ABSTRACT

The Process Of Developing My Voice As A Playwright
Based On The Creation Of An Original Play

By Irad Vanterpool

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the process of developing my voice as a playwright through scholarly research. In collaboration with my research, I have created an original play through the process, which I refer to in my paper. The play places certain issues to the forefront in order to analyze what elements or contributing factors play a role in the lives of African American men. In this thesis I explore the influences that helped create my voice and the process of creating a play reflective of those inspirations in my writing and hence my voice.
The Process Of Developing My Voice As A Playwright
Based On The Creation Of An Original Play

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Irad Vanterpool
Miami University
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Committee Advisor: _____________________
(Dr. Paul K. Jackson)

Committee Member: _____________________
(Dr. William J. Doan)

Committee Member: _____________________
(Dr. Tammy L. Kernodle)
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Introduction

The voice of the playwright depends on the environment from which they came, their upbringing, good and bad experiences, influences and unforgettable moments in life. When reading or seeing a play, one can learn a lot of information from it whether it’s history, culture, fashion, religion or philosophical thought. What this says about the playwright is that influence and experience plays a vital role in developing his or her script. After many rewrites, revisions and practice, the writer creates a work that can have an impact on the public, the reader or the viewer. Throughout history, there were many playwrights whose impact was legendary in a particular era of theatre. No matter the era, their works transcend time. Throughout time these writers have included some of the Ancient Greek and Roman playwrights, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Moliere, Restoration playwrights, George Lillo, Colley Cibber, Joseph Addison, Friedrich von Schiller, Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas Sr., Eugene Scribe, George Aiken, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Anton Chekov, John Millington Synge, Luigi Pirandello, Frederico Garcia Lorca, Bertolt Brecht, Susan Glaspell, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Samuel Beckett, Lorraine Hansberry, Harold Pinter, Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Kennedy, Sam Shepard, August Wilson, Caryl Churchill, Athol Fugard, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner.

These playwrights wrote plays with which the general audience could identify. Certain writers served as the voice for their fellow countrymen, a particular class, or for themselves. Others wrote plays that were political, controversial and even offensive. Nevertheless, the playwright’s voice was heard. More importantly, the playwright wrote plays that allowed the reader to understand and see what things were going on in that particular era. In the west, from ancient Greece to the twenty first century, the Black writers who are recognized in a particular literary era are very few in numbers. On the other hand, White writers can be accounted for in every era. Terence is the only black playwright that is accounted for in the ancient world. More importantly, there were no plays that were recovered to show what life was like for an African in ancient Rome. Nonetheless, both Plautus and Seneca’s plays have been documented.

In the U.S, scholars such as James V. Hatch and Ted Shine recovered and
documented important African American theatre artists and plays throughout the history of African American theatre. These scholars and their work have retrieved and acknowledged notable African American playwrights and plays that were significant during a specific time period. The earliest record of significant Black playwrights and Black plays in American theatre was during the early nineteenth century. For years, white theatre historians have extensively documented *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by George Aiken (1852) as the most notable play in American theatre. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that Black theatre historians recovered evidence of a notable play written over thirty years before *Uncle Tom*. The African Company (founded by West Indian Actor James Hewlett) presented a play at the African Grove Theater. *The Drama of King Shotaway*, written by William Alexander Brown (also the founder of The African Grove Theater), was a play about the Caravs in the Caribbean revolting against their masters. The play premiered on the stage of the African Grove Theater. While the script has been lost, the documentation of *The Drama of King Shotaway* provided proof that Black writers and Black theatre artists created productions for the general public that reflected Black history and culture. The African Grove Theater’s existence was ephemeral due to the jealousy of racist white politicians and white theatre artists. Nevertheless, the African Company still made its presence felt. In 1858, William Wells Brown wrote *The Escape* (or *A Leap of Freedom*), which was based on his personal experience as a slave. The Dred Scott Decision of 1857 was another reason why Brown was inspired to write the play. (Hatch & Shine, 26) Even though Brown wrote his play six years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, various white historian writers acknowledged *Uncle Tom* as the only significant play during that time period.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge (1807-1867), an African American actor, was also part of the African Company. He expatriated to Europe due to the lack of acting opportunities in America for Blacks. Aldridge wrote plays in which he starred in such as *The Black Doctor* (1847). The play was about a Black physician who falls in love with the daughter of a French aristocrat and elopes. (Hatch & Shine, 3-4) Victor Sejour (1817-1874), another African American, became a very popular playwright throughout

