



# Blacktino Queer Performance

E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, editors

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To the foremothers,

**Marsha P. Johnson** and **Sylvia Rivera**

And to our companions,

**Joel Valentín-Martinez** and **Stephen J. Lewis**

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# Part VII

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# Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love

Pamela Booker

## CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

CHORUS—composed of the cast

TheEX

TheFACE

DIRECTOR

LEADINGLady

## NOTES

- ▶ All actors should possess a strong sense of physical movement.
- ▶ Time shifts between present-time action and memory-invoked storytelling. The characters also alternate between speaking tenses that include interior/private voices and exterior/public voices within a given movement.
- ▶ Masks play an important role in the performance and should be inter-faced at director's discretion.
- ▶ Setting kept to a minimum with greater emphasis on visual projections if used.
- ▶ Sound and lighting as determined.

## MOVEMENT I OF MARRIAGE, MEMORY, AND SUMMER CLOTHES

SEEN 1: "When I Fall in Love . . ."

---

[AT RISE:

All cast appears as chorus of voices as noted. All are masked. DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady carry silver trays with two pairs of rose-colored glasses and a long-stem rose on each.]



Fig. VII.1. *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love*.  
Photo by Julie Lemberger, courtesy of Pamela Booker.

CHORUS

We said we would be forever.  
We said we would show each other the world  
Filled with sacred/supple nights  
And malleable/morning kisses.

TheEX

We said our lives and our choices  
Were surmountable

TheFACE

That children and careers  
The acquired demands  
The unanticipated compromises

CHORUS

(swift) Of two who love each other who are trying to do this thing right  
together of two who love each other who are trying to do this thing right  
together . . .

TheEX

Would not sour  
The buttery taste of our dreams  
Nor dilute our red sky at dawn  
Quartz rose love

TheFACE

Fueled by desire, imagination and trust  
That played a love supreme  
As if composed by Coltrane.

TheEX

We said our love would flourish  
Because it must

TheFACE

Not because it had to  
But that it must

TheEX

In the way that blood and oxygen must  
Conspire with organs to keep life  
Present in the body.  
It will be forever . . .

Both

It will be forever . . .

[EXIT DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady. TheEX FREEZES IN THE SHADOWS.  
MUSIC RISES: Violin or recording of “When I Fall in Love . . .”

LIGHTS crossfade to TheFACE who drags out an already filled large plastic trash bag. She reaches for a stack of clothes and begins stuffing them into another bag. Each piece of clothing is painstakingly studied. Her body and facial expressions recall the events that wore the clothing; emotions reveal anger, sadness and the satisfaction of completing her task.

MUSIC and LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.]

## SEEN 2: THE BLACK &amp; WHITE

[The outer and inner lobbies and staircase of a walkup apartment building. TheEX is seen in the outer-lobby carrying an empty garment bag. An array of masks of many colors dangle precariously from the bag and TheEX tries on several “faces.”]

TheEX

You chastised me for not remembering what dress you wore to Steve and Edie’s wedding.

CHORUS

She may again forget the color of your dress, but she knows the color of your eyes that float like almonds set upon pearl disks. She knows the thickness of your eyelashes which send forth cool, tender breezes on nights that are hot and intoxicating. She knows the lower east-side of your strong, elegant back, and the collard-green birthmark that dances across your calf. In times of longing—

TheEX

—and there is always longing

CHORUS

She sips hungrily from the pools of Egyptian musk and salt that dwell in the arc of your neck and moisten the insides of your armpits and in-between your thighs—

TheEX

—thighs that wear me . . . Wear me . . . Wear me . . . Why then, would I need to remember a dress worn to someone else’s wedding? (beat) My face. My face.

[TheEX selects the black & white mask and places it on her face, then rings the doorbell. TheFACE’s voice screeches expectantly, crackling in tune with the intercom.]

TheFACE

Who is it?

TheEX

Me.

TheFACE

Just a minute, I'll be right there.

[TheFACE runs quickly to a rack of masks, tries on several, then swiftly pulls out one that is blue and the other black & white. The black & white mask is placed on her face, in a ritualistic fashion; as if arming herself for the encounter. The blue mask is concealed on the body. There is the rhapsodic, echoing sound of an apartment door opening/closing and footsteps descending the stairs. This sound is repeated several times, each level softer than the last. Simultaneously, TheFACE mimes a fluid, gentle, but steady movement down two flights of stairs as TheEX speaks.]

TheEX

I enter the building's entryway with the air of a trespasser. Stay calm. Be charming. I wonder, is my face on properly? My face, my face.

[TheFACE gestures reaching the landing, then opens the door.]

TheEX

Two flights later, I am greeted by TheFACE that once made me laugh, once a muse, once a life-mate, once a muse. Today, clichés relax us.

TheFACE

Come in.

[TheEX enters as TheFACE moves to close the lobby door.]

TheEX

Hello.

TheFACE

How are you?

TheEX

Hello.

TheFACE

How are you?

TheEX

Hello.

TheFACE

You look well.

TheEX

You look well.

TheFACE

Well, okay. Let's get your clothes. **(strolls eagerly toward the upper staircase as TheEX hovers near the entrance.)**

TheEX

**(with masked alarm)** Aren't the clothes in the basement?

TheFACE

No, as a matter of fact, I brought them up earlier. I needed to . . . SEPARATE mine from yours. Let's go up. **(TheFACE moves as if ascending stairs.)**

TheEX

**(shakes head in mock agreement, then speaks to TheFACE with beats)**  
Mmmm . . . Yes. *Separate*. That makes sense. You *separated* our clothes upstairs? **(to audience)** Now that's strange. But stay calm, don't say anything stupid. Smile. Be charming. Yes, charming. Charming. **(repeats twice)** I—am—charming. **(suspicious)** Hauling boxes of clothes all the way from the basement to the third floor? Why, when she could just as easily have handed them to me in the lobby? What should I be thinking right now? Think. THINK. What's she up to? It's, it's already late, I'm leaving next week and I need my summer clothes!

TheFACE

Did you say something?

CHORUS

I said, I'm leaving next week  
I'm leaving next week  
I'm leaving and I need my summer clothes!



TheEX

(startled) Who . . . me? I . . . I said I'm following you. After you! (They begin to mime climbing stairs.) (reflective w/beats) I used to call this building home, and shared a life with this strangely distilled face that's greeted me as if I'm picking up hand-me-downs for the Salvation Army. (to TheFACE w/ strained gaiety) I see the neighbors still haven't set out their recycling!?! (resumes interior voice) Innocuous small talk is all I can manage as we scale the stairs to the third floor apartment that TheFACE and I shared for the decade. Yet, after ten years, each of my hairs stand on end and bad vibes are swing-dancing about my head. (TheFACE pauses as TheEX continues.)

TheFACE

(beats) We fell in love while working in the theater. Me and TheEX. Virginia Woolf captures in a sentence our life together when she said, "I don't think two people could have been happier." A rather ironic declaration on married life, don't you think, (slight chuckle) considering it's borrowed from the suicide note that Woolf left her husband—

TheEX

—her husband Leonard! Yes. TheFACE and I, we died slow, painful deaths like Virginia—

TheFACE

—and her husband Leonard.

TheEX

Drowned. Yet for years we were both "happy."

TheFACE

We were filled with a genuine purpose, wouldn't you say?!

TheEX

Yes! Oh yes, absolutely.

TheFACE

Building a life together, buying things, paying off credit cards.

TheEX

Vacationing. Serving as role-models for our high-maintenance friends, you know—"deconstructing" other people's dysfunction.

TheFACE

We did! Playing leading roles one day, supporting roles the next. Damn good characters we were—fully dimensional, believable and passionate about our craft.

TheEX

Yes, *passionate*.

Both

We fell in love while working in the theater.

[Actors remove their masks.]

**MUSIC PLAYS.**

**LIGHTS TO BLACK.**

## MOVEMENT II—FLASHBACK

### SEEN 3: The Theeeeatre!

---

[Space arranged to give the impression of a theater, front of house and backstage. TheEX should carry a clipboard and the DIRECTOR is pretentious-looking and grand sounding.]

CHORUS

(speaks in the round with a sense of reverry)

She walked effortlessly into the vacancy of MY life.

She walked effortlessly into the vacancy of MY life.

She walked effortlessly into the vacancy of MY life.

She walked effortlessly into the vacancy of MY life.

TheEX

I believe it was Picasso who said, “painting is stronger than I am, it makes me do what it wishes . . .”

[ENTER DIRECTOR]

DIRECTOR

This turned out to be the last day of the final moment of callbacks.

TheEX

The DIRECTOR and I, the stage manager, shaking our heads, sighed collectively, **(both sigh)** wishing that she'd appeared at least one week sooner.

DIRECTOR

You see, the leading role was already cast. It would have been . . . Irrational . . . No, mad, to audition the practically, almost cast, LeadingLady for yet a third time! Then again this was the "theeatre" and sometimes that's the way life happens, isn't it? Mad and irrationally.

TheEX

Where was she all this time?

DIRECTOR

Exactmo! I've been looking for her type for months now!

TheEX

**(reflective)** I've been looking for her type for a lifetime.

DIRECTOR

We shall call her *SupportingCharacter*! It's the only remaining role. Yes, her role shall be small, but smart, and full of and full of—

TheEX

—of verve, pizzazz!

DIRECTOR

Yes! Yes! Verve, pizzazz! And her presence, though brief, shall be everlasting!

TheEX

Little did I fathom that she would steal the show and my sense of reason before the final curtain call.

CHORUS

All actors to the stage please.

To the stage please.

All actors to the stage.

## SEEN 4: BACKSTAGE

TheFACE

Fasten me, pin my hair.

TheEX

Her lines intoxicated me.

TheFACE

Backstage was best. Oh what charades and acts of foreplay were contained in the dressing room, between, around and through our unscripted, unspoken lines.

TheEX

She asks me to replace a fallen light-bulb from her mirror. I do, with the only bulb available—an impotent one of not more than 60 watts. Tonight, it glowed 100 times its capacity.

Both

Backstage was best.

[ENTER LEADINGLady. She is dressed extravagantly and takes up space with her presence.]

LEADINGLady

(mumbling the lines) Out damn! Out damn, spot! Out damn! Out damn, spot!

TheFACE

The leading lady strutted about despondently like Macbeth's wife asking all who were brave enough to respond—

LEADINGLady

How now! What news of my reviews and delivery and such? Director, oh director! I'm ready for my close-up. And don't NOBODY bring me no bad news. Bad news gives me wrinkles . . .

TheFACE

Sensing treachery, ME in the wings, she brayed—

LEADINGLady

Where was I? That's right—Out damn! Out damn—line?!

TheEX & TheFACE

Spot!

