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Pathways Toward Healing: The Presence of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in Black Mother-Daughter Relationships

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PATHWAYS TOWARD HEALING: THE PRESENCE OF POST TRAUMATIC SLAVE SYNDROME IN BLACK AMERICAN MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Dedicated to Gertie, whose silence is a testament
to JoAnn, whose words are an altar
and to Morgan, whose being is a blessing.

To the mothers and daughters of Palestine, Congo, Sudan, and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

Michael was born nearly two months early, weighing only two pounds and sevens ounces and fitting the length of my father's hand. My grandmother viewed his trembling form at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and spoke: "He's light-skinned," she said. "Those light-skinned boys always think they so cute." A NICU nurse immediately asked my grandmother to leave. I often ask my mother if it is possible that my grandmother was joking. Was she, perhaps, trying to lighten the mood? "No" was always the answer. My grandmother was not the type to make jokes about the array of shades Black people exist in.

The true reason for Miss Gertie's (as my mother and Aunt Debbie "affectionately" called my grandmother) comment was that she did not approve of my mother's marriage to a white man. Michael was my parents' first child together and would be a barrier to a clean, simple divorce should they ever want one. My parents are still together 32 years after Michael's birth, but Miss Gertie was thinking ahead. "I'm just trying to protect you," my grandmother would say any time my mother grew tired of her objections to her and my father's union. "There are a lot of ugly people in this world who will want to hurt you."

The sentence "I'm just trying to protect you" is a mantra passed down through the generations of women in my family. This mantra is often attached to upsetting acts which are conveniently forgotten by the mothers and internalized by the daughters. This mantra has many variations, including but not limited to "I just don't want you to be embarrassed," "I don't remember doing that. Did someone at school do that?," and "I don't think I said that to you. That sounds like something *my* mother would say." The last one is my favorite because of its unintentionally transparent quality.

As silly, nonsensical, and sometimes offensive as this mantra may *seem* to those unfamiliar with my family's dynamic, I understand its purpose in my family, in our history, and in Black history. In my life, "I'm just trying to protect you" has served two main purposes. The first purpose truly is to protect the offspring from ill-meaning outside forces. During a time in my adolescent years when I stopped applying chemical relaxers and heat from flat irons to my hair in order to fully embrace my natural curls, my mother constantly belittled my appearance, calling my natural hair "ratty" and "unkempt." Each time I explained to my mother how her comments hurt me, "I'm just trying to protect you" was always her reply. Conversations with my mother, teaching in public and private schools, and the passage of time have clarified her words, which is that my mother simply did not want the white children at my school to comment on my hair. She hypothesized (wrongly) that if she could just shame me into straightening my hair, the white kids at school would leave me alone. As it turned out, I suffered at the hands of racist bullies regardless of the state of my hair. My mother knows this and (un)fortunately, the passage of time has taught her that no amount of relaxing, blow drying, and hot combing/flat ironing stops a racist from being racist.

The second purpose of "I'm just trying to protect you" is to serve as a frustrated mother's cry for forgiveness in the face of ongoing harm. It is a plea for the daughter to recognize the mother's humanity, and to follow her strict orders on the basis of that recognition. The tough and humiliating nature of her advice was just a matter of circumstance. "I'm just trying to protect you" loosely translates to "I wish things weren't this way, but they are. You just have to fall in line. *We* just have to fall in line." What do we have to fall in line with? My grandmother never explicitly told my mother where the line was located, but she made it clear that by marrying outside of her own race, my mother had crossed it. Even worse was the specific race of my

father. Had my mother married an Asian or Native American man, perhaps my grandmother would not have taken issue. But the fact that my father was white brought an uncomfortable historical context to the surface. How did the wedding photo of my Black mother and white father look within the historical context of white slave owners assaulting Black enslaved women? How did my parents' mixed-race children compare to the light skinned house slaves fathered by their own captors? These unsavory questions may not have made their way out of my grandmother's mouth without being internally rephrased beyond the point of recognition. Perhaps my grandmother no longer knew what she was truly asking. But she had to ask anyway, lest my mother forget what was at stake. But what was at stake? Often, the answer was dignity. What would remain of my mother's dignity if, during a fight, my father fixed his lips to call my mother a nigger? Sure, my mother is inclined to fight back when such words are thrown around, but if my father did have the nerve to say it, what would be said of the Black woman who chose to marry him? For the record, my father has never called my mother a slur, but my grandmother was (again) thinking ahead.

The tendency to think ahead in such drastic ways, as well as the tendency to unintentionally allow that "thinking ahead" to harm one's children is one characteristic of the intergenerational trauma which plagues the women and girls in my family. Despite the shame and confusion my grandmother's actions caused my mother, my mother often acted the same way toward me, her reason being that she "was just trying to protect" me. While the repetition of the cycle can be demoralizing, recognizing the problem is often the first step to recovery. I recognize the historical context that American chattel slavery has within the actions of my grandmother, my mother, and myself. For this reason, I am researching Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) within the context of Black mother-daughter relationships. Through scholarly

research and interviews with academics and female family members, I will identify paths toward intergenerational healing and exhibit this information through a danced manifestation.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

I have only recently narrowed in on my mother's desire to be perceived as a tough, no-nonsense authority figure by white people. My mother was the disciplinarian of our household regardless of whether or not she had an audience. However, her methods of keeping us in line were/are particularly brutal when white eyes are watching. For instance, every Sunday at church, my mother chats with Tim and Annie, a conservative elderly white couple. The couple often repeats the latest buzz phrases they hear on Fox News and my mother politely corrects them in a way that avoids hurting their feelings. My mother, who is well-aware of how harmful Tim and Annie's rhetoric is, never seems perturbed by the couple's beliefs. While she does correct them, she does so gently and without upsetting their sensibilities. When I ask her (in private, of course) how she can stand to listen to Tim and Annie, she brushes their ignorance off with a simple "they just grew up in a different time, Rachael."

But when my young niece or nephew, who are often playing nearby in the Parish Hall after the service, begin to fuss or make a mess, my mother's charm seems to dissipate. She begins firing out threats like T-shirts from a T-shirt gun. "I don't wanna hear it", she yells. "You better dry it up before I come over there and give you something to cry about!" She is particularly incensed by the crying of young children. To her, this common expression of emotion is an act of defiance. Tim and Annie look on approvingly as my mother unleashes her fury onto my niece and nephew. Annie will sometimes join in, yelling at the children to "can it" before bragging that she spoke to her own children the same way. There is an unsettling quality to my mother's yelling in these instances; though I have often been on the receiving end of her

anger many times before, these outbursts seem entirely manufactured in comparison to the ones had in private. At home, my mother's fury will gradually build after having worked all day, cleaned, cooked, and done the majority of the childrearing of her granddaughter. But in front of Tim and Annie, her anger is conjured out of thin air. The children have not spent the entire day acting out and she is not in a bad mood prior to these moments.

Fulfilling my role as the sibling who argues with Mom, I intercept in these instances. I tell my mother, Tim, and Annie that it is normal for a child to cry when they are upset. I remind my mother that she hates seeing my oldest brother so deeply entrenched in toxic masculinity, afraid to show any emotion other than anger. I remind her that scolding children (particularly boy children) for crying is what leads to that bottling up of emotion. I am met with condescension from Tim, Annie, and my mother. My mother asserts that the children should learn not to cry so easily, while Tim and Annie recount the times they beat their oldest daughter for acting out.

