

WE USED TO BE AFRAID

Writing Sample from a Ten-Minute Play
by Farah Lawal Harris

Contact:
Farah Lawal Harris
Address Available Upon Request
(240) 360-0938
farah.lawal@gmail.com

Character Breakdown

SHANTE: A black woman (late teens to early 20's); college upperclassman; wears leggings and a college T-shirt

MELLI: A black woman (late 20's to mid 30's); works in a corporate environment; wears a business suit

B: A black trans woman* (early 20's to late 30's); beautician; dressed in black pants, a black T-shirt and a hairdresser's apron.

SHANTE, MELLI and B are cousins.

**Casting Note: It is important that the producers of this play make a sincere effort to find a black trans woman to play the part of B. If this proves impossible, a black woman who identifies as queer or a black person who identifies as genderqueer would be acceptable.*

Setting

The living room of MELLI and B's two-bedroom apartment in Washington, DC.
Summer.

Scene 1

Blackout, then lights up on the empty living room of a two-bedroom apartment in NW Washington, DC. An excerpt from Malcolm X's May 5, 1962 speech, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" plays: "Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? To such extent you bleach, to get like the white man. Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to so much so that you don't want to be around each other?" SHANTE, MELLI and B enter the apartment. They are pissed—not at each other, but at the world. They take good looks at each other and the audience. A deep inhale and then...

SHANTE, MELLI & B

I am afraid.

SHANTE

I'm scared to let my neck roll; keep it perfectly still when I'm mad cuz I don't want to be seen as "ghetto." I'm afraid to agitate, so instead I keep my anger locked inside, shakin like a teakettle about to whistle too fuckin loud.

MELLI

I un-slur my words around white people because I don't need to give them one more reason to see me as less than, missing 2/5 of my humanity.

B

I once read that Josephine Baker would cut lemons in half and rub them all over her skin to make herself lighter, so I also walk around smellin like citrus to make myself sweeter and easier to digest.

SHANTE

I stiffen my dancing with my white friends; restrict myself to a boring ass two-step—afraid to become instructor instead of peer...

MELLI

Cultural interpreter instead of colleague—dreading dumb ass questions like...

SHANTE

(Imitating a white woman)

“So what does ‘on fleek’ really mean?”

B

That shit is late.

SHANTE

I don’t want to teach you how to whip.

SHANTE, MELLI & B

Your ancestors already taught you.

MELLI

Ours taught us to...

SHANTE, MELLI & B

Work thrice as hard...work thrice as hard...work thrice as hard...

B

To get half of what they got. What they got on me though? Sally’s skin may be white as snow but mine is deep like Mother Earth. Do you know how much beautiful shit comes from Mother Earth?

SHANTE

But I refuse to have babies cuz I don’t want them to die—don’t want my sons and daughters to be shot and kept outside to roast like sunflower seeds covered in my salty tears. Don’t want my seeds to be spit out, their names turned to hashtags buried under timelines.

MELLI

I’ve swallowed my tears. In the corporate world, a black woman’s tears are not seen as vulnerability, but as incompetence. If I cry at work, I’ll get asked if I can handle all the responsibility and they’ll want to fire me. So I reserve hot tears for the ladies’ room because muffled sobs and leather shoes in a closed stall have no color.

SHANTE

Everyone’s name is black at the top of a resume. But my mama named me Shante, not Shannon, so hiring staff throw me away.

B

I don’t fight for people to call me “woman” cuz I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself. Invisible feels better than dead. So I smile through all the he, he-she, tranny, it, bitch wit a dick, freak, thing and abominations. I grit my teeth, prayin their words don’t become fists, knives or guns. But I’m sick of smiling.

SHANTE, MELLI & B

We are afraid.

SHANTE

Last semester, I learned about how sequoia trees have adapted to the point that when forest fires come, they release their seeds into the ground right before they burn down. They refuse to go extinct...

Suddenly, B has an "a-ha" moment.

B

Shit, that sounds like us.

MELLI

Doesn't it, though? Like, black is synonymous with survival.

B

Yes! Black is synonymous with survival...Shit! Why didn't I think of this before?

(Getting excited)

We bout to be black as hell, y'all!

SHANTE

Um, last time I checked, we already black as hell.

B

You not listening, lil cuz. The blackest thing we could possibly do is survive. And that's what we bout to do, Shante. We are about to be black as hell...by becoming white!