LEADINGLady

Yes, spot! Thank you my dears. **(to TheFACE)** You must be the new girl? Welcome dahling. Oh my, must'nt dally. I have sooo many lines to remember. I'm the star you know. Yes, carry on then . . . Out, out, out! **(EXITS mumbling lines.)**

TheEX

She observed that you, the mere SupportingCharacter delighted them nightly **(points to audience)** with the magnanimity of being small. While they applauded politely for the LeadingLady at curtain call, they howled like wolves and unabashedly stomped their feet for you. I was charmed. The LeadingLady was pissed!

TheFACE

She wanted "off with my head!"

TheEX

What she wanted was your cute ass off the stage! **(They both chuckle as they EXIT.)**

**[LEADINGLady ENTERS struggling with her lines. DIRECTOR also ENTERS coaching her. Theirs becomes a sexually charged exchange.]**

DIRECTOR

I need more! Give me more. Come now LeadingLady—feel the textures. See the colors. Imagine your lines a finely drawn set of bodily demarcations.

LEADINGLady

Deee-Mark what?!

DIRECTOR

**(screams to audience)** Learn your lines cow! Okay, okay, center Director, center. **(to LL)** Let's take it from the top—again. Slowly, delicately, piannissimo. Make love to those syllables. And 1, 2 and 3—**(He mouths the phrases with her.)**

LEADINGLady

(to audience) I'll show him who knows how to "make love" and who knows how talk about it! (mocks Director with heightened sexy voice/gestures) Uuuuut! Oowwwttt! Deeeeemn. Daaaaammm!

DIRECTOR

Yes, yes, that's it. Feel it—feel it! I mean feel it baby.

LEADINGLady

Uuuuut! Oowwwttt! Deeeeemn. Daaaaammm!

DIRECTOR

Good. Again. (begins self-flagellating) Give it to me baby.

LEADINGLady

Uuuuut! Oowwwttt! Deeeeemn. Daaaaammm!

DIRECTOR

Oh, yes . . . I'm feeling you. Right there. Don't stop. Don't stop.

LEADINGLady

(moans) Oh, Mr. Director, you're exhausting meeee. . . .

DIRECTOR

Only to make it as good for you. AGAIN. This time without interruption. For . . . for . . . peak effect.

LEADINGLady

Daddy wants it rough? (slutty tone/gestures/grunts) Uuuuut! Oowwwttt! Deeeeemn. Daaaaammm!

DIRECTOR

FREAK me baby, yes baby. Oh don't stop. Don't stop. . . .

DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady together

Uuuuut! Oowwwttt! Deeeeemn. Daaaaammm! (repeat)

DIRECTOR

Oh GOD, you are breathtaking! (falls from exhaustion, then crawls on all fours, EXITING behind LEADINGLady.)

[ENTER TheEX & TheFACE chuckling at the pair.]

TheEX

Over the weeks, the bard Will's musings on how we are all merely **(points to departed Director+LeadingLady)** players on the ever so bizarre stage of life competed with my thoughts. What was my role in this odd affair and why so much adieu **(points to TheFACE)** with this player?

TheFACE

I dreamt that I had entered into the abyss of some actor's nightmare.

TheEX

Here I was a simple stage manager, standing by as the familiarity of our town and my station in it was conspicuously altered by a landscape whose scenes were filled with strange, enticing cues.

Director and LEADINGLady

**(holler from OFFSTAGE)** Familiarity breeds contempt!

TheEX

I was not cued for the affection of a woman, yet I knew that I would not be able to exit without her.

TheFACE

A host of friends, family, wannabees and well-wishers, joined us for the closing performance. I was restless, unfocused, glad to see this run over with and in a quandary about our impending good-bye. Portia was wrong, the "quality of mercy" is strained and so too is the unexpectedness of falling in love as the house lights slowly dissolve to black.

TheEX

I watched from the shadows your movements, the roll of your eager shoulders, the extension of your welcoming arms, the confidence of your stroll. You greeted fans awaiting you at house right. I crossed to meet you down center. Time stopped. I was eclipsed by a force—making me do what it wanted. I thrust my lips upon your startled but approving mouth **(they kiss)**. In the sanctity of our private world, we consummated a public intimacy that would linger.

TheFACE

And then linger. (they kiss again)

TheEX

I love you.

TheFACE

I love you. (beat) This was no longer rehearsal. Neither of us dared to question the deed—

TheEX

—nor repeat it. We were trapped willingly in a sound barrier of compressed, limitless time, joy, time.

[Both are giddy as they dance with each other.]

TheFACE

How did we withstand the reverberations humming through us? We had surpassed human weightiness, elevated to a vastness preserved only for the goddesses.

TheEX

Venus herself smiled sumptuously upon us bearing witness . . . Bearing witness.

TheEX & TheFACE

(together) I love you.

[The LEADINGLady releases a piercing laugh/scream as she ENTERS with the DIRECTOR. He is carrying her bouquets of flowers. TheEX and TheFACE are startled by the shrill.]

TheEX

The LEADINGLady was exiting, her entourage, within arm's reach, gazed wantonly like captivated pedestrians—

TheFACE

—or sitting ducks!



DIRECTOR

(to LEADINGLady as he hands her the flowers) You were faaabulous daaahling.

LEADINGLady

Yeeeesss, I was. (then to TheFACE) But you were fabulous too lovely.

DIRECTOR

She was, indeed!

LEADINGLady

Hope we can do it again.

TheFACE

We will. (to audience) In another lifetime.

LEADINGLady

Smooches daaahlings! Smooches! (EXITS on arm of DIRECTOR.)

V/O

Eve

Eve

TheEX

Where . . . do we go? What do we do with this?

V/O

Confesses

Confesses

TheFACE

Tomorrow and tomorrow—

CHORUS

To Eve.

TheEX

And tomorrow?

[ENTER DIRECTOR]

DIRECTOR

(to TheEX) Duty calls stage manager. I say, duty calls.

TheEX

I bid you a rigorous adieu—

TheFACE

But not good-bye, my lady.

[TheEX EXITS with DIRECTOR AS MUSIC SWELLS ON TheFACE.]

LIGHTS TO BLACK.

### SEEN 5: THE “L” WORD

---

[The setting is a pastoral/Elysian field. ENTER DIRECTOR and LEADING-Lady carrying silver platters with two pairs of rose colored glasses on each. They speak while dressing TheFACE. ENTER TheEX carrying pink roses. They turn to dress TheEX in her glasses. All actors move to a choreographed movement and exchange partners throughout, configuring in the shape of “L” at the end.]

CHORUS

Locks fall upon you resolutely.

TheFACE

A terrific downpour.

TheEX

Rainfall.

CHORUS

Steady determined wetness.

TheEX & TheFACE

Longing.

CHORUS

Caressing the shoulder

They arc like fluid streams of

TheEX

Licorice

Smooth/slender

Often they

Being of a

TheFACE

Languid

Lounge

Lofty nature

CHORUS

Sigh gently when stroked

By familiar fingertips

Or lie placidly across

TheEX

Landscapes

Written on the body

Licking limbs

TheFACE

Flanking

Rounds and mounds

Breasts and chests

Loitering.

CHORUS

Eagerly they rise

Eagerly they rise to meet

To meet

Eagerly

TheFACE

Yes, eagerly to meet

The ebbs and flows of the back

TheEX

Looping

Lustily

Around our chocolaty necks

CHORUS

Spilling

spooning

spiraling

TheFACE

Lingering  
as if jewels

TheEX

Pearls  
Lodged

CHORUS

Between thick thighs/torsos  
& ample waists  
Seeking hidden crevices  
Among graceful hips

TheEX & TheFACE

Intertwined. Locked.

TheEX

Each strand magnificent carriers  
Of independent secrets  
And faint scents

TheFACE

Woven/threaded/kneaded  
Palmed in oils  
Coconut frankincense  
Sandalwood  
myrrh

CHORUS

Love.

TheEX

At dawn locks dance among themselves  
Spray across pillows

TheFACE

Form inverted pyramids or crowns  
Divined for majestic heads of  
Goddesses and warriors.

CHORUS

This is where  
Laughter  
Lurks  
Within dreams  
And reams of  
Locks.

[DIRECTOR + LEADING Lady collect glasses from the lovers then EXIT. The entire tone of their world turns to a stark reality. Thunder and lightning crackle. An uneasiness preoccupies them.]

The EX

We discovered the sameness of gender, afraid to call it the “L” word, yet enchanted by the strangeness of this new fruit.

The FACE

The smell, the taste, the touch of woman. We consumed each other with epicurean delight.

The EX

In gregarious portions.

The FACE

Convinced that our lives depended on it.

The EX

It did. The hunger, the hunger. We sipped, nibbled, gnawed, chomped and suckled the “L” word.

The FACE

For more than a decade we lived and danced on the emotional fringes of the “L” word. Instead, it was simpler to choose the “S” word—to say we loved the “sameness” of each other. We learned not to limit ourselves to categories or placards or the politics. We thought we could avoid the politics. We didn’t expect to *become* our own cause! In reality, we were terrorized by the intolerance and the hatred . . .

The EX

The self hatred and the legislated . . .

V/O

Recording of an antigay platform.

[ENTER LEADING Lady and DIRECTOR, MARCH IN CARRYING LARGE CROSSES AND BIBLES.]

CHORUS

(whispers, then shouts) Bible thumpers, Bible thumpers, we are the bible thumpers . . . (repeat)

TheFACE

Like scum-carrying creatures from the bottom of a dead pond, they crawled up and coated us with the residue of their stinking disapproval.

TheEX

It was pervasive. Who am I kidding? It was ugly. (points) It's still ugly!

TheFACE

It was noxious. Mean.

TheEX

It hurt, damnit. And it was all so unexpected.

CHORUS

(taunts) Love is always unexpected. How you respond to it is choice! Man should choose woman! Woman should choose man! It's just not right!

TheFACE

You're all so smug and so fucking righteous!

TheEX

You reduced our "marriage" to sound-bite and curtsy.

TheFACE

No . . . in all fairness we did that . . .

TheEX

You're too polite! We didn't have help or role-models. And all they said over and over again—

[HOUSE LIGHTS UP. Lovers + Chorus move to confront audience.]

CHORUS

(stern) It's just not right!

TheFACE

Our parents, Our friends said it. Well, ex-friends.

CHORUS

It's just not right!

TheEX

Every religious doctrine said it.

CHORUS

It's just not right!

TheFACE

The television said it.

CHORUS

(all actors—builds into frenzied sermon-like voice) Gods says, it's just not right. Therefore WE are your God. And we are RIGHT. But you're NOT. RIGHT. WE say YOU'RE just not right! Move to the right. Buy right. Live right. Speak right. Pee right. Right shoe? Right fit. Alright. Rite Aid. Aids? Ohhhh . . . my . . . No. That's not right. Get right . . . we know . . . with Jessssuuuus. (clap) He'll fix everything. Like Mikey, he's eats from a bowl of cereal and the world is made RIGHT. Make it all right. Make ME all right. If you eat right with Jessssuuuus. (clap) It'll be all right. RIGHT! Get to know Jessssuuuus. (clap) Get to know, ha, get to know, yes, get to know, get to know, I said, get to know (clap) Jessssuuuus and it will be alright. RIGHT? RIGHT? RIGHT . . .