My mother returns to her charming disposition as Tim and Annie validate her disciplinary methods. They reminisce with each other about the "good ol' days" when one could beat their child in a grocery store for whining too loudly. I recoil as I witness the white couple verbally pat my mother on the head like a dog. I remind myself that she is suffering from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), and I try to conjure some empathy. *I will speak to her about this later*, I tell myself. *I will help her understand how harmful her actions are*. But I soon "forget" to have that conversation with her. On Monday, as my students swarm around me and rattle off excuses for why they cannot participate in class, I hear my mother's voice exit my own mouth and yell, "I don't wanna hear it!"

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is a term coined by American professor Dr. Joy DeGruy to describe the pathology birthed by the legacy of American chattel slavery. The term describes

"many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora."[1] According to DeGruy, PTSS manifested from the trauma of enslavement, resulting in the specific methods enslaved Africans and African-Americans employed to protect their families, each other, and themselves from the constant threat/presence of racist violence, separation from loved ones, and sexual abuse at the hands of white people. Habits that were formed by the enslaved, such as verbally/ physically abusing one's children, hyper-fixating on hygiene, and suspicion of those in one's own community were passed down through each following generation, resulting in Black Americans who exhibit those same habits in 2024.[2] While DeGruy coined the term "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," she did not invent the concept itself. A condition called "Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome" was first mentioned in 2000 by Alvin Francis Poussaint and Amy Alexander to explain the increasing suicide epidemic among Black men.[3] Psychiatrist and Philosopher Frantz Fanon had also explored the impact of colonialism and white supremacy on the habits and defense mechanisms exhibited by many Black people in Martinique. Fanon asserted that Black Martinicans used language (among other cultural tools) to gain closer proximity to "whiteness," avoiding the use of creole French and instead opting to use the French language associated with white citizens of France.[4]

Black Women, Black Girls, and PTSS

Crooked Rooms and a Culture of Dissemblance

In her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, professor Melissa V. Harris-Perry references the study of field dependence when speaking about the

[1] Joy DeGruy, "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome", Dr. Joy DeGruy, 2018.
[2] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland, OR: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2018), 8-10.
[3] Alvin F Poussaint and Amy Alexander, "Lay My Burden Down: Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis of African-Americans," Beacon Press: Lay My Burden Down, 2020.
[4] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2021), 19.

choices of Black women seeking jobs in the entertainment industry. She writes:

> "Field dependence studies how individuals locate upright in a space. In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves as straight only in relation to their surroundings. To the researchers' surprise, some people could be tilted by as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were aligned with images that were equally tilted. But not everyone did this: some managed to get themselves more or less upright regardless of how crooked the surrounding images were."[5]

Harris-Perry goes on to explain that Black women who engage in actions that seem to confirm racist and sexist stereotypes (i.e., "twerking" in rap videos, playing "angry Black woman" characters on T.V. and movies, etc.) are simply aligning themselves as "straight" in comparison to a world that is crooked. In other words, Black women may modify their actions in order to maintain their safety, success, and livelihood in a society that refuses to see us as more than a stereotype.[6] These modifications are prevalent in the entertainment industry, as noted by actress Nicole Byer. Byer has often spoken out about being required to adhere to stereotypical displays of Black womanhood when auditioning for shows and commercials. A casting director once asked her to read her lines in a "blacker" and "sassier" manner before ultimately dismissing her from the audition.[7] In Byer's experience, the "crooked room" she must align herself with involves being required to "shuck and jive" for a powerful white person's entertainment, without the possibility for upward mobility in her career.

Byer's experience echoes the practice of "dancing the slaves." According to Author Lynne Fauley Emery, enslaved Africans and African-Americans were forced to dance in front of

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[5] Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 29.

[6] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen Shame*, 29.

[7] Stephanie Merry, "These Television Shows Turn the Spotlight on Racist, Sexist Hollywood Auditions," The Washington Post, 2016.

their masters, not only to remain physically fit for work, but for the entertainment of their enslavers. Enslaved individuals who chose not to dance or did so with little energy were beaten, thus turning the celebrated cultural practice of dance into one of punishment avoidance and humiliation.[8] While casting directors and producers are not allowed to beat their employees (though this industry is not free from violence), Black actresses like Byer who refuse to engage in stereotypes may suffer punishments such as industry ostracization and loss of roles.[9]

While Byer's story takes place in the entertainment industry, the act of aligning oneself to a "crooked room" is common for Black women and girls in all professions and social settings. Teacher Yanick Chery Frederic recounted the concern her white colleagues expressed for Black students who did not code switch or modify their speech patterns to mirror those of their white counterparts. Frederick asserts that her colleagues' concern was rooted in the idea that "white vernacular" is the default method of communication for all Americans, regardless of race, ethnicity, and culture.[10]

The act of aligning oneself to a "crooked room" is similar to the culture of dissemblance, a practice defined by Darlene Clark Hine as "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."[11] In her article "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," Hine cites the migration of Black women from the Southern United States to the Midwestern states during and after slavery as being a catalyst for the culture of dissemblance. Since the Middle Passage, the presence of rape and violence has loomed over

[8] "Dance among Slaves," Gale Library of Daily Life: American Civil War. Encyclopedia.com. April 15, 2024.

[9] Merry: 2016.

[10] Yanick Chery Frederic, "Black Girls Negotiating Code-Switching: The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Classroom," VUE (Voices in Urban Education) 50, no. 2 (2022).

[11] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 14, no. 4 (July 1989): 912.

the lives of Black women, pushing them to seek personal agency and freedom from sexual exploitation in other parts of the United States during the Antebellum and Reconstruction periods, as well as the present day.[12] Alongside migration to a new home with unfamiliar people and different economic conditions came the necessity for Black women to mask their true emotions and the details of their personal lives, opting instead to maintain an air of serenity and contentedness so as not to arouse any suspicion from their community. This culture of dissemblance often allow(s/ed) us to avoid violence at the hands of a society which vilifies the negative emotions of Black women and girls.[13]

Internalized Misogynoir and Respectability Politics

Sometime during my middle school years, I began to experience an unusual fear/compulsion; every time I undressed to take a shower or change my clothes, a thought popped into my head asking, *what if you're not alone right now? What if other people can see you undressing? What if you're really in public and you just* think *you're alone in your bathroom?* I would pinch myself several times and wait for long periods of time before deciding that I really was alone and that I was safe to undress. Perhaps I wanted to take control of these intrusive thoughts, so I began purposely imagining that other people were around me at all times. These imaginary "friends" were usually white male celebrities whom I found attractive. I would interact with them in my head and simply ask them to leave the room when I needed to shower. On one hand, this maladaptive daydreaming helped me solve my shower issue. On the other, I could never be in a state of authenticity again, as I was constantly "surrounded" by white men who might think ill of me if I showed my truest self.

[12] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 914.
[13] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 915.

Years later, a new problem arose. Each time I walked past a mirror, I began to dissociate from my body. I looked at my reflection and felt as though I were watching myself on video. I felt no connection to my own image, and the sensation continued as I looked down from the mirror to my own hands. I continued to experience periods of dissociation off and on, assuming they correlated to times of high stress. But after speaking with a colleague with similar experiences, I have begun to link my white-male-gaze-daydreaming to my dissociation. I had spent the majority of my life hypothesizing on how I, a Black woman looked to white men, and the cost added up to exiting my own body. Upon interrogating myself, I now understand this to be an effect of internalized misogynoir.

