air
And sell it under market in the cul de sac.
The airbag is very sorry for snapping your neck

So you don’t let it.
You know better
you are black
And in suburbia
Where you still don’t belong.

ME
She has subtler stories
Not better or worse
No better or worse

She has subtler stories
That make her feel small
while the old ways don't fall

The Blacker the berry, the sweeter the vine
Black is the color of everything combined

ODETTA
I was born in Tuckahoe
My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage.

CORETTA
You a lie.

ME
I was born in Detroit
in the midst of Berry Gordy
ruining Motown
Lifting it
from auto-juju
sexual machine steel
and relocating it to LA
southern blacks don’t belong in LA
It’s all wrong for us

He fell for the allure of Reaganism
and Big Business
Had he kept his exploitations local
where they belonged
Detroit Ruin Porn might never have existed

I was born in 1985.
Tuesday
The 8th day of October, 4.32pm.
My tiny black body emerging
into Reagan’s heyday
Big cars
Big business
Big dreams.

My daddy built me a house with a three-car garage.

AVERY
Once, When i was little, I spent the night at my grandmother’s house
The sun shined in through her chantilly curtains
The next morning
It was hot

I woke up
And stepped my foot right out of the bed
And onto a blade of glass
That’s what this feels like

My great uncles
My real ones
Are all named after Presidents:

ME, NIXON, ODETTA, + CORETTA

Hoover
Theo(dore)
Roosevelt (a different Uncle)
Grover

ME (alone)
And then there was McLeod
Eddie Lee
Not presidential
But country just the same.

The Greats of my branch who died
Before their 6th birthdays
Nathaniel
And Lizzie Bell
They were not presidents, either

AVERY
(To See the Sun). To see the sun and think it’s gonna be a gloryfull day, and before there can be a next thought there’s a chard of glass embedded in the bottom of your foot dripping communion-colored blood onto the red carpet. Blendin’. You’re frozen, so you haven’t thought it’s not gonna be a good day. You haven’t had the chance to think or forget the sun but you are bleeding and so you’re mind is on that. Blendin and bleedin.

The Recording Returns:

I remember this man
Uhhh
Comin
To visit
Uhhh
At my grandmother’s house
And uhhhh
My mother told me that
That uhhh
He was my dad
His name was Melvin Cuvin-Cummins
So
The man gave me a nickel and patted me on my head
And told me say
Oh you look just like your momma
And that’s about mos of what he said to me

Yep

But
I
I don’t know
I don’t think that
I know he wudn’t my father
Whoever

My birth certificate never did go under Sherkins
It went under Wysingle
Because she
Just like
Sometimes
When uhhh
the mother’s not married
The father can
Have his name put on the birth certificate
But the
The child will still go into the mother’s say you know
Whatever the mother’s name was
They used to
You didn’t have to sign
You could just tell em what
Whichever you want to tell em
But now like
When Diane--

Wysingle was my mother’s birth name
And she
And the lady who raised me
Was a neighbor
And she
She didn’t have any children
I guess couldn’t have any
And she was
You know a heavy-set lady
So
When mother went to have me
I guess she went somewhere for a few days
you know
Then uhh
I guess
Mother called my grandmother from the hospital
And said that the baby was a boy and had died

**ME** sings ‘African-American Song’

**ME**
I gave em what
They asked me for
They want my name
I tell em so
“It’s not enough
To keep afloat,
You’ll drown in anonymity
You’ll never quite fly.
What do you mean
You’re just a Brown?
A thompson or a jenkins
Or a davis or a jones?
A jones a jones a jones

Feel sorry for your history
But I don’t wanna hear about your misery
I don’t wanna hear about it cause it’s all your fault
It’s all your fault

You want my hair
You want my vibe
Then turn around and call me ugly to the side

But you’ll leave my body to the side and let me go

When the sun sets overhead
Keep in mind till morning time
I’m blending in
I’m blending in

WALKER 81
ME
I see the house
I want to get close to the house
But I'm afraid of snakes and things
Catchin on me
And I'm in my 20s
But I'm afraid to ask
Too many questions
The wrong questions

In my grandmothers house
There are white Jesus everywhere
Like there are in many black grandmothers houses
Kitchen bathroom
Living room
White prayer hands in the back room
We replaced the white cherubic children
On the wall with my great grandfather
And a photo of the cousin who paid my grandfather's fraternity dues that no one ever met
We replaced them two years ago
Finally
After I asked who the white cherubic children were on the wall
Who watched over me while I slept
As I've grown older
I think they do not look
I think they stare
I think they want to eat my skin
And swallow my hair
And make me slick and clean and
They do not like me
They do not want
Me
They want cleanliness
And peace
And the older I grow
The more I am not peaceful
The more white Cherubini
And prayer hands become charred in my mind
And I only want to scream about the lost murders
And solve the puzzles
And take the picture frames off of the wall.