TheEX

No, it's not right! Not what Our friends said. Our families.

TheFACE

YOU, you moderates, liberals, FUCKa—I mean . . . FUNDamentalists!

TheEX

Our families. My family . . . and ever so politely, our heterosexual friends, questioning . . . are you sure? Or remaining silent.

[ACTORS RETURN TO STAGE. HOUSE LIGHTS OUT.]

TheEX

Have you said it? Or thought it?

TheFACE

What?

TheEX

You know . . .

TheFACE

Maybe I have said it.

TheEX

(**confessional**) I even knew a sister who told her father about the yearnings that her sister had for girls.

TheFACE

Oh, you mean the “G” word.

TheEX

She discovered it in her journal you know. A sacred, private sanctuary.

TheFACE

Mmm . . . What was *your* sister doing reading *your* journal anyway?

TheEX

It . . . it wasn't my sister. You're right. It was my sister. The one place in this entire schizophrenic world that allows you to confess all of your truths, your fears, joy, that you love . . . that you love . . . women.

TheFACE

That you love is all that matters.

TheEX

Like Pandora and that damn box—she succumbed to the temptations of seeking evidence of her sister's tainted ways.

TheFACE

Now you know—some treasures are better left unexplored.



TheEX

Mmm-hum, I do. Yet she remained silent with her sister—ME—about her discovery as if terminal illness or sin had been detected and could only be discussed in the most hushed of tones or preferably not at all.

TheFACE

What is it about the “L” word that makes them crazy?

TheEX

Or righteous?

TheFACE

Or silent and shoutin’—this is a man and woman’s world—

TheEX

With the Saviour’s word

TheFACE

Ye who love same have no place in this world.

[SOUND of lightning flares as the Chorus chants.]

CHORUS

(whispers to shouts) Bible thumpers, Bible thumpers, we are the bible thumpers . . . (repeat until EXIT.)

TheEX

It’s better to speak, we learned, for we were never meant to survive. We were never meant to survive. Anyway.

TheFACE

This love, this love is stronger than we are.

TheEX

How do you choose such a thing?

TheFACE

How do you deny it?

LIGHTS TO BLACK.

[ENTER CHORUS WITH BLACK & WHITE MASKS. THEY BEGIN CHANT AS TheEX and TheFACE change into their masks.]

CHORUS

All actors to the stage please.  
Standing by.  
House to half.  
Standing by. Standing by.

**MOVEMENT III  
ALL ACTORS TO THE STAGE PLEASE.**

**SEEN 6: “Your friends exhausted me . . .”**

---

[TheEX and TheFACE place Black & White masks on their faces. Together they speak opening chant with Chorus.]

CHORUS

Your friends exhausted me  
Exhausted me  
Your family wore on my nerves  
on my nerves  
Your friends exhausted me  
Exhaustion!  
Your family wore on my nerves  
The very last nerve  
Your damn friends exhausted me!  
Exhaustion!  
And lordy, your family wore on my nerves!

TheFACE

Your problem where our friends and even our family were concerned was that you took them all too seriously—at least as seriously as they mis-took themselves. You were resented for that. They didn’t really want “truth” from us. Collusion, certainly. Obedience, always. They wouldn’t know the elements of “truth” if it was choking any of them by the throat. Yet you insisted on it—confusing your truth with their delusions. In the end, you were resented for pointing out their flaws. Who could possibly live up to your standards? I simply stopped trying.

TheEX

It was too hard for me to keep up with appearances, wearing other people's expectations of my life. It was exhausting. Family, friends . . . Family . . .

TheFACE

Hmmm . . . Maybe it was the "we" that exhausted you?

TheEX

Maybe. For a long time we loved . . . Didn't we . . . ?

TheFACE

(pause) We did.

TheEX

But . . . But then . . . We started gasping for breath

TheFACE

Fighting off death, lingering. I . . . I . . .

TheEX

I couldn't breathe in your company anymore. We loved until we bled. I have bite marks to prove it.

TheFACE

Oh, baby, I have bite marks too. And then you left.

TheEX

Over time, our plot, though intricately staged, revealed a weak, sometimes forced structure, incomplete arcs and loose links. We climaxed until we ached—then simply lost the ability to sustain our momentum.

TheFACE

Will you come back?

TheEX

I don't think I can.

TheFACE

We . . . just unraveled didn't we?

TheEX

In a matter of scenes. Eventually we started dropping cues in mid-sentence or cut whole pages, just got sloppy. Foreplay became fore-shadowing and overbearing. Drama became comedy became tragedy. Clearly, *you* are directing.

TheFACE

But I asked you to come back!

TheEX

Yes, but only as I stood by in stage-left unpreparedness. Reduced to understudy and lingering. Waiting in the wings for a cue from you. Some sign that you were also prepared to help us save us. But you were too busy directing other people's scenes.

CHORUS

All actors to the stage please.  
Standing by.  
House to half.  
Standing by. Standing by.

TheFACE

But I asked you to come back!

TheEX

I—couldn't—breathe. I was drowning . . . like Virginia. Stones weighing me down in my pockets, and you—

TheFACE

No, *you*, were some place holding auditions or “humoring” confessions out of people. **(beat)** I asked you to come back!

TheEX

But first—You asked me to LEAVE.

CHORUS

**(Repeat then echo out.)**  
All actors to the stage please.  
Standing by.  
House to half.

Standing by. Standing by.  
House out. House out. House out.

[TheEX and TheFACE resume the climbing stairs mime in unison as the sound of their ascendancy echoes their movement. They freeze with the increased volume of the Chorus as Chorus EXITS.]

LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE ON THEIR TABLEAU.

#### SEEN 7: SUMMER CLOTHES—PRESENT TIME

---

[Both actors arrive at the apartment door; it squeaks when opened. A red “couch” dominates the room. Both also switch to their blue face masks, but each hides the change from the other while tossing the Black & White masks aside.]

TheEX

HI kitties! Miss Daisy! Miss Ross! Miss me? (The sound of cats meowing lovingly as TheEX stoops to nuzzle them, then hiss and scamper away.) (nervous chuckle) This door is still noisy. So, how are things between you and Mr. Scrooge? Has he raised the rent yet? I remember he was threatening to before . . . before—

TheFACE

(snaps then regains composure)—before you left!? Yeah, he’s still threatening, but I’m resisting him. (breathes) *I’m doing yoga now and meditating.* (breathes) *Learning to breathe.* And learning to resist all things and people included, who in any way disrupt the (breathes again) mindfulness that I’ve reclaimed for myself—since you left.

TheEX

How “zen” of you . . .

TheFACE

Well, like I said, I needed to . . . to *separate* our clothing. We both agreed it would be best to separate.

TheEX

I thrust my elbow back sharply, a feeble attempt to diffuse the awkwardness and at the same time deliver a fresh supply of blood to my neck

muscles. (**gingerly**) So, where are the clothes? You know, you really didn't have to trouble yourself . . . Bringing them all the way up here.

TheFACE

(**points offstage**) They're in your old study. (**Gestures to the red couch**)  
Have a seat.

[TheFACE CROSSES OFFSTAGE BUT CONTINUES EXCHANGE WITH TheEX.]

TheEX

I sit. Guarded banter preoccupies us again the way lint does when you're wearing black clothing.

TheEX

(**shouts**) How's your Health?

TheFACE

Fine.

TheEX

How's the new book coming along?

TheFACE

Fine. School? Teaching this semester?

TheEX

Fine. Two classes.

TheFACE

Fine.

TheEX

Your family?

TheFACE

Fine. Your family?

TheEX

Fine.

BOTH

Fine.

[TheFACE returns dragging two bulging trash bags. TheEX rises from the couch to offer assistance. TheFACE's body language suggests otherwise.]

TheEX

What the hell? I mean . . . what happened to the boxes that I packed?

TheFACE

Oh, um . . . when I brought them up, it was just easier to put all of the clothes into plastic bags. (TheFACE freezes as TheEX speaks.)

TheEX

(Moves to survey TheFACE up close then mimicks.) "It was just easier to put all of the clothes into plastic bags." (screams) That's really fucked up! (sighs) Doesn't matter, I have a garment bag with me. (beat) Look at her, with those blue-blank features, scrutinizing me with the vigor of a computer screen—cyberspace blue. The flatness of the eyes and the glare are compelling. (TheEX falls back onto the couch.) Ahhh. The couch. (rubs it) Yes . . . We spent months searching for this defining beauty.

[TheFACE resumes action.]

TheFACE

I desperately wanted southwest themes and colors since our first visit to Santa Fe, the summer of 1995 wasn't it?

TheEX

Yes, the summer of 1995 and the start of my restlessness.

TheFACE

(mocking) Oh, was that the "official" year?

TheEX

Let's be nice. (points) The red couch.

TheFACE

Yes of course, the red couch. (with beats) Once a symbol of our passion, it now strikes me as blood-soaked and splattered, patterned after our lives—suppressed dreams and scarlet trespasses. Our unscripted

entries, our exits, and the accumulated squalor of superficial friends, left red spreading between us like we used to spread between each other's thighs. In love. Now, I just feel soiled. We exhausted ourselves, running from Macy's to Bloomingdales, in search of a perfect motif. Santa Fe red. Commitment demands lengthy rehearsals and pink. How could two people invest more energy in their decor than they do the dressings of their everyday desires?

TheEX

If I knew, I wouldn't be collecting my summer wardrobe in garbage bags like somebody's motherless child.

TheFACE

Would you like some water? Juice?

TheEX

Yes, water, thanks. (Picks up a magazine.)

[TheFACE crosses to the kitchen. We see her survey a set of masks of assorted colors and designs. She inspects/rejects several as one would wine glasses for smudges or knives for sharpness. She then quickly grabs a bottle of water that she offers to TheEX.]

TheFACE

I'm sorry but I only have bottled water. I seem to have broken all my glasses . . .

TheEX

(nervous) Really? I . . . I love bottles. (gestures to bag of clothes) Well, I should get started.

[TheEX places garment bag on the floor and begins to pull clothing from a plastic bag. TheFACE moves quickly again to the "kitchen" and quietly slips on a red mask. She returns to stand behind the couch where she catches TheEX off-guard.]

TheFACE

(circles TheEX) Who knew that summer clothing could be so high maintenance considering how flimsy the material is, really. Oh the shallow people and materialities we spend our time with. Linens, muslins, cottons, khaki . . . (chuckles coldly) LIGHTWEIGHT. CHEAP.



[TheEX is visibly startled. She swigs from the bottle of water and continues to frantically pack.]

TheFACE (cont'd.)

(pacing) You know . . .

TheEX

(panicked) I knew it! There's a monologue coming and I still have another bag to sort. (Looks up and fully registers the RED mask.)