Misogynoir is a concept defined by Moya Bailey as "the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture."[14] Although the definition mostly refers to misogynoir in the entertainment industry, its presence can be seen in all industries, as well as outside of the workplace. For example, every girl under the age of 18 who faced police violence New Orleans in 2021 was Black.[15] The inclination for police to disproportionately target Black girls is an example of misogynoir within American policing. Misogynoir can also exist in the realm of respectability politics, which professor Ebony Janice defines as "a set of beliefs holding that conformity to prescribed mainstream standards of appearance and behavior will protect a person who is part of a marginalized group, especially a Black person, from prejudice and systemic injustices."[16] When adopting standards for oneself

[14] Moya Bailey, "Misogynoir in Medical Media: On Caster Semenya and R. Kelly," Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience 2, no. 2 (September 21, 2016): 2.

[15] Abbie VanSickle and Weihua Li, "Police Hurt Thousands of Teens Every Year. A Striking Number Are Black Girls," The Marshall Project, November 2, 2021.

[16] Ebony Janice, *All the Black Girls Are Activists: A Fourth Wave Womanist Pursuit of Dreams as Radical Resistance* (New Jersey: Row House Publishing, 2023), 17.

and others that are based in misogynoir is presented to Black women and girls as a method of protection, misogynoir becomes internalized.

Internalized misogynoir is defined by Psychologist Elizabeth S. Cook as "an intersectional form of internalized oppression which stems from the integration of internalized racism, internalized sexism and internalized misogyny."[17] In other words, internalized misogynoir is the internalization of gendered racism by Black women. As with internalized racism, internalized misogynoir often creates the illusion for the affected that they are safe from their oppressor(s) on the basis that they identify with and uphold the oppressor's beliefs. My compulsion to fantasize about white male voyeurism is based in misogynoir in that it created a false sense of safety; if I presented myself as constantly "perfect" to this imaginary white male audience, I felt I could control my own fears of being watched without my consent, and subsequently ostracized. The idea that pandering to white society might offer protection to Black women is well-documented in American chattel slavery.

Patricia Hill Collins teaches us that enslaved Black women were heavily influenced by the patriarchal gender roles of their white captors; men were viewed as providers and protectors while women were viewed as nurturers and homemakers. However, Collins notes that the conditions of enslavement made such a structure impossible for enslaved Black people to follow, as enslaved Black women were made to do hard physical labor typically associated by white patriarchal society with men, while tying their own babies to their backs and searching for quick moments to feed them.[18] Though notions of Black womanhood being inherently less feminine than that of white womanhood prior to American chattel slavery, the working conditions for

[17] Elizabeth S. Cook, dissertation, *Creation of the Internalized Misogynoir Measure: A Qualitative Approach to Designing an Intersectional Tool for Use with Black Women* (Northeastern University, 2020): 2.

[18] Patricia Hill Collins, *Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* (New York City, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 48.

Black enslaved women served as confirmation bias of these notions. When Black women attempt to overcorrect their own mannerisms to combat these stereotypes, mimicking characteristics defined by white patriarchal society as "feminine," they internalize the misogynoir that has been weaponized against them. This internalized misogynoir serves as a method of protection for Black women and their families; by ascribing to white patriarchal values, many believe that they will be protected from misogynoir-based violence.

Mothers, Daughters, and PTSS

After years of identifying the ways in which Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome affected my mother's and grandmother's relationship, I only recently concluded that I do not know much more than surface details about my grandmother. I know that she was born Gertie Leola Walker in Virginia in August of 1932, making her a Leo and that her loved ones called her the "Prettiest Girl in the County." I also know that she was markedly tight-lipped and secretive, hence why I know little else about her. But where my grandmother was a vault of secrets, my mother, JoAnn, was an altar. Every fun fact concerning my grandmother had been communicated to me through my mother. She presented our family history to us, sometimes boisterously, sometimes lovingly, sometimes gently as if she were setting down fragile items at an antique sale.

I do not remember having any long or involved conversations with my grandmother, not even when she lived with my family after her Parkinson's Disease worsened. Once when we were alone, my grandmother read aloud a passage from the bible about the importance of not having sex outside of marriage. I assumed this was a message for me. About the same time that I recognized my lack of knowing my grandmother, I realized that my mother's stories may not be enough to fill the gaps. JoAnn's relationship with her mother seemed at best, distant, and at

worst, tumultuous. My mother had loads of stories about how Gertie had slighted her, like how my grandmother had blamed and beaten my mother and my Aunt Debby as children for writing a curse word on the wall (which had actually been written by my Uncle Pat), or how the first thing my grandmother said to my mother at her wedding rehearsal dinner was that my mother's dress made her look fat. I believe my mother's stories, but the hurt in her voice and in her eyes lets me know that she is not an objective party. I was also recently informed that my grandmother was just as secretive with my mother as she was with me. Apparently, my mother got all of her intel from eavesdropping on her mother's conversations or from listening to her Auntie Viola's (Gertie's sister) stories.

As it turns out, Gertie kept a wide array of secrets from her daughter. My grandparents had my mother out of wedlock, a fact my mother did not learn until the age of 20. "I thought you knew," my grandmother swore when my mother questioned her. My mother also did not find out that she had an older half-brother until she was well into adulthood when she saw his name written on the program at her father's funeral. "I thought you knew," was again my grandmother's response. I generally do not take my grandmother's "I thought you knew" response at face value. My grandmother had a child out of wedlock, an action which was considered taboo in 1959. Further, she had this child with a womanizing man who already had a previous marriage and a child. It is understandable that my grandmother kept these things a secret; these were occurrences that carried a lot of shame at the time.

My grandmother had adapted to a culture of dissemblance, a characteristic of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. She treated secrecy as a safety net and extended that net to her loved ones. She did not talk about her husband's other child or her premarital pregnancy because she could not deal with the stigma. But rather than explaining why she chose to be tight-lipped, she

approached her secrets with even more mystique. Instead of telling me, “Rachael, I don’t want you to have sex outside of marriage because I don’t want you to have a baby out of wedlock like I did,” she chose to read a passage from the bible discouraging premarital sex, without truly addressing me. Rather than telling my mother, “JoAnn, you were born before your father and I got married but I don’t want you to tell anyone that,” she kept the circumstances of my mother’s birth to herself until cornered, then claimed, “I thought you already knew.”

The ways in which I never knew my grandmother leave a peculiar absence in my heart; I search for information that I cannot be sure exists. I long for closeness with a person who may not have desired closeness with me. Conversations with my mother have confirmed that she feels the same way. But I also understand why my grandmother’s dissemblance was extended to her loved ones. Decades of having to hide your truest self from the public do not easily subside after returning home to your family each evening. I challenge myself to view my grandmother’s secrecy in a different light, not as a slight to me or my mother but as a testament to our history.