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1 From the introduction of *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*. Pp xi-xiii.
Europe. France in particular, placed his name with likes of other French playwrights at the time like Alexandre Dumas pere (who himself was a quadroon)\(^2\) and Emile Augier. (Hatch and Shine, 25-26) These were a few examples of the early contributions to theatre by African Americans that were unknown until scholars were able to recover evidence. Hatch and Shine were two of the first scholars of Black theatre to center these writers’ accomplishments. Scholars such as, Hatch and Shine have provided an extensive bibliography of other studies in relation to the African American theatre.

It wasn’t until the twentieth century that Black playwrights wrote plays in a major way that that allowed them to voice their concerns. They did so continuously throughout the century. The black women of the Harlem Renaissance wrote anti-lynching plays that were real and symbolic. The Black writers of the Federal Theatre Project wrote plays that were political. By the mid-twentieth century writers emerged such as Lorraine Hansberry and not too far behind her came Amiri Baraka and later August Wilson. What was significant about the black writers in the different eras of theatre was that they wrote plays reflective of African American life, culture, history and politics.

While earlier black playwrights were able to be the voice of their people in a particular era, the new millennium poses a different problem. The reason is related to the low number of young black playwrights that are developing or being developed today. Part of the problem has to do with the low number of black writers that exist in collegiate playwriting programs. That’s not to say that a playwright can only come from a college program because August Wilson’s life proved that you could teach yourself if you’re committed. Wilson was a high school dropout and never attended college. August Wilson is still writing plays today but today’s generation is not his generation. Although there are some contemporary Black playwrights, there is a need for young writers in the twenties to early thirties who can write plays that reflect their current culture.

The role of the Black male playwright is a road that has historically been an overall struggle and few have been able to truly find success. One of the factors that have contributed to this problem is generational difference. The reason for the survival of African American Theatre is that every era of Black theatre consisted of a generation of

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\(^2\) According to Wilson Moses, Dumas pere had African Ancestry, which was well recognized by the French people during his time period. For further information see Wilson, pp 167.
artists that wanted their voice heard and representation of their culture. The general Black population wanted to see some form of representation on stage with which they could identify. This inspired Black playwrights to take the initiative of writing plays in every era of African American theatre. While that may have been the case from the early nineteenth century to the twentieth century, the same cannot be said for the generation of young Black males today.

There are some factors that come into play. The education system in inner city schools faces difficulty in encouraging or implementing Black theatre and hence playwrights in the curriculum. In high school, the ancient Greek playwrights, Shakespeare and white American playwrights like Tennessee Williams are still the main event in high school.

The other problem in relation to education comes down to peer pressure. When a young Black male actually cares about his education, he is subject to ridicule and chastisement for being smart. I am a representative of that type of student. Personally, I know what it’s like to be a victim of chastisement and harassment for caring about my education. Another problem is the heavy influence of the hip-hop culture. While every era of African American history has a huge impact and influence on an entire community or the African American race, theatre doesn’t have that affect on today’s generation. Hip-hop is the greatest influence in today’s generation due to identification. A young Black male sees an entertainer such as a rapper who comes from the same environmental background and wants to emulate the artist. In hip-hop being a nerd is not acceptable. Hip Hop is all about image and young Black males get “caught up” in that type of thinking. This type of negative influential thought makes its way inside the schools.

Another problem is recognition. In any book of a collection of the greatest plays in American theatre or world theatre written by white writers, only certain African American males will surface in those books. Throughout the previous century and depending upon current political fashion, only a select group of African American playwrights are in theatre anthologies written by whites. These writers include Amiri Baraka, Charles Gordone, George C. Wolfe and August Wilson. Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott, who are both Nobel Prize winners, are the only Black male writers outside the US that are in a mainstream anthology. On the other hand, a contemporary
white counterpart with less notoriety may find his or hers play receiving recognition. The only way to read an anthology of plays by numerous Black playwrights from different eras is if an African American theatre historian publishes a Black anthology of plays.

While the previous generations had to overcome their struggle, a new struggle exists for young Black male writers today. Unfortunately there are few young Black writers that are known or even visible to the public eye. There are many issues and topics that have to be addressed with today’s youth and young adults but the plays by young playwrights that exist within the “y” generation rarely surface to regional level, almost never on a national or commercial level.