TheFACE

(seething) You and I need to have closure.

TheEX

Closure? Fair enough. (to audience) Yes, we deserve a stirring last scene. A heartfelt final curtain. I felt it coming, percolating beneath that terribly enlightened statement. (mocks) We need closure. I'm meditating and resisting all negativity. I'm enlightened and so superior to you because I'm doing yoga, yadda, yadda, yadda.

[As TheFACE continues pacing her expletives turn into a series of sharp "wahs," "wahs," "wahs," similar to the Charlie Brown classroom teacher's voice. The rant continues as TheEX speaks to audience.]

TheFACE

What a deceitful, shallow, thoughtless, insensitive, spineless, heartless, sorry-ass COWARD you are. If you were so unhappy with me, with us . . . Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah. . . .

TheEX

(Falls onto the floor in a prostrate position while folding clothes into garment bag.)

TheFACE

(Voice rises and falls) Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah. You haven't even accepted how deeply you've violated the trust that I thought we lived by . . . Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah. . . .

TheEX

Just keep packing. Efficiency and a fast escape is all that motivates me.

[Nina Simone's version of "You Put a Spell on Me" plays as TheFACE continues mouthing rants.]

TheFACE

I thought . . . I thought . . . she must have put a spell on you. That's it isn't it?! SHE—PUT—A—GODDAMN SPELL ON YOU! What happened? Did you lose your mind? That's it—you lost your mind . . . lost you . . . I thought you were MINE!

TheEX

TheFACE-is-ugly, contorted, spittle hanging from the corners of the mouth, or is that blood?

TheFACE

I thought we were special. Ten years! Ten years! Turns out I'm as disposable as those flimsy clothes you're arbitrarily packing. This skirt goes—these shorts get tossed! Trash. It's all trash to you isn't it? (TheFACE FREEZES.)

TheEX

(quickly surveys TheFACE) Puss colors the eyeballs. Just a half bag more. This other stuff is crap. Couples clothes. Matching colors and themes. Identity meshed in the folds and blends of the fabric. Wounded threads. She's right, some of it is trash now. But none of it was arbitrary. (beat) Our life together was never arbitrary. Family reunion tee-shirts, faded. And the hideous "ethnic" wear! We were like anthropologists collecting useless fashion artifacts—African kente cloths, Native American vests, East Indian tunics and these ghastly multi-colored Japanese kimonos. My only fashion rule is, if you haven't worn it for more than two seasons, toss it. (holds up the shorts as if inspecting them) plaid shorts? What was I thinking? (surveys TheFACE closely) The voice rests, as do the jowls, although I notice the twitching of an ear. The hands are fisted. The veins bulging, expanding and rising as rage must.

[TheFACE UNFREEZES.]

TheFACE

(seething/pacing) Do you have anything to say for yourself?

[TheEX stares at TheFACE as she searches for her misplaced RED mask.]

TheEX

**(evenly)** I suppose it really doesn't matter what I have to say since obviously, you need to say more. I didn't come to argue. **(LOCATES MASK AND SLIPS IT ON.)**

TheFACE

**(growls)** What did you come for then?

TheEX

To pick up my summer clothes! I didn't come to defend my behavior. Just to pick up my summer clothes. **(TheEX coughs, then cups mouth, then pulls a long string of RED from the mouth.)** Red floods my mouth. I feel some of it splatter onto the garment bag. Stay calm, but charming has fled my mind. I spot my shirts, squashed like cloth accordions, raking the bottom of the last bag. There they lie, more obedient than myself between a doubled-over, seersucker jacket. Squatting on numb limbs I brace myself against the wall, only to disturb the cats, **(sound of hissing cats)** feverishly licking at each other's private parts. Trying not to spill any more red, I gingerly release the words cramming my mouth. **(Turns to TheFACE)** If my behavior was so depraved, why did it take this long for me to get your attention?

**[TheFACE coughs up then spits out red.]**

TheFACE

**(exhausted)** Of course. It's always about you!

**LIGHTS TO BLACK.**

**MUSIC UP.**

**[ENTER DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady MARCHING IN RHYTHM TRANSPORTING LOVERS TO ANOTHER MEMORY. THEY ARE DRESSED COLORFULLY AND MOVE IN THE SPIRIT OF A BACCHANAL.]**

#### MOVEMENT IV 4 BEATS OF BETRAYAL

**[This movement involves a call and response exchange that plays like a club/party scene that overlaps with different musics. Each "SEEN" represents a different beat or sensation. Movement changes from hard**

marches to “couples dances”—soft hustles, swing, waltz, etc., given the emotional landscape.]

**BEAT #1: Thud, Thud. Boom, boom: HOUSE MARCH**

CHORUS—ALL

I hear your heavy-footed Noise.

I hear you. Your Noise.

No, I hear you.

Heavy-footed Noise.

Thud, thud. Boom boom.

Thud, thud. Boom boom.

I hear you. Your noise.

What does it sound like?

BETRAYAL.

HEART-BREAKER.

BOOTYSHAKER.

NOISE. I hear you.

Bouncing/pouncing/grinding through your consciousness

It disturbs me.

Wears me OUT.

What?

Your NOISE.

Thud, thud. Boom boom.

Thud, thud. Boom boom.

The bashing of blunt objects shunted upon soft things.

But is this love, love, love? Mixed cuts

Cutting confessions, thrashing, spinning

Searing amplified house

deep deep house

Bone-breaking

Inner-ear-shattering

Heart-breaking

Deep deephousehearhouseheart

House-breaking

BETRAYAL.

HEART-BREAKER.

BOOTYSHAKER.

NOISE. I hear you.

I HEAR YOUR NOISE.

But is this love, love, love? Remixed.

Still you are too immobilized to move away from

MOVE AWAY!

MOVE AWAY FROM THE SPEAKER.

MOVE AWAY!

HEART-BREAKER.

BOOTYSHAKER.

I hear you.

HEART-BREAKER.

BOOTYSHAKER.

**DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady (continue softly repeating refrain while moving through the Lovers until directed to exit.)**

HEART-BREAKER.

BOOTYSHAKER.

I hear you.

TheFACE

My heart lies impaled as certain reality leaps  
Through windows of opportunity not danced to  
Promises made then left to melt  
Like old 45s in hot pools of sun.

TheEX

Dull pain pumps its way into my third eye  
Stalks my fourth wall  
But is unable or unwilling to push, push through. Move on.

TheFACE

(cries) You broke my heart.

TheEX

(moves to embrace TheFACE who pushes her away.) I loved you.

TheFACE

I saw her finger, saw her finger running down your back. Scratchin,  
scratchin, tracing the delicate notches of your spine. Casually scratching  
away the confidential layers of me as though I was never there. Scratchin  
me! Scratchin, scratchin. Me. Soon, that finger will discover you have no  
backbone and it will stab you!

**LIGHTS TO BLACK. MUSIC UP. EXIT DIRECTOR AND LEADINGLady.**

## BEAT #2: LOVE LETTERS: CLASSICAL

[TheEX is seated at a desk writing with a feather quill pen. TheFACE is seated writing from inside a bathtub. They struggle to capture the words.]

TheFACE

We are writing all the things we should have said. Betrayal leaves my psyche blank, like unmarked pages in books without themes, margins, no words.

TheEX

Words escape us. Empty overtures flutter aimlessly, loosely, and unharnessed. In moments, strange inquiries are composed and recanted. (scribbles) I don't dream of you anymore. Do you dream of me? We don't exchange dreams anymore—Only sullen post-scripts left hanging or dangling from torn shirt-sleeves or scribbled onto steamy bathroom mirrors with masked indignation.

TheFACE

(scribbles) By the way why did you leave? Why did you leave me? Are you seeing someone? Else? Are you? Are you seeing someone? Seeing someone? Else? Are you seeing some one? Else? Are you? I am weeping.  
Signed, *feeling betrayed*.

TheEX

(scribbles) *Dear feeling betrayed:*  
Seeing someone? Else? What does that mean when we see too much and so many? Be certain of your questions. (I want to scream!)  
I caution you to Be certain. (cries) OH GOD, I want to purge myself flush myself of these lies and foreign odors that do not smell of you. (I want to scream!) I said—BE certain! Listen to me and BE CERTAIN (whispers/haunted) I said—BE certain of what you ask. BE certain! Then listen. But first, BE certain!  
Signed, Your devoted lover.  
p.s.—Sorry that I have made you weep—but if I had stayed, I would only have pulled out your heart and battered you with it. Of course—I have done that anyway. Please forgive me.

LIGHTS FADE AS SOUND OF A HUNGRY CROWD RISES.

**BEAT #3: SUCKER-PUNCHED! TECHNO/ELECTRONIC**

[Slowly TheEX and TheFACE put on a pair of boxing gloves and begin to simulate boxers sparring. At directed intervals DIRECTOR moves about them as referee, pulling them apart, etc. The LEADINGLady is dressed as the sexy ringside “babe” and parades with a score card denoting ROUNDS 1-2-3. Bell rings at start of end and start of each round.]

**ROUND 1: BELL RINGS.****TheFACE**

Betrayal is finding oneself drawn to the center of a boxing ring without preparation, training or a coach—

**DIRECTOR**

Look out! There's an upper-cut, a sucker's punch!  
About to knock you on your artless ASSumptions.

**TheFACE**

How could a person called “friend” whisper in the ear of my lover, my

Fig. VII.2. *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love.*

Photo by Julie Lemberger, courtesy of Pamela Booker.



spouse, my Soulmate when my back was turned and still be rewarded with something virtuous—my lover and her devotion.

TheEX

(swipes) Take that!

[TheFACE FALLS. TheEX STANDS OVER HER. DIRECTOR INTERVENES.]

TheEX (cont'd.)

You didn't know 'cause you didn't want to know!

DIRECTOR

(stands over TheFACE, who remains down) And 5-4-3 . . .

LEADINGLady

(shouts) Get up honey or you'll look like you want more! (to TheEX) Bully!

TheEX

(helps TheFACE stand) I need you to get up! (gently) 'Cause I know it's too hard to know.

BELL RINGS.

ROUND 2: BELL RINGS. LEADINGLady PARADES WITH SIGN.

TheFACE

(recomposes/swipes back) I know you better than you know yourself. All your insecurities, your lies. Your high threshold for inflicting pain. I know you!

TheEX

Familiarity breeds contempt!

TheFACE

You played at love, all the while concealing fragments of a deceitful personality, a wayward, dismembered spirit manifesting a thousand selves. Shiva goddess with a snake in her mouth. You wouldn't know the truth unless it crawled up on you during Halloween or a lunar eclipse.

BELL RINGS.



DIRECTOR

To your corners ladies. Final round.

[LEADING Lady parades with sign ROUND 3. EACH LOVER PREPARES FOR FINAL EXCHANGE. BELL RINGS AGAIN. SOUND OF CROWD SHOUTING MADLY.]

TheEX

Your betrayer matches a rapist's profile. Bam!