I was on my period during my 2008 dance recital. I had just started getting periods one year earlier and was still struggling to prevent leaks, as I was constantly moving in dance classes and did not know how to use tampons. I made do with pads which always threatened to shift if I made a single wrong move. I could only imagine the roasting I would receive from the other kids if I were to accrue a blood stain at school. I knew my mother would probably blame me for it. I imagined her saying, *I don’t wanna hear it! I know you didn’t change your pad enough!*

I was incredibly careful during my cycle, yet, sitting on the floor of the high school hallway-turned-dressing room of my dance recital, my mother’s voice sliced through the conversation I had been having with my friends, letting me know that I had not been careful enough. “Rachael!” My friends and I turned to see my mother holding my purple and black tutu

up by the crotch, which was stained with still-wet blood. She glared at me with a combination of anger and torment, as if to scold and mock me at the same time. I sank into myself, in the way that some cactus flowers shrivel up in the heat, still alive but hiding from the intense sunlight. I do not remember what my mother said at that moment. I may have blacked out.

The next day, I confronted my mother about the incident. “I just didn’t want you to be embarrassed,” she said. “But you did embarrass me,” I said. “You showed my blood to everyone.” I do not remember what she said after that, but I know that it was not “sorry.” So began my quest for an apology for the infamous period incident, a journey which lasted 17 years, a journey which I have largely abandoned. I continually picked at my mother, sometimes randomly, and reminded her of the incident. With each reminder, her recollection of the event worsened. At one point, she suggested that my story detailed something my grandmother had done to her, and I had simply co-opted the experience. As revealing as this response was, I realized that I would never get my mother to remember, much less apologize for showing my period blood to my friends. In fact, I have begun to suspect that her initial response of “I just didn’t want you to be embarrassed” was supposed to suffice as an apology. For a long time, I wrestled with the thought that my mother was a habitual liar, intent on hurting me then gaslighting me out of confronting her. My view of my mother lacked empathy and context and presented her as a villain. I had not considered that her denial was not truly a lie, but an act of immediate forgetting.

My mother once told me during a conversation about painful and embarrassing memories that when a memory became too difficult to confront, she repeated over and over to herself, “I don’t want to remember this. I don’t want to remember this.” She told me that this mantra generally helped her to forget negative experiences, and that I should try it too. I remember this

conversation and apply it as context to my mother's denials, especially to the denials which suggest that my grandmother was the true culprit. Each time my mother recounted the ways in which my grandmother had harmed her, she concluded by promising never to repeat my grandmother's actions when raising my siblings and me. Perhaps the idea that she could have unintentionally hurt me in the same ways my grandmother had unintentionally hurt her was too painful of an idea to confront.

The nature of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome involves the passing down of habits formed during American chattel slavery and the centuries of anti-Black oppression that followed. Like my grandmother, my mother also appears to wrestle with shame, though she navigates that shame in a different way. My grandmother adapted to a culture of dissemblance while my mother appears to have forced herself to repress unsavory memories. Both women engaged in the denigration of their children for the sake of protection. As my mother prepared to marry my father, the number of negative comments made by my grandmother about my mother's appearance and relationship increased. While my grandmother was wrong to insult my mother, she did so under the context that my mother was marrying a white man. To my grandmother, this union ignored the centuries of oppression that resulted from white supremacy.

My mother found reasons to insult my appearance as well, specifically in regard to my hair which I stopped applying chemical straightening relaxers to, and my body which began shifting from my previously thin frame in high school. I initially took her insults at face value, thinking that her fatphobia and texturism existed in a social vacuum. But I now view my mother's denigration with the knowledge that many schools in America enact policies which remove Black girls from the classroom for wearing their natural hair textures.[19] I apply this

[19] Lindsey Norwood, "Natural Hair Discrimination," Legal Defense Fund, March 19, 2024.

context and my anger gives way to empathy. I think of the promises I made to my niece and nephew not to engage in the more negative aspects of my mother's and grandmother's parenting styles.

But then I interrogate my own behaviors toward my students; while I continue to extend empathy for the children who are related to me, do I offer that same treatment to my students? When I am alone in my small dance studio with 35 children who have been sitting at desks for hours and finally have a chance to move, and so begin running and screaming throughout the space, do I extend empathy toward them when trying to regain order, or do I adopt the same tone as my mother when she disciplined me? In identifying the context of my mother's and grandmother's actions, I find it necessary to interrogate myself and identify the ways in which I suffer from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. My journey cannot simply hinge on the identification of PTSS symptoms but must also employ healing tactics which reduce further harm.

Healing from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

As I continue my quest for healing within my relationship with my mother, I am aware of the fluid and subjective nature of the term and practice of "healing." The fluid and personal nature of healing make it necessary for me to create my own definition. As it applies to my family, I create my own definition of healing with acknowledgement that it may or may not approach the definition or practice of others. I define healing as "a commitment (mutual or not) to the following: acknowledgement and validation of the past and present trauma experienced by one's own self and/or others, understanding the origins of that trauma, and taking action to rectify past actions if possible, or to continue on with awareness and respect for that trauma." I coin this definition with the understanding that while I may be willing to heal my relationships, I

cannot force others in those relationships to do the same. I also place emphasis on recognizing the trauma and personhood of others outside of their relationship to myself. In other words, I strive to see my mother and grandmother for who they are outside of their roles as "mother" and "grandmother." This definition applies insofar as one or both parties may choose to enter the healing process, and the acknowledgement of the many "selves" of the other is incredibly significant. What follows is a list of healing methods that can be applied to Black mother-daughter relationships with this definition in mind.

Storytelling

When researching the history of anti-Black oppression in the United States, it becomes clear that knowing one's full history is a privilege that many descendants of the enslaved do not possess. During American chattel slavery, enslaved Black people were not named in American census records, nor were the countries from which they were kidnapped.[20] Further, much inaccurate writing was done by white historians which downplayed the horrors of slavery, including assertions that Black women do not feel pain as severely as white women.[21] While accurate documentation of Black history does exist, many school districts throughout the United States institute bans on exploring this documentation in schools.[22] This purposeful erasure and inaccurate documentation have not only prevented many descendants of the enslaved from being able to trace their roots to a time before American chattel slavery, but also from understanding the origins of their defense mechanisms.

[20] Colleen Shogan, "African Americans and the Federal Census, 1790–1930" (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, July 2012).

[21] Linda Villarosa, *Under The Skin: The Hidden Toll of Racism on Health in America* (New York City, NY: Anchor, 2023), 22-23.

[22] Stephen Sawchuk, "What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?," Education Week, March 24, 2023.

With this historical context in mind, it is important that we keep track of our Black histories through storytelling. By passing down the events that shape our lives, whether those events are exciting or mundane, we afford our next generations the privilege of knowing their own history. Further, by documenting our existence and what we know of our histories, we resist structures which benefit from our ignorance. Knowing the history of Black subjugation, as well as the accomplishments of Black people, will allow us to foster healthy self-esteem and avoid internalizing racism and misogynoir.