The question I pose is, where are the young Black male playwrights? Are there any young Black male playwrights being developed? For a playwright, finding your voice is truly vital in creating a play where your voice is heard throughout the play whether it’s seen or read. As a Black playwright, getting the opportunity to let your voice be heard can be a difficult task when the opportunities are scarce or nonexistent. One has to wonder why are the opportunities scarce?

My own path as a playwright warrants consideration. My development as a playwright is an ongoing process but I learn as I continue walking my playwriting path. While graduate school is where I have begun to concentrate on playwriting, part of my inspiration comes from experiences as an undergraduate student (1995-2001). Reflecting back during that time, acting was of more importance in my life. However, the lack of roles for African American men or women in one of my undergraduate programs is one of my reasons for my interest in playwriting. In his book, Woodie King Jr. notes that, “Unfortunately for the Black actors, the plays chosen were usually classical plays that were written when Black men didn’t figure in the scheme of white America.” (King, 3) In the case of Blacks at my undergraduate institutions, the tendency to traditionally cast in accordance with the classical or archaic plays created a dearth of acting opportunities.

In one specific institution, a theatre program comprised of theatre majors that were predominately Black and Latino, made no effort to recognize the multiculturalism present. The only thing I learned about acting after graduating from undergrad was that I wasted time being a theatre major. King notes that, “The true understanding of acting comes when the student is involved in acing and producing before a live audience. And
the professors destroy this by selecting classics, which the Black actor finds difficulty in acting, not to mention difficulty in casting.” (King, 3) I have seen the pain and frustration of the students of color who just wanted an opportunity. A day never passed when I wished that someone could create plays that would have better representation and roles for African Americans and Latinos. With this in my mind, I became a playwright.

Ironically, a significant event in my brief career of playwriting occurred shortly after beginning my Master’s work. A playwriting instructor said something that I will never forget. The instructor said:

“I want to get you away from writing plays that are “too African American themed”. I want you to move away from that and begin to write “different things”. So I want you to get away from always writing the “same stuff.”

In this moment, it was apparent that the instructor wanted to stymie the voice of a Black playwright. Coeval with the incident, I never had the opportunity to write any plays with an African American theme. I couldn’t even get any of my work on stage while students of other cultures were able to present their work. As disparaging as those remarks were, I came to the conclusion that I was misunderstood. When people are clueless or have little knowledge about a particular culture, someone has to do something to open up people’s awareness. There are people in this country who are representative of that instructor at all levels of education.

In the tradition of Black playwrights before me, I had to create something in order for my voice to be heard. So I channeled my anger and frustration into creating *An Urban Fairytale*, a play that had different levels. Through the use of making the characters animals instead of humans, I intended to entertain children but allow the adults in the audience to look deeper into the play to understand the true message of the play. Many friends, colleagues and students truly enjoyed what they saw and to my surprise have had many intellectual conversations about the play since. I came to the realization that my voice was heard and there are different ways to reveal a voice if there is opposition standing in the way. Although *Fairytale* was publicly successful, as a cultural exercise, I was still unsuccessful because I was unable to have the opportunity to present a play on stage that visually reflected and displayed my culture.
August Wilson and the Black Theatre Network Conference were catalyst in allowing me to formulate my thesis while continually developing as a playwright. August Wilson was someone I’ve always admired and another reason why I became a playwright. Researching Wilson was one of the inspirations for finding my voice as a playwright. August Wilson inspires me because he was able to amalgamate the African American experience, culture and history, which allowed the audience or reader to become cognizant of his work. I was motivated then to learn more about Wilson. In conducting my research on Wilson, my goal was to find out what influenced him. What was responsible for creating his voice? How was he able to use his voice to resonate through his plays and make the public understand the messages he was relaying through his plays? In order for me to find what is my voice, I have to begin with August Wilson.

August Wilson exemplifies a playwright whose voice resonates in every play that he has written. As an African American he recognizes that he is in a position where the truth, beauty and facts about African American history, culture and tradition must be displayed and expressed in his work. In creating what is known as the cycle plays (plays set in the time periods from 1910-2000) Wilson combines all of those elements in each play. Writing these types of plays gives a reader an idea of how people function within a specific time period as far as living, social and political conditions. What is remarkable about Wilson is his longevity in playwriting and his ability to control the artistic product while progressively fighting the silencing of his work.