TheFACE

Someone you know. Zap!

TheEX

Ouch! Someone you love blindly. Kapowee!

TheFACE

Someone you have tossed open doors for. Boom!

TheEX

And allowed them access to the forests of your personal domain.

TheFACE

Only to witness yourself ravaged

TheEX

Violated.

TheFACE

(stumbles) Cut down. (BOTH SHOW SIGNS OF FATIGUE.)

TheEX

Ambushed like . . . like lush tropical forests at nighttime.

BOTH

As the moon watches in meek terror, beaming impotent rays upon a nasty perpetrator who steals away into the dark, dusty bush

TheEX

(strikes then falls) Their fingerprints and savage breath written across your private parts.

TheFACE

(strikes at air then falls) And what of your heart? My heart?

BELL RINGS. CROWD ROARS. DIRECTOR and LEADINGLady move to stop the fight.

DIRECTOR

And 5-4-3-2-1 (continues counting out until end of scene.)

LEADINGLady

Your heart you say? (Holds up sign with picture of a heart) Yes, well . . . It'll be found discarded along unmarked pathways on the following morning. In bits and teeny, weeny pieces. But go—you must try to retrieve it, otherwise, be assured—your betrayer stands poised to eat the remains . . .

[MUSIC CHANGES. WHILE LEADINGLady SPEAKS LOVERS RECOMPOSE THEMSELVES. SHE AND DIRECTOR HELP THEM DISROBE AND REMOVE GLOVES.]

#### BEAT #4: "BUT! I NEVER MEANT TO HURT YOU!"—JAZZY

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LEADINGLady

Betrayal of this magnitude is maddening really. I for one don't understand how any of us survives it. Ask Hamlet, Caesar, any president's wife. How else, you ask bewildered, sucker-punched!, could a once inviting, reliable, trustworthy figure, so methodically strip you of your dignity, bits of your sanity, and then ever so eloquently exclaim: "But! I never meant to hurt you!" with a perfectly cited exclamation mark looped coolly at the close of that pitiful confession? Sometimes it's better that you don't explain. . . .

(laughs uncontrollably) But! I never meant to hurt you  
To spill open your gut. But! I never meant to hurt you!

TheFACE

(reaches for picture of heart from LEADINGLady) Nor did you plan to dislodge a life sustaining organ, the heart. Ordinarily a robust muscle now reduced to fatty tissue and listlessness—mangled from triple, by-pass deceit.

TheEX

But! Never meant to hurt you

To spill open your gut  
But! I never meant to hurt you.

LEADINGLady

Well, sweetie, what was it then that you aspired to? You two were good together. You really were. (EXITS.)

TheFACE

(chuckles) Yes, what was it that you aspired to? Shopping?

TheEX

Reading.

TheFACE

Playing solitaire?

TheEX

Praying or dreaming. Resting on clouds hoisted upon old world spires at dawn.

TheFACE

Maybe . . . maybe you should have taken a long walk with me and confessed—

TheEX

What? How confused, sad, or pissed off I was at you—

TheFACE

Not me—at the disembodiments of YOUR life. The mediocrity you imagined in YOUR life and held me responsible for.

TheEX

You're right. I should have confessed. Instead—

TheFACE

Instead, one day you cocked your head, betrayal rushed into your bloodstream, poisoned your system and distracted you the way dogs are distracted by flies as they buzz around their shit.

TheEX

I, I was distracted.

TheFACE

You learn, flies demand attention.

TheEX

(clears throat) Yes, well, whether you're the offender or the offended, betrayal thrives on atonal vibrations.

TheFACE

There's nothing innocuous about this distinctly human cadence.

TheEX

Brutal.

TheFACE

Deadly.

TheEX

A virulent strain will permanently scar you.

TheFACE

You learn—other species kill when offspring become intolerable—  
Humans simply betray.

[TheFACE and TheEX pause. Slowly they place red masks on their faces.]

## MOVEMENT V EPILOGUE

### SEEN 8: THE MASQUERADE IS OVER

---

[SOUNDS OF OVATIONS PIERCE THE ROOM; the audience is heard wildly shouting "bravo! Bravo!" Red roses are tossed to TheEX and TheFACE from offstage. Awash in clamors and screams they move about the stage as if matadors who have just slain a bull. They bow to the heightened cheers of their audience. Action returns to apartment as TheEX finishes packing.]

TheFACE

Our audience can't get enough. It really is all about the "performance," isn't it dear? (They both take a final bow.)

TheEX

I stand, immobilized, thinking myself plunging through a series of French absurdist plays. Watching in horror, the monstrous transformation of an unexpected love.

[TheFACE resumes ranting as the SOUND OF A VIOLIN SURGES. Suddenly a spectacular force of light appears and spills onto her.]

TheFACE

Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah-wah . . . (She freezes. TheEX resumes a prostrated position as she completes packing clothes.)

TheEX

TheFACE is chanting ancient invectives. I can tell from the way her body flails—possessed by Chango, the Yoruba deity, at once male and female, hurling its body through red forests. There, the bag is full. The zipper, closed. Closure. Apparently, so is the past decade of my life, though not as neatly. (TheEX raises up off knees.) The bag is heavier than I expected. I should have called a car.

[TheFACE doesn't respond, but moves toward the door where the light is even brighter and bursts through the crevices. She opens the door to an explosion of light and music.]

TheFACE

It's time for you to leave.

TheEX

(dry chuckle) Exit stage right.

TheFACE

Leave.

[TheEX moves to cross the threshold with garment bag, then stops as the TheFACE noticeably relents.]

TheFACE

Wait—I . . . For a long time we loved, didn't we?

TheEX

(pause) We . . . We did.

TheFACE

For a long time we loved, didn't we?

TheEX

We did.

[TheFACE then walks over to the cabinet and grabs the rack of masks. One by one, she begins discarding hers and TheEX does the same. As the sound of their closing sentences are repeated, lights slowly fade on both actors ridding themselves of their masks.]

MUSIC AND LIGHTS FADE OUT.

FINIS

## “Public Intimacy”

### WOMEN-LOVING-WOMEN AS DRAMATURGICAL TRANSGRESSIONS

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When *The Color Purple: The Musical* opened on Broadway in 2005, Black women-loving-women moved front and center in the U.S. theatrical landscape.<sup>1</sup> Due in part to the critical and popular success of Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize–winning epistolary novel, the musical made an impressive showing at the box office by recouping its \$11 million investment in its first year on Broadway and grossing more than \$103 million by January 2008. While Black theatergoers typically account for approximately 4 percent of Broadway audiences, this group composed an unprecedented 50 percent of the audiences for *The Color Purple: The Musical*.<sup>2</sup> Black lesbians, whom the Combahee River Collective considered to be the ultimate challenge to patriarchy and the clearest evidence of social and political emancipation, were appearing in the most commercial and commodified of all theatrical forms.<sup>3</sup> Notably, Black audiences were responding in record numbers. Pamela Booker’s *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love* gives me an opportunity to examine Black woman-to-woman theatrical love and its ability to map a road to personal and dramaturgical freedom. As theatrical works examine transgressive personal truths, their structure, style, and tone must likewise forge new forms. This essay, then, notes the ways in which Booker’s piece offers both love and dramatic form as strategies of resistance to repressive conventions.

### “Black Is, Black Ain’t”

Marlon Riggs’s last film, *Black Is, Black Ain’t*, opens with Black men and women of many hues proclaiming the varied possibilities of Blackness.<sup>4</sup> They shout, sing, moan, and whisper, “Black will get you, and Black will leave you alone. Black can let you move forward, and Black will make you stumble around. Black can be your best friend, cozy as the

night; Black can do you in, make you cuss and fuss and fight.” These pronouncements do not have to include “Black is Queer and Black ain’t Queer” because the film itself does this work through a powerful sequence of spiritual leaders who denounce homosexuality alongside Riggs’s poignant narrative about being a Black gay male artist and activist. In the visual and verbal texts of the film, Black Queerness is both embraced and interrogated as a given of Black life on the one hand, and a threat to it on the other.<sup>5</sup> *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love* offers a similarly paradoxical understanding of Black Queerness.

*Seens* is a highly theatricalized play of five movements and eight “seens” (rather than scenes) in which characters don masks, directly address the audience, compete in a physical and verbal boxing match, interact with a chorus, and sometimes perform scenes shaped by specific musical genres. The understood public conventions of theatrical scenes are played against the personal perception of seeing and being seen. The play charts the dissolution of an intimate relationship between two Black women discovering woman-to-woman love for the first time. The play is both Queer and Black, not only because of the identities of the characters, but because of the world Booker creates around them. In so doing, Booker challenges the disremembering in which Black Queer people are omitted from Black history and Black life generally.

In identifying the practice of disremembering, Matt Richardson notes, “Black queers are, in many respects, dead to Black memory” and are “the anxiety-producing mnemonic that signals to the unconscious that it must protect itself from remembering.”<sup>6</sup> *TheEx* and *TheFace*, the former lovers and main characters of *Seens*, are Black women who operate within a Black cultural context thereby requiring audiences to acknowledge the reality of Black Queer lives. They speak of collard greens, Egyptian musk, Coltrane, and Chango. These are not women whose sexuality distances them from the particulars of Black life; rather, their very lovemaking is rich in its Black references. As the women make love, the other characters join them in verbal and physical interplay noting, “Locks fall upon you resolutely,” “Licorice Smooth/slender,” “Around our chocolaty necks,” “between thick thighs,” “Intertwined. Locked,” “Palmed in oils/Coconut frankincense/Sandalwood/myrrh,” “At dawn locks dance among themselves/Spray across pillows . . . Form inverted pyramids or crowns/Divined for majestic heads of Goddesses and Warriors” (411–12). *TheEx* and *TheFace* understand their loving through a Black lens, a critical frame of cultural and political specificity. Indeed, when *TheEx* says they were “afraid to call it the ‘L’ word,”



her fear could be as much about limiting her sexuality with the label lesbian as it is about being associated with the very white lesbian world of the popular television series of the same name (413). Understanding *Seens* as conceived through a Black lens parallels the play's emphasis on *seeing*, or perspective—Black perspectives, the perspectives of the lovers themselves, and the perspectives of the society in which they attempt to live and love.

Importantly, Booker also seems to assume her audience is Black. As LEADINGLady struggles to learn her lines repeatedly mumbling, “Out damn! Out damn, spot! Out damn! Out damn, spot!” TheFace clarifies the line by saying, “The leading lady strutted about despondently like Macbeth’s wife.” Immediately after this, LEADINGLady responds, “How now! What news of my reviews and delivery and such? Director, oh director! I’m ready for my close-up. And don’t NOBODY bring me no bad news” (404). Booker explains the well-known line of *Macbeth* but doesn’t feel the need to identify Evilene’s now classic line from *The Wiz*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, an assumed familiarity with Black references occurs as TheEx packs her clothes to leave the apartment she once shared with TheFace. TheFace screams, “I thought . . . I thought . . . she must have put a spell on you. That’s it isn’t it?! SHE-PUT-A-GODDAMN SPELL ON YOU! What happened? Did you lose your mind? That’s it—you lost your mind . . . lost YOU . . . I thought you were MINE!” (426). The stage directions indicate that Nina Simone’s version of “I Put a Spell on You” plays under the scene. Many Black audience members would have gotten the Simone reference even without the music.<sup>8</sup> Other Black musical allusions include Nat King Cole’s “When I Fall in Love” as the ironic romantic background to the play’s prologue, and the use of House music and jazz in the scenes of betrayal.