Acknowledgement of Self and Others

The definition I have provided for "healing" banks on the importance of acknowledging the trauma and personhood of oneself and those around them. Listening to others and to ourselves is integral to that acknowledgement. When confronted by a loved one for a misdeed, one may be inclined to defend themselves or deny any wrongdoing. As I have observed from my mother's actions, the idea that one has harmed someone they love (intentionally or not) can cause uncomfortable emotions which are difficult to confront. Asking ourselves why we feel defensive, as well as reminding ourselves of the respect and care we feel for the involved loved one(s) can foster more empathy and a commitment to not repeating past mistakes. Further, we must acknowledge the hurt we feel about our loved ones' actions. Doing so can prevent the repression of negative emotions and encourages open communication with those who have hurt us. This practice of listening and acknowledging, as well as encouraging our loved ones to share their traumas has been described as "loud healing" by scholar Asha S. Winfield, who writes about healing processes between Black mothers and daughters. Winfield asserts that by listening to the hurts of our mothers and daughters, we empower each other to abandon intergenerational silence

which stems from shame and gendered racism.[23]

Passing Down Positive Habits

Along with healing ourselves and our mother-daughter relationships from racialized trauma comes the concept of teaching the next generation better habits of coping and communication. While we cannot prevent young Black women and girls from experiencing misogynoir in a country built on racism and bigoted violence, we can help them to understand their situation and the history behind this violence, as well as provide a supportive community in the face of ongoing harm. I want to emphasize the importance of community support in the passing down of positive habits and healing methods. I assert that we have not only the ability, but also the responsibility to engage in healing work for every young Black woman and girl, not just for our kin. By assembling villages to raise every child, we find more community support and strengthen our resolve to fight against anti-Black oppression.

Passing down the lessons we learn on our healing journeys can take many different forms depending on one's relationship to younger generations. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and godmothers can engage in "gentle parenting," a practice in which parents help "guide children through the decision-making process without threatening or punishing them."[24] Psychologist Jen Lumanlan states that gentle parenting has shown high rates of success in establishing secure attachment methods in children, but also notes that this method is most successful when parents have accurately identified their child(ren)'s needs, which can depend on culture, location, and family dynamics.[25] For example, a Black teenaged girl who acts out during a class at a

[23] Asha S. Winfield et al., "Between Black Mothers and Daughters: A Critical Intergenerational Duoethnography on the Silence of Health Disparities and Hope of Loud Healing," Frontiers in Communication 8 (January 17, 2024).

[24] "Millennial Parenting Statistics: Navigating Modern Parenthood in Today's World," Lurie Children's, 2024.

[25] Jen Lumanlan, "Why People Claim That Gentle Parenting 'Doesn't Work,'" Psychology Today, 2023.

predominantly white school may have a need to see and develop friendships with others within her culture. Gentle parenting would require that her parents and teachers recognize her situation and her humanity and respond with empathy.

My Healing Journey

My quest for healing from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome began with an acknowledgement of the resentment I felt toward my mother. It pains me to say that I often have days during which I feel anger toward my mother for no apparent reason. When these emotions bubble up, I entertain them and allow them to fester, sinking deeper into my hurt. I believe that this spontaneous dwelling is the result of residual pain from conflicts between my mother and myself that we have never fully confronted. I also believe that Black mothers and daughters should be allies, especially in a world that seeks to harm them. My mother and I are still allies but the strength of our bond is sometimes overshadowed by the feelings of distrust formed after years of engaging in respectability politics, fighting, and refusing to acknowledge each other outside of our roles as "mother" and "daughter." I now challenge myself to acknowledge that our lack of communication is a symptom of PTSS that we both exhibit. I now choose to step forward and initiate difficult conversations with my mother while also taking her humanity and sensitivity into account. I do this in hopes that my mother and I will finally *see* each other.

DANCED MANIFESTATION

Creative Framework

Entering my graduate studies at Hollins University, I already possessed clear and detailed intentions for my thesis performance. I had known for some time that I wanted to focus on the relationship between my grandmother, my mother, and myself because I had grown concerned with our tendency to fight so often. In 2019, I choreographed a 16-minute length dance piece

titled *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, which focused on the mother-daughter relationships between my mother and myself, my grandmother and my mother, and my former sister-in-law and her mother, and how those relationships affected my niece, Morgan. Although I was and still am satisfied with the aesthetic outcome of the work, I regret that I regarded the behaviors of the women in my family as if they existed in a social vacuum. At most, I considered the fact that I repeated my mother's behaviors and that she repeated her mother's behaviors. But I had not considered the historical context, specifically the legacy of American chattel slavery, attached to those behaviors.

I am not sure where I first heard the term "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," but I do know that the actions of my grandmother, my mother, and myself have made more sense to me as I continue to research the theory. Coming into Hollins University, I decided to narrow the scope of my research for *Songs My Mother Taught Me*. Rather than focus on my sister-in-law, her mother, or my niece, I would zoom in to Gertie, JoAnn, and Rachael and analyze the impact of slavery on our actions and interactions. I felt that adding too many "characters" to the work would not allow me to give enough attention to each woman. Further, I was seeking to make the work more personal and specific to my own story.

Why Boxing?

I chose the action of boxing because of the parallels I had drawn between boxing as entertainment and the behaviors of the women in my family. I had seen clips of professional boxers and wrestlers fighting in front of large crowds of people and I thought of the arguments between my mother and myself that had taken place in public. I observed the fighters yelling and "show ponying" to the crowds during pre/post-fight conferences and interviews and I thought of the different stories my mother and I each told our friends after fights to get their approval of our

actions. A friend of mine who boxes professionally once told me that he did so because he felt he had to; he struggled with anger and had always felt an intense need to fight, a need which could be satisfied through professional boxing. I listened to his story and thought about the need I felt to pick at my mother's past transgressions.

To physically fight representations of my mother and grandmother takes the turmoil within our relationship to different heights; while my mother physically hit me as a child (as did my grandmother to my mother), we have never engaged in shared physical combat. By boxing, we represent our transgressions with an activity that can cause physical wounds, wounds which can remain visible long after each fight. The concept of being professional boxers implies that this is not our first or last fight and that our wounds can/will be reopened the next time we step into the ring. Further, the act of fist fighting one's own mother, grandmother, or daughter is generally viewed as supremely immoral and harmful to each party; the implication is that unintentionally hurting each other through respectability politics, denigration, and misogynoir can be viewed the same way. While professional boxers generally consent to fighting each other, there is also much to be said about the organizations that host these matches. These organizations provide venues and large crowds for boxing matches, all while profiting from the displays of violence. This is not a critique of the boxing industry. However, the concept of a boxing match can represent the effect of American chattel slavery on the African diaspora; enslavement is also an institution which profits from violence and encourages distrust and aggression between the enslaved.

Shifts in Structure

The "clear and detailed" concept I entered Hollins University with was initially very literal. I was set on building an actual boxing ring in the gallery space of the Visual Arts Center

using movie theater stanchions. I planned to create large promotional banners with pictures of my grandmother, my mother, and myself presented as professional boxers, and to hang those banners on the walls surrounding the ring. I would set up a small table and a chair to the side of the room, which would function as a betting booth; audience members could approach the booth before the performance to place bets on which "fighter" would win. Inside the boxing ring, there would be a stool in three of the four corners, and us "boxers" would sit on those stools as we prepared to fight, each one of us with our own "coaches" rubbing our shoulders and giving us pep talks. A referee would signal for the fight to begin and us dancers would engage in stage combat/dance work while yelling at each other for past transgressions. As the fight wore on, a video would suddenly be projected onto a wall. The video would depict my niece, Morgan as if she were video calling us fighters. Upon seeing her face and her confusion at our aggression, we would stop fighting and start talking, beginning the healing process.

I expressed my desire to create this work in my thesis proposal and submitted it to the Thesis Advisory Committee (TAC), under the impression that my idea would be accepted in full. However, the TAC expressed concern for the cost of the work, the literal nature of the manifestation, and the large number of moving parts involved. It was brought to my attention that the cost of the stanchions and banners, as well as payment to the two other dancers, three coaches, referee, and betting booth operator would be a large aspect to consider. Further, the TAC made comments regarding how literal my manifestation appeared. I was encouraged to find more metaphorical ways of expressing the impact of PTSS on Black mothers and daughters. I was also asked to consider creating a solo instead of a group piece and using a punching bag instead of a boxing ring, which would help reference the personal nature of my healing journey and avoid taking a literal route.