This cousin
He fought in WWII I think
My grandfather showed me the flag from his funeral
tucked behind his sweaters in the closet.

The sound of water.
An American flag

ME
This is my great grandfather:
And this is my great-grandfather
YOU see a slide of Lignin:

SMILING TUXEDOED MAN
Lignin made trees possible. Now, Life could build upward and this opened a whole new territory. A three-dimensional matrix for communities far above the ground. Earth became the planet of the trees. But Lignin had a down side: it was hard to swallow. When nature’s demolition crew: fungi and bacteria tried to eat anything with lignin in it, it got a really bad case of indigestion and termites wouldn’t evolve for at least another 100 million years.

It took the fungi and bacteria millions of years to evolve the biochemical means to consume the dead trees that covered the Earth. Trees and trees. Meanwhile, the trees just kept springing up, falling, dying over and getting buried by the mud that built up over eons. Eventually there were hundreds of billions of trees entombed in the Earth, buried forests all over the earth.

ME + AVERY sing ‘Sister Citizen’.

ME + AVERY
Sister Citizen
don't you cry
you beautiful child
you are made of light

Sister Citizen
I give you peace of mind
I complete your line
circle back to life

Oh, oh, oh
if we only knew
what we do to you
sister citizen

oh, oh, oh
mule of the world
back-broken girl
sister citizen

How many babies you've saved
know what it's like to be slaved
sister citizen

Sister Citizen
don't you cry
for your tears will be dried
you're made of light

sister citizen
your peace of mind
is hidden in plain sight

Sister citizen
if you knew
don't wait for us
we'll catch up to you

Sister citizen
if you knew
don't wait for us
we'll catch up to you

The world you see is emptying
the world you see is emptying
sweet child
don’t you know who you are

the world you see is emptying

if I could show you the way
i would show you the way
but the way is yours to go

ME + BAD BAND transitions to ‘While the Sun Waits for You Bless His Honor’

ME sings:

While the sun waits for you
Bless his honor
Bless his honor

While the sun waits for you
Bless his honor
Bless his honor

While the sun waits for you
Bless his honor
Bless his honor

ME

When I was young
My mom would always say to me go out and play
Go out and play
And when I had the space
I was already a new yorker in my head
Busy busy
Must get do go
Must beat
Must keep up
No be ahead

I would lay on the deck
Next to our potted plants
But never really rest

Must go
Must keep up
No be ahead

WALKER 88
I remember my first full breath after I turned 30.

I Say to YOU:

I realize that when a grandmother says
*I am proud of you*  
To a granddaughter  
What she is saying is
I am filled from the inside  
Filled with joy  
To see you breaking through  
YOU are breaking through  
Farther than I got  
Than I could get  
YOU are pushing a wall  
That was built around the bottom of my trunk  
My roots cracked it some  
And you are breaking through

What she is really saying is
Thank God for you  
Thank God for your plane ticket  
Thank God it was worth everything  
That broke my branches  
Thank God your eyes  
Remain white and open and unblinded

I am proud of US  
Proud of US  
Proud of what I birthed  
That birthed you  
And you can do what you like about that  
You can do what you like because  
I did enough  
I did just enough  
To make you  
Exist  
And YOU exist.

And she is saying
I see  
I see
And she is proud the ground is solid
Because she made it So.

BAD BAND plays:

What does my blackness have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my blackness have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my body have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my body have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

Hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey
Hey hey hey

What does my Afro have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my magic have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my wormhole have to do with you
Have to do with you
Boo boo boo boo
Boo boo boo boo boo boo

What does my lacefront have to do with you
Have to do with you
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RICHARD NIXON</th>
<th>ODETTA</th>
<th>CORETTA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| On land, bacteria and other microbes in the body will rapidly multiply and break down the soft tissue. Shortly after death, flies and other insects consume the soft tissue. Vultures, dogs or other large mammals may also take pieces of the decomposing flesh, sometimes reducing the corpse into a skeleton in under two weeks. | **Hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
No no no no no no
No boo
No no no no no no
No boo
No no no no no no
No boo | **Hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
**Hey hey hey**
No no no no no no
No boo
No no no no no no
No boo
No no no no no no
No boo |

On the open ocean, however, flies and other insects are largely absent. And if the body is floating in water less than 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 degrees Celsius) for about three weeks, the tissues turn into a soapy fatty acid known as "grave wax" that halts bacterial growth. The skin, however, will still blister and turn greenish.
black. Finally, crabs and small fish may feed on the soft parts of the face like the eyes and lips, according to the book *Forensic Taphonomy: The Postmortem Fate of Human Remains*, by William D. Haglund and Marcella H. Sorg.

NIXON
Would you like to see my family?