Blackness is once again the understood foundation for the women’s world as the social penalties for Queer desire are laid out. As the Chorus assumes the role of a homophobic minister delivering a sermon, it declares: “Get right . . . we know . . . with Jessssuuuus. (clap) He’ll fix everything. Like Mikey, he eats from a bowl of cereal and the world is made RIGHT. Make it all right. Make ME all right. If you’re all right with Jessssuuuus. (clap) It’ll be all right. RIGHT! Get to know Jessssuuuus. (clap) Get to know, ha, get to know, yes, get to know, get to know, I said, get to know (clap) Jessssuuuus and it will be all right” (415). Although the stage directions simply state “all actors—builds into frenzied sermon-like voice,” Booker’s use of the clap and the guttural “ha” strongly suggests that this is specifically a Black preacher in the Baptist or AME traditions. Black people are also referenced when TheEx

acknowledges the legislated hatred that terrorized her and TheFace as well as the self-hatred of those who condemned them. The idea of self-hatred likely suggests those Black people who refuse to admit to the complexity of their own sexual desire and practices. Booker seems to be speaking directly to Black people even as her play operates outside some of the unstated conventions of Black theater.

*Seens* does not fit the Black theater of Amiri Baraka, who declared in 1965 that “white men will cower before this theatre because it hates them.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than exploring the contours of Blackness and racism, *Seens* focuses on the challenges of sexuality and homophobia. Race is never an explicit theme in the play; instead sexuality is literally and figuratively central. The juxtaposed scenes of lovemaking and public condemnation are pivotally positioned in the play. The first innocent yet transgressive kiss occurs immediately prior to these scenes and the unraveling of the relationship occurs immediately after them. Even though the audience learns that the women have been together for ten years, in stage time, the beginning, censure, and unraveling of the relationship are adjacent to each other and occur right in the middle of work. This play is an exploration of Black Queer love in which Queerness is foregrounded. Booker’s interest lies in how eros operates rather than how race functions, and she explores her interest in sexuality without muting the Blackness of TheEx and TheFace.

In an important way, for TheEx and TheFace, Blackness is a fact of life rather than the sum total of it. *Seens* represents an expression of Black theater in which Blackness itself is not the subject, but is the understood given circumstance. Situating *Seens* as Black theater pushes the boundaries of what Black theater has been and might be. While this work surely fits W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1920s dictum that Black theater be for, by, about, and near Black people, it does not do the social uplift work that is also associated with the productions Du Bois created through his KRIGWA Players.<sup>10</sup> Black Queer subjects challenge the very middle-class respectability that characterizes theater as high culture, and reflect the dominant political history of Black struggle in the United States. When Queer is added to the formula of Blackness the social respectability that some have fought to attain is simply impossible.

### Prisons and Closets

Patricia Hill Collins likens Black sexuality to the mutually influencing locations of a prison and a closet, as Blackness itself has been criminalized and locked down, and Black Queerness has had to remain tena-

ciously hidden to avoid the fatal taint of disrepute. When one is not free, secrets are required for survival. Collins explains how the prison in which Blackness has become incarcerated requires closeted sexuality: “Women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, children, people living with HIV, drug addicts, prostitutes, and others deemed to be an embarrassment to the broader African American community or a drain upon its progress or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time become targets of silencing, persecution, and/or abuse. This is what prisons do—they breed intolerance.”<sup>11</sup>

Black lesbian characters have found a home in the working-class settings of some theatrical productions but are less well represented in middle-class contexts. In discussing the relationship of sexuality and class in plays with lesbian characters by Ed Bullins, Sharon Bridgforth, Shirlene Holmes, and Cheryl West, Lisa M. Anderson suggests that lesbian characters are more likely to be found in “strong black working-class cultures.”<sup>12</sup> This is also true of August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, with Ma Rainey’s publicly transgressive behavior—as blues singer, as a loud and aggressive Black woman, as Dussie Mae’s lover—keeping her well outside the world of the Black middle class in spite of her money and fame. This working-class location for Black lesbian characters keeps the middle class protected and may account for the apparent acceptability of *The Color Purple: The Musical*, as Celie and Shug live outside the sanctions imposed by the controlling glare of the Black middle class. *TheEx* and *TheFace*, however, are solidly middle class as demonstrated by their professions and their language. The women are theater artists. They met during auditions for *Macbeth* in which *TheEx* was the stage manager and *TheFace* was favored for the role of Lady Macbeth. They quote Shakespeare, Picasso, and Virginia Woolf, and comfortably use phrases like “unanticipated compromises,” “sacred/supple nights,” “the buttery taste of our dreams,” “I bid you a rigorous adieu,” “our love would flourish,” and “clichés relax us.” These are women whose education and literary linguistic gestures root them in middle-class realities.

The Black middle class’s deep investment in disavowing any threat to its tenuous status results in Black Queer theatrical characters rarely making their way into middle-class theatrical settings. Booker achieves a radical move when *Seens* breaks with the tradition of presenting Black lesbian characters in protective working-class environments—and indeed, *TheEx* and *TheFace* are soundly punished for their love. Audre Lorde notes that Black women are terrified of being named lesbian because lesbians challenge the very patriarchal structure that defines

the role of woman and keeps women beholden to patriarchy for their existence, albeit a subservient one.<sup>13</sup> The unknown terrain and responsibility that freedom brings can be so frightening that such freedom creates a defense of even a stultifying status quo. TheEx and TheFace are not afraid to openly love each other but by doing so they become enmeshed in public political sanctions that serve to maintain patriarchy. TheEx prophetically says, “In the sanctity of our private world, we consummated a public intimacy that would linger” (408). The privacy of eros dangerously seeps into public view and disrupts the carefully closeted Black sexual identities. Love and eros are never solely personal and private. They are always laced with the very public politics of national and individual identities, and the attendant claims of these identities.

Immediately after a richly erotic scene of lovemaking between TheEx and TheFace, the Chorus, acting as the disapproving and regulating society, declares, “Love is always unexpected. How you respond to it is choice! Man should choose woman! Woman should choose man! It’s just not right!” (414). Queer is sexualized in the way that Blackness is racialized, and like race for Black people, sex for Queer people becomes public through what literary scholar Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley calls the “violence of normative order,” which necessitates extinguishing Queer realities.<sup>14</sup> It is the *visible* fact of Queerness, of public sexual intimacy between TheEx and TheFace—both the *scene* it makes as display of Queerness, and the act of Queerness being *seen* by a policing public—that must be immediately punished by society. Equally important, the characters are rejected by their friends and family as staunchly as they are denigrated by the society at large. These middle-class women-loving-women find no haven in their middle-class community.

In considering community, it is important to note that TheEx and TheFace are not surrounded by a Queer community. They seem to have no Queer support for their love. In a risky dramaturgical move, they attempt to shame the audience through the Chorus for their homophobia, thereby making them complicit in the tensions of their relationship.

THEFACE: You’re all so smug and so fucking righteous!

THEEX: You reduced our “marriage” to sound-bite and curtsy.

THEFACE: No . . . in all fairness WE did that . . .

THEEX: You’re too polite! We didn’t have help or role-models. And all they said over and over again—

[HOUSE LIGHTS UP. Lovers + Chorus move to confront audience.]

CHORUS: (stern) It’s just not right!

TheFACE: Our parents, Our friends said it. Well, ex-friends.

CHORUS: It's just not right! (414-15)

These Black women are working to understand their sexuality through their direct address to the audience, which allows them to demonstrate that they are not licentious sexual monsters. They give voice to the questions the audience may be asking—"TheEX: How do you choose such a thing? TheFACE: How do you deny it?" Booker devotes substantial stage time to exposing their inner struggles, which opens a space for experiencing their humanity, for dissolving judgment. The characters share their innocence:

TheEX: We discovered the sameness of gender, afraid to call it the "L" word, yet enchanted by the strangeness of this new fruit.

TheFACE: The smell, the taste, the touch of woman. We consumed each other with epicurean delight.

TheEX: In gregarious portions.

TheFACE: Convinced that our lives depended on it.

TheEX: It did. The hunger, the hunger. We sipped, nibbled, gnawed, chomped and suckled the "L" word.

TheFACE: For more than a decade we lived and danced on the emotional fringes of the "L" word. Instead, it was simpler to choose the "S" word—to say we loved the "sameness" of each other. We learned not to limit ourselves to categories or placards or the politics. We thought we could avoid the politics. We didn't expect to *become* our own cause! In reality we were terrorized by the intolerance and the hatred . . .

TheEX: The self hatred and the legislated . . . (413)

In stage time, the collapse of the relationship pointedly titled "Your friends exhausted me" occurs immediately after the public censure and the private reflection on how the characters navigated their Queer identities. In spite of the fact that the women were together for ten years, what the audience sees is a swift progression from the first rush of desire to the termination of the relationship. This quickness and this juxtaposition suggest that community—"We didn't have help or role-models"—is important to the maintenance of Queer relationships. Because Queerness is a publicly private reality for many, a supportive community becomes essential for safety and self-understanding.



Fig. 13.1. *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love*.  
Photo by Julie Lemberger, courtesy of Pamela Booker.

### “It Really Is All about the ‘Performance,’ Isn’t It Dear?”

Performance is a governing principle in *Seens*. In the play’s epilogue, after reviewing how their relationship began and unraveled, TheFace says to TheEx, “Our audience can’t get enough. It really is all about the ‘performance,’ isn’t it dear?” (436). The performers then bow and offer their closing understanding about “the monstrous transformation of an unexpected love.”

Theatrical performance confounds an easy dichotomy between public and private truths, between real and pretend, between individual and communal responsibilities. Because theater is public and communal, it makes the politics of sexuality visceral for everyone present. The women find each other in the theatrical space of possibility, where their transgressive love can be, where masks, clothes/costumes, and furnishings/sets are chosen and discarded as needed for each moment of seeing and being seen, each acknowledgment of corporeality. In an important way, the play asks what it takes to be seen—by one another, by the world at large, and by one’s self. The play’s intriguing use of the homophonic “seens” and “scenes” positions theater (scenes) as the site

of knowing (seens). Theater, with all the paradoxes of truth and artifice, becomes an apt way of examining a relationship. The play uses theater as a place where audiences and characters come to collaboratively pretend in a world of make-believe *and* to know themselves more keenly through the distinctive experience of communal public embodiment.