Blackout.

Scene 2

A couple hours later. Lights up on SHANTE, MELLI and B. MELLI holds a wooden spatula and brings it to her mouth to taste.

B

Test it out, Melli! What it taste like?

MELLI

(Smacking her lips and thinking)

Hmm...it tastes...bland, but powerful at the same time.

B

Perfect!

SHANTE

Seriously? A freakin potion gonna turn us into white women, B?

B

Trust me, ‘Te...growing up, I used to spend the summers with my Gramma in New Orleans and she taught me everything she knew about hoodoo. I haven’t practiced it in years, but I still remember.

MELLI

B, you know I have so much on the line. Like, this has to work.

SHANTE

Chill, Melli. According to Cousin B, we’ll be white in no time.

MELLI

We better be. My annual review is coming up and Lord knows I need a promotion and a raise. The rent is too damn high and I swear, that job has sucked the life out of me for five straight years! I can’t watch another white girl with less experience just zoom on past me...

B

I got you, boo.

B takes the spatula from MELLI, stirs the pot and tastes the concoction.

B

It’s ready, y’all. Hold my hands and repeat after me...

SHANTE

I don’t know about this...

B

Girl, what do we have to lose?

A sigh, then they all hold hands. A light shift occurs as B casts a spell.

B

White is free.

SHANTE & MELLI

White is free.

B

White is default, exempt and clean.

SHANTE & MELLI

White is default, exempt and clean.

B

Remove our darkness and fill us with light.

SHANTE & MELLI

Remove our darkness and fill us with light.

B

Take our black skin and replace it with white.

SHANTE & MELLI

Take our black skin and replace it with white.

*Lights flicker and we hear howling winds
and glass shatter. SHANTE & MELLI cling
to each other. B is in a trance-like state.*

B

Ancestors and Orishas, we call on you right now for transformation! Give us the power to move through the world unchained! *Awa fe di Oyinbo*¹!

Thunder crackles and lighting strikes.

B

Cousins, the spell is almost complete. Repeat after me once more...All lives matter!

SHANTE & MELLI

(With excitement)

All lives matter!

B

Blue lives matter!

SHANTE & MELLI

Blue lives matter!

B

Make America great again!

¹ In Yoruba, “We want to be white!”

SHANTE & MELLI

Make America great again!

The sound of an explosion. Blackout.

Scene 3

Lights up. SHANTE, MELLI and B appear stunned, then examine themselves from head to toe. They are seeing the world with new eyes; they are now white women.

SHANTE

(To MELLI) Melissa?!

MELLI

(To SHANTE) Shannon?!

SHANTE & MELLI

(To B) Brittany?!

MELLI

You did it! You really did it!/
/

SHANTE

Oh my God...I can't believe it, Brittany!

SHANTE goes in for a hug. B recoils.

B

Don't get carried away, dear. I had a vision and carried it to completion—if you work hard enough, you can do the same.

SHANTE

Come on...cut the shit, Brit.

B

Language! Please, Shannon, elevate yourself to the skin we are now in.

SHANTE

(Whining to MELLI)

Melissa! She's making me out to be a villain...

MELLI

Hang on, Shannon—we've undergone a great transformation and perhaps Brittany is just getting her bearings. Give her a moment, OK?

(To B, gently)

Brittany, honey?

B

Yes?

MELLI

(Carefully)

Are you feeling OK? You're acting quite strangely and I think you owe our cousin, Shannon, an apology.

B

(Incredulously)

Oh, you can't be serious, Melissa! You're asking me to apologize for being white? I will do no such thing!

Beat. They all begin giggling, then crack up.

SHANTE

Gosh, I was really looking at this all wrong!

MELLI

Me too!

B

I tried to tell you, darlings, but the realization refused to hit you soon enough.

SHANTE, MELLI & B

We're white!

SHANTE

(Freaking out)

Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod! There's so much I can do now—what do I do first, you guys? I know! I'm going to secure an internship for next semester, then go shopping!

MELLI

I have to get to work! I'm going to march into my supervisor's office and demand a promotion! What are you going to do, Brittany?

B

I'm going to walk down the street without the fear of losing my life. It's going to be a marvelous day, my dears. Let's revel in the joy of being white women! Ta-ta, ladies!

Ta-ta!

SHANTE & MELLI

They exit.