Recalling the incident I encountered in 2004, I spoke to my family and friends and received much needed support. A week after the incident, I went back home to New York City and had the pleasure of meeting August Wilson. After introducing myself and telling him about being an aspiring playwright, I told him about my incident with the playwriting instructor. Mr. Wilson looked me straight in the eye and said:

“First of all, don’t let anyone take away your voice. Your voice is what makes you, if you let someone take it away then you have nothing. If people don’t believe in you, you make them believe. If you have disbelief in yourself then no one will believe you. Don’t let anyone ever take away your voice brother. That’s what defines you.”
Hearing this come directly from the mouth of Mr. Wilson was the greatest advice
I could ever receive as a playwright. What Wilson said caused me to reflect on one of the
themes of the first play of his cycle, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. One of the major
themes was never to let anyone take away your song. The voice was what allowed Black
playwrights in various periods of theatre to sing and shout what they wanted to say. If
their voice was taken away from them, they would have become invisible. In meeting
Mr. Wilson, I realized that he’s not physically a tall person but as little as he may be, his
influence, plays, words and place in theatre is gigantic. The contradiction of his physical
stature to his career as a playwright is an example of making one’s presence known and
felt. Wilson may be short in height, but through his work and his voice, he will always
have a large presence in theatre.

My admiration and respect for August Wilson compelled me to write a paper
which was presented at the Black Theatre Network Conference in August 2004. “Kiss
My Black Bottom: From August Wilson To His Critics” addressed the ongoing criticism
that August Wilson kept receiving due to controversial remarks he made. Wilson, on a
couple of occasions, indicated that blacks should only produce black plays in black theatres. Wilson also mentioned that blacks should only perform in black roles. These
types of comments had many white theatre critics calling August Wilson, the Broadway
King, a hypocrite. The ensuing debate with Robert Brustein and ultimately the theatre
community opened the opportunity to examine Wilson’s background to get a clearer
understanding as to why he would make such comments. The other objective of the
paper was to determine whether the critics were justified in criticizing Wilson.

After examining Wilson’s dramaturgical background, two things were revealed.
Wilson’s background gave him the right to say what he wanted. The second revelation
was that it was obvious Wilson’s critics didn’t know or hadn’t explored his background
to get a better understanding of his “controversial” comments. The biggest issue was
voice. Since Wilson became famous through white mainstream theaters, it seemed as if
his critics felt that he had no right to speak. This supposedly meant that Wilson couldn’t
speak for African Americans because he’s famous and can’t speak on behalf of the
struggling Black artists. As I defended Wilson in the paper, the question I explored was
whether or not Wilson can be the voice for black artists today? Since Wilson is one of
the few Blacks at the top of the theatre elite and America’s greatest living playwright, it
does not mean he’s obligated to stay silent in defending Black theatre artists.

The Black Theatre Network Conference allowed me to have the opportunity to
meet notable African Americans in theatre. Most of the people I met at this conference
have paid their dues and made great impacts in their careers but there was something that
seemed to echo throughout the conference. It was the fact that the only voices that were
heard from African Americans in theatre today are mostly from the elder generation. The
voices of the young generation seem to be silent. When I was sitting at a table for a
banquet at the conference, I had the pleasure of sitting next to Sandra Reeves-Phillips
who has been an actress for a long time. Ms. Reeves-Phillips (“Mama Sandra” as she
wants me to call her) said to me:

“It’s great to see young writers like you because there are
no young voices in theatre and old-timers like myself need
young and fresh writers like yourself to continue to create
roles in theatre for people like myself and future
generations.”

What can be read sub textually from Ms. Reeves-Phillips is that the young black
writer is relatively nonexistent. The elders can’t write forever and they’re looking for a
new generation of Black writers that can help Black theatre to continue to strive.
Ultimately, with that type of encouragement from people such as Ms. Reeves-Phillips,
Woodie King Jr., Paul Carter Harrison and others, I was inspired to find my voice. The
bottom line was that a challenge was presented to find my voice and use it to create a
future that can benefit others and make an impact.

Reflecting on the conversation with Wilson, it comes down to believing.
Wilson’s plays have made many people from many cultures believe in his work. This is
one of my goals as a playwright. My aim is to create a play that will make the reader or
spectator believe what I write reflects the contemporary black male and black culture. In
showcasing my work, I want the audience to believe that what is being presented on the
stage reflects the message of the play.