Because *TheFace* and *TheEx* work in the theater and because *Seens* is a work of theater, the performative nature of the play's core themes of gender and sexuality are foregrounded. These women love and make love without apparent attention to the traditional performances of masculinity and femininity. Their bodies are female bodies, their gaze appreciates the femaleness of their identities, and their femaleness is not in dialogue with maleness. In fact, *TheFace* and *TheEx* are so similar that it is difficult to distinguish them by what they say or do. By making the women almost indistinguishable, Booker eschews butch-femme stereotypes and allows for a more expansive expression of their Queer identities. The choice not to sharply differentiate the women also transforms their public intimacy into social spectacle as erotic affection between two women undermines the accepted necessity for men in sexual life. Being seen—as in, freely revealing their erotic selves *and* being viewed by society—creates the spectacle.

There is very little evidence in the play regarding the gender performance of either woman. Booker creates a productive gendered ambiguity that challenges the audience members to relinquish what they may believe to be true about Queer people, and about intimate relationships in general. Importantly, the absence of these gendered codes can also extend an understanding of what Black Queer theater might be. In discussing Black lesbian and gay films, Kara Keeling challenges the requirement of specific cues to ensure recognizability. She explains, "I am arguing here that the appearance of black lesbian and gay images is made possible through a regime of visibility that has conceded to currently hegemonic notions of 'lesbian and gay sexuality' and to the primacy of binary and exclusive gender categories in the articulation of sexuality."<sup>15</sup> In several other theatrical works with Black women-loving-women characters—Shay Youngblood's *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, the musical adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Sharon Bridgforth's *no mo blues*, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*—the Queer relationships are characterized by butch-femme gender performances. By avoiding marked gender performances and the butch-femme binary, *Seens* discards a necessary feature of patriarchal frames and resists creating recognizable and therefore tolerable Black Queer women. This choice amplifies the spectacle of Queerness as women-loving-women

publicly enact intimate relationships without regard to expected gender binaries.

Making *TheEx* and *TheFace* almost interchangeable serves another important function. The similarity of their characterizations and the theatricality of their names place focus on the ideas they present rather than encourage empathy for one or the other. As their scenes of betrayal are revealed, neither seems clearly right or wrong, neither operates as an obvious heroine or villainess. In *Seens*, the attention is on the density of relationships rather than the specifics of character.

Performance is sensory and visceral and felt. The fact of Blackness, as Frantz Fanon came to learn while walking the streets of Paris, is an always already marked everyday life performance.<sup>16</sup> The fact of Queerness, for some, is a private performance that dangerously spills into the public domain through acts of intimacy—a held hand, a lingering gaze, a wet kiss, a knowing laugh. Because *TheEx* and *TheFace* have made love, are they now lesbians? Did their private actions change their public identities? How much public/private fluidity is there in loving? Must all loving be named, and have all possible names for loving already been identified? Does a shift in one's private performance ethically necessitate a shift in one's public self-performance? *Seens* does not attempt to answer these questions but instead provocatively and persistently raises them.

Theater encourages a confrontation with embodiment, an embodiment that resists stereotype or predictability. The audience members must contend with the human beings in the performance as well as those seated next to them. In an essay about her work, Booker writes, "Plays also allow for the *realness* that affirms black female representation. You know, the kind of *realness* that makes audiences squirm uncomfortably in their seats."<sup>17</sup> It is inside this squirming that growth can take place.

Perhaps it is this interest in "realness" that causes Booker to have *TheFace* and *TheEx* speak in first person major character narration as they describe their actions to the audience. They break the fourth wall theatrical convention and have "real" conversations with the audience. Early in the play, *TheEx* says to the audience, "I enter the building's entryway with the air of a trespasser. Stay calm. Be charming. I wonder, is my face on properly? My face. My face" (399). Although the characters do not speak of themselves in the third person, this self-narrating is reminiscent of Chamber Theatre, which provides language for the psychological workings of a character and a scene.<sup>18</sup> These choices root the play in very particular theatrical traditions in which the audience



is brought into the action and the act of being in the theater is part of the production.

*Seens'* awareness of the importance of performance or constructed realities is also present in the use of masks, clothes, and furnishings, which relate directly to the theatrical elements of character, costume, and set. Each character selects a mask for several of the scenes. When the women agree to meet for the first time since their separation, they each choose a black-and-white mask, suggesting that their current positions allows for no gray area, only the definitive irresolvable division of opposites. As black and white are the colors of separation, red is the color of their eros and their passion. *TheFace* shifts to a red mask before leveling accusations at *TheEx*, who loses her composure, telling the audience, "Red floods my mouth" as she coughs up red string and declares that their carefully selected red couch was "once a symbol of our passion" (423). *TheEx* and *TheFace* are ever aware of their lives as a series of staged events. The theater is their work and their primary life metaphor. They describe their relationship as if it were a play: "Playing leading roles one day, supporting roles the next. Damn good characters we were—fully dimensional, believable and passionate about our craft." Then, punctuating the metaphor, they declare jointly, "We fell in love while working in the theatre" (402). The masks are their way of interacting with one another, until the end of the play when they discard their many masks one by one.

*TheEx's* clothes serve a similar function as the masks: they reveal emotional dimensions of the relationship and underscore the constructedness of life. There are several clothing references in the play: "summer clothes," "dressings," "We were like anthropologists collecting useless fashion artifacts," "wearing other people's expectations," "Who knew that summer clothing could be so high maintenance," "linens, muslins, cottons, khaki . . . LIGHTWEIGHT. CHEAP." In the present time of the play, *TheEx* comes to collect her summer clothes from *TheFace* in the apartment building where they once lived. Since the breakup, *TheEx's* clothes have been stored in the basement, a kind of closet where secrets are kept and potentially forgotten. *TheFace* brings the boxes of clothes up to the third-floor apartment and sorts through them, placing *TheEx's* clothes in a trash bag. In the apartment, each item is examined for the stories it carries. Although placing the clothes in a trash bag might seem like a way to destroy the memories, bringing them into the apartment can also reanimate them. As soon as *TheEx* arrives in the apartment, the women begin to recall the events of their relationship, and the play is set in motion. Just after the central se-

quence of flashbacks in which the women meet, fall in love, then end the relationship, we return to the apartment and the sorting of clothes. During the scene, TheFace begins to rant and TheEx kneels over the bag of clothes while packing. The ritual-like elements of this moment are more specific in the final scene of the play. In the epilogue, TheEx packs the summer items she needs into the garment bag she brought for this purpose. While TheFace is “chanting ancient invectives” and “her body flails—possessed by Chango,” TheEx states, “There, the bag is full. The zipper, closed. Closure. Apparently, so is the past decade of my life, though not as neatly. [TheEx raises up off knees.] The bag is heavier than I expected” (437). Just as the carefully sorted clothes are about to cross the threshold of the apartment with TheEx’s departure, TheFace yields with, “For a long time we loved, didn’t we?” TheEx responds, “We did” (437). They repeat these lines as the blinding light from the opened door and the raging violin music envelop the space. This final scene is tellingly entitled “The Masquerade Is Over.”

Through the ritual-like elements of TheFace’s chants and TheEx’s kneeling, the women rid themselves of the masks that kept them concealed from each other. They let go of the posturing that required specific clothes and color schemes. Compelled by both the ritual and the glaring light of the outside world, they simply affirm the love they shared. Those carefully sorted clothes never go outside the door, as if their separated lives cannot go any further. Ultimately, they were more committed to artifice, to the disposable elements of performance than to the abiding intimacies it can provide. As TheFace asks, “How could two people invest more energy in their decor than they do the dressings of their everyday desires?” (424). *Seens* offers performances of gender and sexuality that are nonnormative and in so doing sheds light on the complex performances of intimacy.

### Finis

*Seens* sits squarely in a Black theater tradition even as it may remain, for some, in the shameful shadows. It is Black theater because it resists external definitions of Blackness. Black theater is the action of our humanity. Here, our bodies *are*. Here, the contradictions and layers of who we all diversely are cannot be erased or ignored. Black theater that includes Queer identities—particularly women-loving-women identities, given the way such loving has the unique potential for dismantling patriarchy—can become a true “hollering place” as Pearl Cleage describes her vision of theater that allows the voices of Black women—

all Black women—to be heard.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps to let out the next whoop and holler in such a theater is to achieve erotic autonomy, the ultimate freedom for a people whose sexuality was used as evidence of our non-humanity. M. Jacqui Alexander notes that “erotic autonomy has always been troublesome for the state,” and *Seens* suggests that this troublesomeness can herald in moments of personal exposure and truth.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the play, the women have discarded their material and emotional masks, and acknowledged that they did indeed love. As a powerful final statement *Seens* offers love as the space where closets are abandoned, prisons are empty, and Black is everything we create it to be.

## Notes

- 1 Throughout this essay I capitalize Black as a way to consciously acknowledge the cultural and political weight of this dense concept. Capitalizing also discourages the tendency to reduce Black to a color, thereby minimizing the historical complexity of race.
- 2 The January 24, 2008, issue of Playbill.com provides box office figures for *The Color Purple: The Musical*. In the November 10, 2009, issue of HamptonRoads.com, Scott Sanders, the show’s original producer, describes focusing on Black women, Black churches, and ads in the *New York Post* rather than the *New York Times* as strategies for ensuring a healthy Black turnout for the production. Patrick Healy of the *New York Times* notes that the audience-development strategies launched for *The Color Purple: The Musical* were later used for the musical *Memphis* and David Mamet’s *Race*. Among the fluctuating cast members for *The Color Purple: The Musical* were *American Idol* winner Fantasia Barrino, legendary R&B/soul singer Chaka Khan, gospel music icon BeBe Winans, and LaKisha Jones, an *American Idol* finalist. Having these well-known artists in the production was another important way to attract Black audiences.
- 3 Combahee River Collective, *Words of Fire*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 231.
- 4 Marlon Riggs, *Black Is, Black Ain’t* (California Newsreel, Signifyin’ Works, 2004).
- 5 By capitalizing Queer, I intend to foreground the specificity and expansiveness of gender and sexual expression. Queer, then, becomes an adjective (describing a thing), a noun (a thing itself), and a verb (the action generated by the concept). Capitalizing also encourages engagement with the reader, rather than lowercase, which almost renders this potent term innocuous.
- 6 Matt Richardson, “The Queer Limit of Black Memory,” in *Listening to Archives: Black Lesbian Literature and Queer Memory*, manuscript, 4–5.
- 7 *The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical of “The Wizard of Oz,”* first performed in 1975, is the seven-time Tony Award-winning retelling of L. Frank Baum’s *The*

*Wonderful Wizard of Oz* from a Black cultural reference point. It was made into a film starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross in 1978. Evilene, *The Wiz's Wicked Witch of the West*, opens Act II by belting out the warning song "Don't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News." It opens with the ominous lyrics "When I wake up in the afternoon/Which it pleases me to do/Don't nobody bring me no bad news/'Cause I wake up already negative/And I've wired up my fuse/So don't nobody bring me no bad news." The catchy repeated chorus has made the phrase readily identifiable among many Black theatergoers.