While I was concerned about the large cost of creating this work and its literal nature, I initially felt uneasy about creating a solo or straying too far from the theatrical aspect of the piece. I have always gravitated toward choreography which is presented in large, theatrical displays with audience participation and humor. I understand that the TAC did not specifically warn against such a display, but I was concerned about remaining true to my choreographic vision and presentation style. I did not want to feel as though my dance work had been created for me with only a few minor adjustments from my own point of view, so I consulted my thesis mentor, Tanya Wideman-Davis, about my concerns. Tanya validated my gravitation toward the theatrical but also asked me two questions which would become the foundation of my manifestation: "Aren't you tired of fighting your mother? Don't you want to focus on healing instead?"

Reflecting on these questions shifted my perspective on my work. I have been fighting with my mother for as long as I can remember; the world does not need to see us fight again. Further, the scope of my thesis includes the cause of the negative interactions in our relationship and the journey we begin to heal that relationship. Depicting the fighting as a large section of the work neglects to incorporate the influence of PTSS. For this reason, I have decided not to depict a physical fight at all. I am pushing back against the suggestion to create a solo, as I believe that a group piece will allow me to remain true to my vision. However, I will not include a boxing ring, a betting booth or three coaches.

Before and After the Fight

Because it is important that I present context for the turmoil in my grandmother's, my mother's, and my relationship(s), I have chosen to present the "boxers" before and after a boxing match. The work will begin with audience members being directed to the hallway outside of the

dance studio in the Dana Science Building at Hollins University. There, they will wait in the hallway and watch a video of a news report projected onto the wall. The news report will feature two reporters speaking about a boxing match which will be fought by Gertie Walker, her daughter JoAnn Grant, and her daughter Rachael Appold. The report will give statistics on the "boxers," including their heights, weights, and catchphrases, as well as context for how long the three women have been fighting. This video will help prepare the audience for the context of the show using humor and mentions of actual fights between Gertie, JoAnn, and Rachael.

After the news report ends, the dancer playing the role of Gertie (Rachel Lawal) will enter the hallway and wave to the audience. She will be approached by a "reporter" (Terrel Morris) who will question her about the fight. "Gertie" will purposely be vague and uncooperative in her answers to allude to my grandmother's secretive nature. She will then enter the dance studio (which will function as a pre/post-fight holding room) while the audience remains in the hallway. The dancer portraying JoAnn (Regina Cameron) will enter the hallway next and be interviewed by the reporter. She will answer the reporter's questions in a personable and humorous way while also invalidating the past comments from Rachael before entering the dance studio. The dancer portraying Rachael (myself) will enter the hallway last and answer the reporter's questions in an angry and aggressive manner before entering the studio. This alludes to my own struggles with resentment toward my mother and grandmother.

After I have entered the studio, the audience will be directed to enter the space. Upon entering the studio, the audience will see the three boxers sitting in stools in separate corners, preparing for their "fight." As the boxers prepare by shadow boxing, wrapping their hands with boxing tape, and addressing the audience to gain their support, they will invade each other's personal space, invalidate each other's concerns, and mock each other, leading to arguments

which a referee (Terrel Morris) will intercept, warning the boxers to "save it for the fight." After three arguments occur, the referee will tell the boxers that the fight is about to begin and lead them out of the studio. The audience will remain in their seats.

While the boxers are out of the room, an audio clip will play of an announcer giving a "play-by-play" of the fight. Rather than announcing actual boxing or sparring actions, the play-by-play will include bell sounds, punching sound effects, and descriptions of fights that my mother, grandmother, and I have had in the past (i.e., "Gertie comes in from the left, telling JoAnn that she looks fat in her wedding rehearsal dress! JoAnn knocks Rachael out by not speaking to her for two weeks!"). The implication is that the audience hears the fight but does not see it. By using audio and describing past arguments, I do not have to engage in any "new" fighting with my mother and grandmother, nor do I have to let the public be witness to that fighting.

After the audio ends, the three boxers will re-enter the dance studio as if they are physically and emotionally exhausted. They will express this state-of-being through "heavy" walking, trembling, and slow movement, alluding to the exhaustion that my mother and I often feel after fighting. A slowed down version of the audio clip of the fight will play as the dancers enter, becoming slower and tonally warped as it continues, followed by "Mad Rush," a piano composition by Philip Glass, and "Turn Around" by Harry Belafonte, a song my mother often sung to me during my childhood. "Turn Around" will begin dramatically slowed and tonally warped and gradually return to its original speed and pitch as it continues. The warping of speed and pitch represents the thoughts of the boxers in the aftermath of the match: unclear, slow, sorrowful. The dancers will take turns performing solos which combine codified contemporary technique and shadow boxing while the other dancers watch. By watching each other's

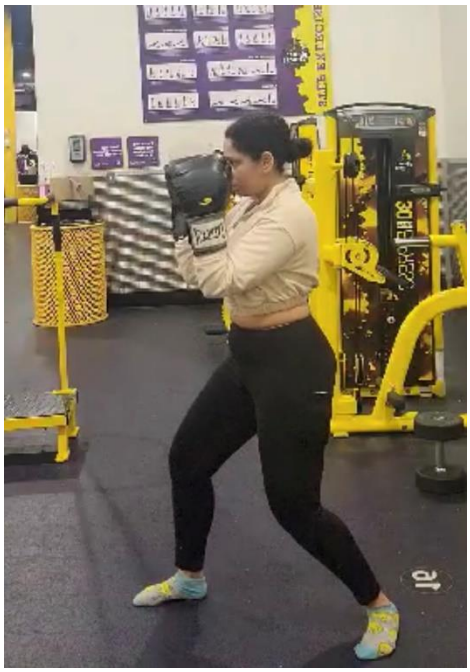
movement, we display the action of truly "seeing" each other. While the TAC previously suggested that I do not use codified movement at all, I opted to keep the contemporary choreography; the juxtaposition between the two movement styles represents the difference between fighting and healing. The work ends with the three dancers standing in a circle, facing each other and unclenching our fists, indicating our commitment to heal. After unclenching our fists, the audience will be directed to leave.

My decision to only present the events that took place before and after the fight was the result of shifting the focus from the actual fighting to the act of healing. Providing the audience information on the three women before the fight provides personal and historical context and helps them to understand why the fight is taking place. Jumping ahead to after the fight conveys that the fight itself is not as important as the negative effect it has on the women and their relationship(s).

Process and Choreographic Considerations

Brainstorming the ways that my choreography could take shape was a process of trial and error. I had begun choreographing in April but was not able to plan rehearsals due to the conflicting availability of my cast. I set movement on myself which included a mixture of codified contemporary movement and shadow boxing movements that I had learned from watching shadow boxing tutorial videos on YouTube. Upon submitting my choreography during my second thesis check in, however, the TAC expressed concern for the low energy of my movement. I consulted my mentor, Tanya, whose father is a professional boxer, and was advised to take a boxing class and establish a daily shadow boxing routine. Tanya suggested that I continue practicing the shadow boxing routine each day and observe the effect it had on my body and movement quality. I was able to receive free private shadow boxing lessons from a friend

who also attended my rehearsals with my cast. Having these brief shadow boxing lessons helped increase the energy in my movement while also providing more jumping off points for my choreography.