I remember my award-winning essay on Wilson in which I discussed his
influences. The influences that inspired Wilson, known as “the four B’s” (Herrington, 2),
helped mold and shape Wilson into one of the best playwrights in American theater. These “four B’s” were, the Blues, Amiri Baraka, Jorge Luis Borges and Romare Bearden. I have been inspired by my own set of influences but they don’t all alphabetically begin with B. My four influences are, Wilson, W.E.B Dubois, Spike Lee and rap music. All four of my influences are connect with the theme of voice, which is the topic of my thesis.

Du Bois’s influence for my writing is in relation to his contributions to Black Theatre during the Harlem Renaissance. His creation of the Black pageants, *The Star of Ethiopia* and his philosophies for Black theatre is what I will discuss in the next chapter. In relation to Wilson, my inspiration for becoming a playwright, the one play I will discuss is *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The voice, which is one of the themes in the play, is what I will examine in the next chapter. Spike Lee is a great influence in my writing because he represents a Black man in control of his creative work. In the next chapter I will examine a few of his films in which he explores various issues that affect the Black community. Rap music is a heavy influence in my writing because it’s a form of music that allows the rap artist to be creative and expressive. Particularly, I will examine the social conscious rap era circa 1979-1993. I will investigate how this powerful form of music makes a great impact, but later loses control of its voice. Public Enemy, KRS-One and Ice Cube are three rap artists whose music I will explore because of their significant contributions in the social conscious rap era.

My thesis centers on an original play that connects with the theme of voice. My play deals with stereotypes and negative images that affect contemporary Black males. There are many issues that a young black male face today and someone has to let the public know what young black males are really about. A number of cultures outside of the African American and Latino community base their views and perceptions of African Americans by what is shown daily on TV shows, the news and music videos. This is particularly true in relevance to Black males. Due to the types of portrayal of Black men through the media, a struggle for the Black male identity has taken place. As a result, the rest of the nation walks around with a false view of Black males, which allows prejudice to occur. Since America is a visually heavy nation, it is up to Black males to take control and start to create visuals to counter the false images from the white controlled media.
Film, video and theatre are examples of ways to effectively battle misrepresentation. As a playwright, the best way to express what’s on my mind is creating a play. Like Wilson who writes plays that reflect African American culture, the same holds true for my goal as a playwright. The only way I can counter the negative imagery and stereotypes of black male is to set the record straight on a number of issues.
Chapter I: Influences

In this chapter I explore the influences that contribute to my development as a playwright. Each section discusses the connection between my influences and my struggle for voice. In the W.E.B Dubois section, I discuss his role in the reappearance of the voice within Black theatre. In the Joe Turner’s Come and Gone section, I examine the historical struggle for voice in the play. In the Spike Lee section, I investigate some of his films and examine some issues he presents from his perspective. In the final section of this chapter, I examine the social conscious rap era in which I discuss how a powerful form of Black music loses complete control of its voice.

W.E.B Du Bois

The Black theatre of the Harlem Renaissance is one of the most important events in the history of theatre. Despite the lack of recognition by some theatre scholars and educators, the Renaissance is significant in the chronicles of African American theatre. The Harlem Renaissance is responsible for the emergence of various eras of Black theatre in the United States during the twentieth century. W.E.B Du Bois is one of the catalysts responsible for creating the foundation for twentieth century Black theatre. There are numerous reasons as to why Du Bois is one of the most influential men in African American history. His services in the fight against racism, social injustice, education and literature are well known\(^3\). As a pioneer for twentieth century Black theatre, his contributions are eminent.

The Crisis was a journal created by Du Bois, which has a connection to his interest in theatre. The Crisis was established in 1910, which was ironically the same year Du Bois co-founded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Color People). According to Arnold Rampersad, “The fundamental aim of the Crisis was to defend, praise, and instruct Black people; more simply put, its goal was black power.” (Rampersad, 143) David Levering Lewis says, “The Crisis was created to serve different functions:

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1. As a newspaper recording “very important happening and movement in the world which bears on the great problem of interracial relations and especially those which affect the Negro-American. 2. As a comprehensive review “of opinion and literature” pertinent to the race problem. 3. As a forum for “a few terse” articles. 4. The editorial page, mainly though not exclusively animated by Du Bois, standing “for the rights of men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy.”