- 8 Some audience members might have associated the lines of the play with "Screamin'" Jay Hawkins, a blues singer who became popular in 1956 when he wrote the original version of "I Put a Spell on You." With either Simone or Hawkins as reference points, Booker's line calls forth a Black musical history.
- 9 Amiri Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre," in *Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 130.
- 10 W. E. B. Du Bois's attempts to generate social uplift for Black people are discussed in his influential essay "The Talented Tenth," which first appeared in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903). Du Bois was committed to higher education, political action, and the arts as tools for improving Black life in the United States. An analysis of his work on social uplift can be found in Jacqueline M. Moore's *Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003). In 1925, Du Bois founded the KRIGWA Players, the theatrical branch of the NAACP's Crisis magazine. KRIGWA is an acronym that stands for the Crisis (spelled with a "K" to "Africanize" the word) Guild of Writers and Artists. Though begun in New York, the KRIGWA Players also had venues in Cleveland, New Haven, Baltimore, and Denver. For more information on this significant development in Black theater history, see Ethel Pitts Walker, "Krigwa: A Theatre by, for, and about Black People," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 3 (October 1988): 347-56.
- 11 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 91.
- 12 Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 99.
- 13 Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984).
- 14 Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," *GLQ* 14, nos. 2-3 (2008): 199.
- 15 Kara Keeling, "Joining the Lesbians': Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 218.
- 16 Fanon's encounter led to his famous poetic exegesis of the exclamation leveled at him—"Look, a Negro!" See "The Fact of Blackness" in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1952).

- 17 Pamela Booker, *Dust: Murmurs and a Play* (Rochester, NY: Evolutionary Girls, 2008), 43.
- 18 Developed by Robert Breen while he was a professor of oral interpretation at Northwestern University, Chamber Theatre is a method of adapting prose fiction for ensemble performance. It retains the narration, embodies the narrator singly or through multiple performers, and emphasizes the psychology of the characters and the consciousness of the story itself. Characters often speak narrative passages about themselves, which necessitates speaking about themselves in the third person, thereby allowing for multiple perspectives to exist simultaneously.
- 19 Pearl Cleage, "Hollering Place," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* (Summer 1994).
- 20 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 22.

## Interview with Pamela Booker

Tavia Nyong'o

**Tavia Nyong'o:** I saw *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love* on the stage here in New York in 2005, but I reread it this week and thinking back to the performance I saw that was directed by . . .

**Pamela Booker:** Anita Gonzalez.

**TN:** I realized that I had no recollection, or sharp recollection of the gender of the protagonists.

**PB:** Which is good.

**TN:** And then as I began to read it I was looking for the clues in the written text. Of course, it becomes and feels like a theme: the question of gender and sameness. It's not presented in this very direct fashion as a kind of problem drama. So, given that same-sex love is always—not always, but in American politics and in culture these days so frequently—dealt with as a problem, how did you come to this particular approach?

**PB:** Well, you know, I first wanted to acknowledge your comment in recognition of not having an awareness of gender in the characters. That was part of my impulse when I first started writing this. Originally, and this is just an aside, I wanted to write something that would have male and female characters represented in characterization and, in fact, hopefully when it [the play] gets done again at some point I would still love to see that particular device have more play. Now, how does one get to that place? You're asking almost for a releasing of what could be seen as problematic by an audience. And in some regards, I don't know. It certainly was not written from a place of intentionality in that regard. I think that one's knowing or a person's knowledge can oftentimes influence it. I guess the narrative that grows between these two characters grows between distinctly rooted places of familiarity,

and within that familiarity I think there are some larger global features or universal themes that are necessarily implicit in how people love regardless of gender, and I think that that was really the point of entry for me. How can I tell a story about how people, these two people in this case, as it's revealed happen to be women who shared a journey through love together. And what was that journey about? And ultimately what was the outcome?

**TN:** That's really interesting to hear because one of the theatrical devices that the play uses that speaks to the common experience of love, and also the experience of falling in and out of love, is the device of the rose-colored lens. People start the play wearing rose-colored lenses and it's kind of a motif: pink and rose and red as the colors of love and as the colors of possibly maybe delusion. I got connotations of the *Wizard of Oz* and I know that that is a different color, but I wondered if that was somewhere in your mind when you are thinking about Dorothy on her journey to Oz . . .

**PB:** It's funny that you would mention Dorothy, because I have to tell you that the *Wizard of Oz* is one of my top three favorite films . . .

**TN:** I'm not surprised.

**PB:** I can't say, though, that the *Wizard of Oz* was necessarily a direct or deliberate metaphor, but certainly I can see how you could get that sort of juxtaposition. Certainly how we—what is it?—our expectations or that which we anticipate around the condition of love is almost always going to be beyond what the love can provide us. And I don't at all say that from a place of being cynical because I really believe in a holistic love, but I think that oftentimes people do have expectations of love beyond what it can provide for us, especially romantic love—and we see how that translates in relationships, friendships, expectations that parents have of their children of sometimes having to shift to a hard love. And I think that when the rose-colored lens[es] are removed from the eyes, in terms of how we expect this person to behave and to react to us and provide for us, is oftentimes really very imbalanced.

**TN:** The characters mentioned early on in the play about serving as role models for our high maintenance friends. [laughs] Does that add to the pressure of love with or without illusions, the expectation that you be a role model—that your love be a kind of role model for others in some ways?

**PB:** Does it add to the expectation?

**TN:** Does it add to the difficulty of sustaining?

**PB:** I think it does only if you take that on, and I think part of what this narrative is attempting to say is if I were to personalize it in some way, that we have all in different moments taken on being a role model. Oftentimes we slip into it without even knowing. And I think oftentimes, too, that will happen to us when we allow other people's projections to shape what we imagined behavior should be or, again, what kind of reaction and response to what is being experienced in a relationship. An example of that for me is my first long-term partnership. And particularly in looking at some of the variances and imbalances that have existed around same-sex couples. On the one hand, we can say that historically because they were not role models, they could not provide. I really do in every way reject whatever this sort of heterosexual model of behavior in coupling [is]. Who is to say that those [models] are necessarily right? So I think on some level there needs to be an invention and there have been inventions of what same-sex relationships can be and are. But I think the danger in that is that people then become these types, and within that they are expected to behave a certain way—and then to critique how you are behaving. And if you are not behaving according to their standard or according to their model, it becomes really difficult for you to be able to be seen as a socialized relationship. I look for where we can locate ourselves around human behavior. And if something lends itself to how you practice it. If something is ethical, if something is just right, if something is operating from a place of high vibration, it doesn't matter whether it is same-sex or some other combination, it's good. It's good love. At the same time, if it is not working, then it's just not good love.

**TN:** I wanted to ask you about the metatheatricality of the play. I guess I should ask, do you see it as a metatheatrical work?

**PB:** Do you mean in terms of layering or echoes or . . .

**TN:** . . . well, for an example in that opening scene TheEX says that “we fell in love while working in the theater” and that becomes a recurring motif. And what you were saying just now about role playing and about coming to believe certain roles in your interpersonal life—in the play *Seens from the Unexpectedness of Love* the theater becomes a metaphor for both the possibility in those mechanics, but also maybe some of the limitations, the constrictedness of that.

**PB:** And the spectacle. The spectacle is very active in it as well. Definitely. Love is oftentimes staged, right? So we have people who plat-



form where they are going to have movement and how they are going to interact with one another on the stage and I think whether or not the staging is realized, it happens in the same way that we talk about the inherent performative video of all relationships. Alright? Now, if you step outside of that and have the opportunity to look at that in a pan-optical way—the way these characters do—they are also critiquing that kind of voyeurism. I'm sort of all over the place with this, but I remember this discussion that Hortense Spillers had. She was talking about black folk being able to exercise what she called “interlogues” around those issues that are particularly pernicious to community behavior. And there is a lot of fear and potential detriment in that in terms of how it can be misinterpreted or miscast by this audience, who is constantly watching what you are doing on this stage. So, in this play I wanted to have fun and give these characters, who are their own players, the opportunity to exercise that privilege and not be concerned with who's listening to their interior monologues as well as to the exterior ones; to be their own critics and to be their own witnesses, and, yes, at the heart of that they are also critiquing the play that goes on within the theater and oftentimes the incestuous nature of it, the hyperreality of it.

I, as someone who has been a theater artist since adolescence, have come to understand that you are part of these many communities for this period of time—for however long it's going to run. I've worked in the past on Broadway and you're in a show for a year and these people become extended family. You take on roles and there are scripts that are assigned and that you assume and that you write for yourself around identity and authority and this is an opportunity to be able to watch. You tend to be able to act it out and just to watch it again. And I think what is the through line, what is the emotional reality of it all? And what does it say about who these people really are when they go home at the end of the day from the theater and remove their masks?

**TN:** Picking up on that, do you have any particular reflections or reminiscences about being in a particular theater family that produced that kind of staging of things?

**PB:** There was a festival that we did and I don't remember the full name, but festivals are, by their very nature, frenetic, because everything is kind of limited: time and money and resources. It is this group of people that we know as actors who are willing to step in to this place with you for a period of time and say I find this script that you have written compelling and it engages me in some way and yes I will be a part of it. And so there is this embracing by a very small community of actors, and

they were extraordinary actors and they were all equity. I've been very, very fortunate the times I have been produced to get really good professional actors who were literally between jobs and who really wanted to do my work. And so that has always just been really affirming for me. And I was working with Anita Gonzalez, who is an extraordinary performance artist-practitioner, who is now transitioning to becoming a teacher, scholar, dance historian, and director on her own terms, and Anita and I go back some years to when she was dancing with Urban Bush Women. And we were watching each other grow up and move into these places where we could be impactful in our work, on other people's work, and we had always wanted to collaborate on a project. And that, to me, is like firmament when you can come back to a new situation, but with someone who has familiarity and who is now informed with whatever your aesthetic is, and the qualities of production that are important to you as the writer, and the original expression in this work and having someone who can capture that makes all the difference in having the support and the continuity with the group of artistic practitioners. And that's been really wonderful for me to experience, especially on this production.

**TB:** Are there any final thoughts or anything you want to put on the record?

**PB:** One closing thought that I hope is conveyed to whoever gets to see the play or read the play is that one of the comments or offerings if you will that the characters put out there is: *we did love, didn't we?* And I see this as a question that is illuminating not only for this couple, but for any isolated couple that is sometimes forced to question: *is the love still there?* And also, for us to look at that as a larger humanity: *we did love.* So I am really very interested as someone who is moving through this path of [the] early twenty-first century in a time that is in the midst of some really deep chaos that we get back to this question of *we did love* and finding our way around to perhaps actualizing it.