AVERY (some time during this speech, the word, ‘Ascension’ appears on the projector screen) Not really. (microbeat) You know, Dick, you know that moment when you re-enter the house after you’ve been out on the porch in the high sunshine and your eyes haven’t re-adjusted? You open the screen door and you go back in the house. You hear that unique slam: CLACK!, you know, and for a moment, it’s so dark in there! So *dark*. But I like that moment because it makes me stand still and feel my feet again and op! I’m back on the carpet, yes for sure the carpet and not the porch. I’m back from the World, and when my eyes adjust I can find somewhere to set down and rest.

beat.

If I had a nickel for every time I heard somebody say somethin about the dark. So *negative*. But dark makes you wait. You just have to take your time in it and stop actin like you know everything, even if it's only dark for a moment. For a moment you know nothing. You have no context. Until--you listen, Dick. Listen and open your body to new kinds of feelin that just don’t happen until you come in from the porch and shut that door.

Sun gives us all the information.
Dark needs our faith.

ME
I look at YOU.
YOU see.

(beat.)

My last name is Walker
I’m destined to take the next right step
I guess
No
I sure am
Destined to take the next right step

I've never really thought much of my name
I'm not a boy
So
That makes sense
Boys are taught to think
You know
About their progeny
The seed!
Plant the seed!
The sound they carry in their --
WALKER
WALK
Er

But lately i've just needed the step
To step through the grief
To pass through the
Not thinking i'm ok somehow
When I'm clearly OK

More than OK

I've been wanting to visit the Walker Plantation
It's in Arkansas
is ?
Was.
I don't know.

But I've been wondering off the plantations i've got
Runnin around in fields of my story
What that one was like.

What Master WALKER was like
WALKER.
Was he slow?
Did he do everything slowed down
Make his money slow
Steady
Just the next barrel
Then the next

Did he build his wealth like molasses?
Or, was he one of those masters that like,
Didn’t even really make a lot because
Even though he owned people
and ran people
He didn’t know how to turn a profit
And he died destitute and dumb
and absent of riches
to carry forward to his offspring?

The Walkers
MINE
Really don’t rush.

Used to drive me a little crazy when
I was little and visiting
Cuz it wasn’t much to do
Just sit
Listen to the screen door slam
Double
Double
Watch flies collect on the fly paper

The tractor didn’t even work.

By the time I was on the scene
It was already rusted.

But one day
I swear this
ONE day, my grandaddy walked by me
Real slow
Like he did
The way retired security guards do

He sat down
And he said he wanted to show me something
His eyes lit from inside
More than anything in the garage with a plug
And as I looked
The way magical granddaughters look
He sat the stillest
Most patient I’ve seen a human sit
And then the something
He caught a fly straight outta the air
With his giant hands

And then he looked at me
And he grinned
And I got to see his gold tooth

And he got to see my pink tongue
As my mouth shot open in an awe
That only happens
When you haven’t yet been told
By the world that girls like you
Should never believe in magic

SO
I’ve always held that
Fly
And carried it around
Underneath my name

And it’s just been growin
And growin bigger than the memory
Of some master
Who’s palace has long since crumbled
And is probably now an auto zone
Or a wal-mart

And I’ve been thinking
That Walker is a brilliant name for me
Because I seem to get the
Next right step

In magical, magical ways.

YOU don’t know any niggers
Except for the voice that tells you
YOU don’t belong anywhere
That YOU better keep moving
Searching
YOU better not stop there
Or there
YOU best be gettin on now
Not safe not safe
Here

Keep on moving don’t stop no don’t look back
Keep on moving don’t stop no don’t look back

The Recording Returns:

So anyway
   It was
   Like I say
   It was really uhhh

But you know
   Jillian I
In spite of all that
   I got over it
   You know
   And I’m glad
   You know that
God blessed me to have my children
   And
   And uh
had a husband had a good husband
   Bay
   Basically.

And um
   So
   I just
   You know
I’m 83 years old now
I cain’t and I don’t hardly think about that stuff anymore
   You know

AVERY hums a little ‘sister citizen’

AVERY
I used to have dreams that I’d float right round the Mississippi up and out of the river into the ocean and not know where I was goin but so excited to be goin’. And I’d get up around get caught in a current or two somewhere around the foot of a sand dune in the distance. But I would stay calm cause I knew that I was bein carried somewhere important.

I always woke up before I got there. So I drink to help me sleep so’s I can figure it out.

**AVERY**

The world you see is emptying  
the world you see is emptying  
sweet child  
don’t you know who you are

the world you see is emptying

if I could show you the way  
i would show you the way  
but the way is yours to go

**ME**

I took my first full breath  
After I turned 30  
And I had cried enough saltwater  
To make space for air.

**ME and YOU** breathe.

---

*ritual?*

---

**ME sings**

This is a call to my next of kin  
This is a call to my next of kin  
Do you know whose skin you live in?  
Do you know whose skin you live in?  
In in in in in in in in In?  

---

WALKER 97
End of Play.