1. Appold, Rachael. Personal photo. April 10, 2024

Because I included other dancers to play the roles of my mother and grandmother, it was important to me that I provide my cast with enough information about my family members. I initially wanted my dancers to match the voice and inflections of my mother and grandmother, but soon realized that such an achievement would be difficult considering the little information I knew about my grandmother. I was assured by the TAC that the little knowledge I had pertaining to my grandmother was sufficient enough, as my work is less about who my mother and grandmother are and more about my experience with/perception of them. So, I decided to provide my dancers with the information I had about my mother/grandmothers and allowed them to act out the roles in voices which made sense to them.

As I planned my manifestation, I consulted two other dance works as inspiration: *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* choreographed by Camille A. Brown and *Bronx Gothic* choreographed by Okwui Okpokwasili. Brown's work presents Black girlhood as defined by Black girls themselves, depicting the ways they play with each other and making a case for their innocence in a world which sees Black girls as overtly sexual. Brown's goal in creating the work was to confront issues of Blackness that were not discussed. She decided to focus on Black girlhood after considering the lack of non-sexualized media representation of Black women and girls.[26] Okpokwasili's work recounts interactions between two young Black girls who are becoming acquainted with puberty. Okpokwasili created this work after giving birth to her daughter and drawing parallels between blossoming motherhood and blossoming puberty.[27] Both works were useful references because they dealt with the subject matters of Black girlhood, Black womanhood, and societal perceptions of both. The topic of societal perception is significant because one characteristic of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is the hyper-awareness of how Black people are perceived in a racist society.

Both works also incorporate lavish set designs and a theatrical approach to the choreography. The works make use of pantomime, pedestrian movement, and vocalization. Using these two works as a reference, I was able to shape my own choreography and set. I also watched several videos of boxers arguing before and after each match, taking note of the emphasis and inflection in their voices, their stature while arguing, and their reaction to their opponents' words. One such video showed a pre-show argument between professional boxers Deontay Wilder and Tyson Fury. Both Wilder and Fury encroached on each other's personal

[26] Mara Measor, "Black Girl: Linguistic Play," Camille A. Brown, April 24, 2024.

[27] Alexis Soloski, "Bronx Gothic: One Woman Shaking Oppression to the Core," The Guardian, May 27, 2019.

space in order to intimidate and assert dominance over the other.[28] While aggressive, I understood the performative nature of their interaction and drew parallels to the performativity in my own work. I found this video to be a helpful reference in regard to how I wanted the characters of Gertie, JoAnn, and Rachael to interact with each other.

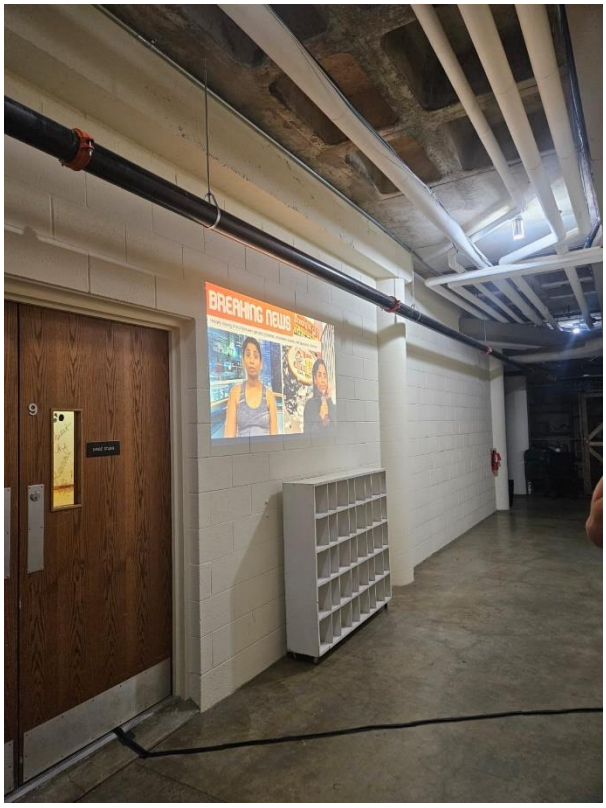
The Venue and the Set

The decision to use the basement and dance studio of the Dana Science Building came after attending several thesis concerts at Hollins University over the past two years. I initially planned to use the gallery space in the Visual Arts Center after seeing a performance there during my first year in my graduate studies. I saw the potential for the space to be turned into a boxing venue and began brainstorming methods to turn my set into an exhibit. Toward the end of my second year at Hollins University, I attended a thesis performance in the basement of the Dana Science Building. This performance made use of the hallway and the studio, and featured a lively, brightly colored set. Videos were projected onto the wall in the hallway which depicted the events taking place in the studio. As I entered the hallway, I noticed the unnerving quality of the space. The dimly lit hallway was at the bottom of a narrow staircase, and I became worried that I might get lost. The hallway had rooms with locked barred gates guarding whatever was inside, creating the illusion of cages. I realize that the space resembled an underground "fight club" and I became excited at the possibility of transforming the basement into a "boxing venue." I decided that this space better suited the scope of my thesis.

Because much of my original concept for my manifestation had been stripped down, I had less need for a lavish set design. In the basement hallway, I will have a projector set up along with my laptop and a Bluetooth speaker in order to project the news report video. I was able to

[28] Sky Sports Boxing, "The Craziest Post-Fight Interviews Ever," YouTube, June 17, 2020.

create the video using a Canon camera and Adobe Premiere editing software. Inside the studio, I will have five rows of chairs set for the audience, as well as three stools for each dancer. Next to each stool will be containers of Icy Hot ointment, medical wrap, TheraBands, and towels for the boxers to use after returning from the fight. The use of these items will draw a parallel between the physical healing work that boxers do after a literal match and the healing work mothers and daughters must engage in to salvage their relationships.



2. Jimenez, Candy. Photograph. June 29, 2024

Reflection of Process

The process of creating this work brought me to the realization that the scope of my manifestation is too large for the allotted time and budget. I do believe that the creation and incorporation of an actual boxing ring and betting booth are not inherently bad or nonsensical ideas. However, the cost of taking on such a project would require fundraising and grant writing

to accomplish. I would also need much more time to plan such a large work, as lack of rehearsal time was a hindrance in my actual manifestation. I struggled to find rehearsal dates and times that fit my cast's availability, as all three of us have daytime jobs and other dance projects.

When I first began searching for dancers to participate in the work, I put out a "call for dancers" ad on social media. However, I did not receive any contacts from this ad and began asking friends directly to participate. I initially finished my casting in March with another dancer in place to play the role of my grandmother and planned to begin rehearsals in April. Unfortunately, the dancer who originally signed on to play my grandmother stopped communicating about her participation and I had to cast a different dancer. Although the current dancer playing the role of Gertie joined our rehearsals slightly later, her professionalism and feedback have aided in the successful creation of the work.

Finding rehearsal space initially proved challenging as well. Although I teach dance in an elementary school and had free access to the studio I use for class, the county I teach in (Prince George's County) is very strict in regard to non-employees and non-students entering the space. Bringing my cast into the school for rehearsals was not an option. I was able to book rehearsal space at Dance Exchange in Takoma Park, Maryland but struggled to afford weekly rehearsals. However, a friend of mine informed me that Washington, D.C. public libraries allow patrons to book rooms for free and that the Martin Luther King, Jr. Public Library has a free-to-book dance studio. I began booking the dance studio space when it was available, as well as large conference rooms when the studio schedule was full.

3. Appold, Rachael. Personal photo. May 16, 2024

The change in structure of my piece lent itself to the creation of movement. I initially planned to incorporate stage combat combined with codified contemporary dance movement. In hindsight, I reflected on the fact that I needed training in order to shadow box and realized I would have also needed training for stage combat. I also would have needed to bring in a stage combat trainer to rehearsals in order to ensure the safety of my dancers and myself. This likely would have been another large cost.

Using stage combat also allows the audience to see my "mother," my "grandmother," and myself fighting, which is a concept that I wanted to let go. Without the presence of stage combat, I forced myself to rely on shadow boxing and contemporary movement, which helped me find other ways to convey anger and aggression. I chose to display these emotions through pointed looks between characters, dialogue, and tensing of the body. I also have considered the fact that I am typically averse to displays of violence, whether fictional or real. This aversion is intensified at the thought of violence against my family, as well as the thought that I perpetuated that violence myself. The decision to remove stage combat from my work, while not originally for

this purpose, was one which can prevent my own dwelling on the thought of family violence. I view this fact as proof that my desire to heal my relationship with my mother outweighs the anger that I still feel.

Having finished creating my danced manifestation, I continually assessed whether or not it reflected this written document. While assessing, I concluded that it would not be possible to insert forty pages of written word into a twenty-minute dance piece without creating a very literal work. I realized that a direct transfer from document to dance was not my purpose in creating my danced manifestation. The topic I chose and the large amount of research that comes with it would be overwhelming to spoon-feed piece by piece to the audience in a dance work. Instead, my intention was to capture the overarching ideas of my written document and transfer them to a dance.

These overarching ideas included the presence of an external-turned-internal force (PTSS), the personhood of my grandmother, my mother, and myself (how we heal ourselves after fights), and our experiences of/with each other (the fighting). The external-turned-internal force, or PTSS, is represented by the boxing match. I note that this force is external-turned-internal because it refers to the existence of enslavement, which is an external entity that was forced onto us, and its long-term effects which we internalize. Similarly, a boxing match is an entity which is external to the boxers but is internalized by the boxers through their combat. The personhood of my grandmother, my mother, and myself is represented by our act of watching each other after the match, witnessing the methods we use to bandage our wounds, thereby truly "seeing" each other and the effect PTSS and its symptoms have caused.

Both our positive and negative experiences of/with each other are displayed before and after the match. We recount our fights and points of contention through shadow boxing,

dialogue, and facial expressions before the match. After the match we express our commitment and high regard for each other through codified and pedestrian movement, changing our reaction to colliding with each other (we "see" each other instead of arguing over personal space), and unclenching our previously tense shoulders and fists. With these factors in mind, I assert that my danced manifestation was not a direct transfer from my written document. Rather, it is a reiteration of its overarching themes.

Reflection of Performance

My thesis performance took place on June 29, 2024, at 6:10pm. The show was successful, though the performance day was marked by a significant last-minute change. Because both of my dancers and the actor playing the reporter/referee live in Maryland and have restrictive work schedules, I had to request that my technical/dress rehearsal take place the day of the performance. During the month of June, my cast and I rehearsed our speaking parts and movement through Zoom calls. Unfortunately, one of the dancers and the actor had not committed their lines to memory and struggled to perform each run-through during our technical rehearsal. Because I did not want the first section of my work to be hindered, I made the last-minute decision to remove the interview section from the work. Instead of making our way through the hallway and answering the reporter's questions, we began the work already sitting in our chairs inside the studio. However, the audience was still instructed to wait in the hallway and watch the video of the news report before being ushered into the studio by the thesis production coordinator. I would like to include the interviews in a restaging of the work, given that all performers are local to the area of the performance and more in-person rehearsal times can be scheduled.

Removing the interviews proved to be the right decision for this iteration of my work. Although I had envisioned the audience being able to watch the boxers enter the studio, be interviewed, and engage in pre-fight live interviews, I quickly realized that the overall cleanness of the work held more importance in the last hours before the performance. I was also able to respect the time and travel of the performers by only removing the interview section; the performers were still able to recite their lines throughout the rest of the work, which was more open to adlibbing. Specifically, the referee did not need to adhere to his exact lines when telling the boxers to stop fighting.

The element of audience participation was important to this project because it would help mimic the environment of a real boxing match, during which audience members loudly cheer for a certain fighter. Each dancer was successful in engaging the audience to participate in our "match." The audience members loudly cheered for the performers when asked which boxer they wanted to win. Some attendees went as far as to jokingly "boo" certain fighters. The willingness of the audience to participate indicated to me that we had successfully created a fictional environment with which the audience could interact.

4. Jimenez, Candy. Photograph. June 29, 2024

During our dress rehearsal, one of the dancers suggested that we hit the studio door with our fists after leaving the room for the "fight." Doing so would add percussive sounds to the audience experience. A colleague who sat in on our dress rehearsal suggested that the percussive sounds could be more aggressive, allowing the door to swing slightly open with each hit. During the performance, we extended this element by allowing ourselves to occasionally crash through the door before running back out into the hallway. This element added another layer of humor to the performance and appeared to intrigue the audience.

Conclusion

In the creation of my thesis, I sought to identify the effects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome on Black mother-daughter relationships in America. Along with identifying those effects, I planned to identify the origins of these effects and provide methods of healing. Lastly, I sought to compile these identifications in a site-specific danced manifestation. In order to accomplish these goals, I employed my research of scholarly texts, journals, and articles, conducted interviews with my mother, and drew comparisons between the behaviors of my grandmother, my mother, and myself to that of professional boxers. Throughout this process, I have uncovered truths about my own behaviors, grown more empathetic toward my mother and grandmother, and traveled further on my healing journey.

Through my research, I identified internalized misogynoir, respectability politics, and a culture of dissemblance as symptoms of PTSS which affect Black mother-daughter relationships. I also identified storytelling, teaching of positive habits, and acknowledging each other outside of the roles of "mother" and "daughter" as methods of healing. I conveyed these findings in my danced manifestation through the creation of a site-specific piece which mimics the interactions between professional boxers in a boxing venue. In that manifestation, I draw comparisons

between the anger and adrenaline experienced before a match to the behaviors Black mothers and daughters may exhibit prior to entering their healing journey(s). I also compared the act of tending to one's physical wounds after a boxing match to the process of emotional mending that Black mothers and daughter may undergo.

As I near the end of this process, I acknowledge the incredibly personal nature of healing and its manifestation (or lack thereof) in every Black mother-daughter relationship. While I have identified methods of healing in this work, I also recognize that there is room within each method for that healing to take shape. I assert that this fluidity is essential, given the different dynamics and presentation of PTSS symptoms that exist in each family descended from the enslaved. I advocate for the freedom of all members of the African diaspora to engage in their individual and familial healing journeys. By choosing to heal from the wounds that American chattel slavery continues to inflict centuries after the fact, we resist the ongoing harm and misogynoir-based oppression that we face today. The love we have for our grandmothers, mothers, and daughters is a testament to that resistance.

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