(Lewis, 409-10)

The Crisis gave Du Bois a forum to address issues in politics, education, social uplift, organizations and meetings, science, and art. The journal allowed Black intellectuals to speak their mind on issues or topics by writing articles. Blacks in various fields such as education, fine arts, sports, and literature gained notoriety through exposure from the Crisis. Du Bois had a two to four page article where he would personally address the reader. His article allowed the reader to see a more ingenuous side of himself as he tackled a current issue or shared a personal narrative.

Reflecting the goal of the Crisis, Du Bois felt that theatre might conceivably provide a stage for tackling issues that were relevant to Blacks. One of the issues he felt the need to address was the racist misrepresentation of Blacks. David Krasner writes, “No definition of race drama has been more influential than the one offered by W.E.B. Du Bois.” (Krasner, 214) According to Krasner, Du Bois felt that “Negro Theatre” must follow four fundamental principles, “about us, by us, for us, near us.” Du Bois said that Negro theatre must be:

1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today must write them. 3. For Us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near Us. The theatre must be in a Negro
neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.

(Krasner, 214)

These four fundamental principles are the reasons for the creation of the first pageant in 1913. One of the reasons for the creation of the pageant was to commemorate the fifty-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation was signed by President Abraham Lincoln to free African/African American slaves in rebel states with the exception of thirteen parishes (including New Orleans) in Louisiana, forty-eight counties in West Virginia, seven counties (including Norfolk) in eastern Virginia and Border States. Du Bois’s pageant served as the “Proclamation” for Black theatre. The pageants didn’t end the minstrel shows and white “Negro Drama” right away, but its presence encouraged Black theatre artists to create their own theatre.

Similarly, the Emancipation Proclamation and the pageant served as signs of hope. The Proclamation and the pageant represented paths that were built by the contributions of their respective predecessors. The predecessors were the enslaved African/African Americans who were successful and unsuccessful in their rebellions. The Proclamation continues the “construction” of the path towards freedom by continuing in the memory and legacy of Blacks who fought and died for freedom. The pageant’s “construction” continued from where the African Company and the African Grove Theater abruptly ended. The pageant continued the path towards freedom for the Black voice in theatre.

Black theatre artists during the Harlem Renaissance were angry at the negative depictions of African Americans. Their anger stemmed from two ongoing issues. The minstrel shows were the first problem. The minstrel shows nefariously portrayed Blacks as stereotypical characters. White playwrights creating plays that were accepted by white society as “Negro drama” was the second problem. Creating a theatre that displayed African Americans in a positive aspect gave Black theatre artists their emancipation from theatrical misrepresentation. The pageant provided Du Bois a platform to excoriate the decades of racist misrepresentation of Blacks. There were three goals he set for his pageant: (1) To get people interested in the development of Negro Drama; (2) To teach

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4 For further information of the exact breakdown, see Bennett Jr., p. 469.
the colored people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich emotional life through a new theatre; (3) To reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing. (Krasner, 82)

White playwrights creating plays that depicted the so-called “true” lives of African Americans offended many Blacks. This motivated Du Bois to create The Star of Ethiopia. His goal for The Star of Ethiopia was that it “would serve as a powerful catalyst for the creation of a Black national theatre fostering interest in racial uplift and indigenous Black culture.” (Krasner, 83) On October 22, 1913 The Star of Ethiopia premiered at the 12th Regiment Armory in New York City.

The Star of Ethiopia is not structured conventionally like most plays but the play consists of a prologue along with six scenes or episodes. Each episode is a continuation of a timeline that traces the history of African Americans from Africa to the United States. After the prologue the play progresses through a succession of episodes portraying different periods of Black history.

“The Gift of Iron” is the name of the first episode. The scene begins with Africans who ran away from beasts and horrific thunderstorms. Some perished while others survived. While fleeing, the Africans called upon their god Shango. Shango answered their prayers by giving them the Star of the Fire of Freedom through his daughter, Ethiopia. Ethiopia appears as a veiled woman with fire in her right hand and iron in her left hand. The scene gives Africans the credit for inventing iron welding and establishes Africa as the source of iron smelting. (Krasner, 89)

“The Gift of the Nile” is the second episode. The scene shows Egyptians worshiping the Sphinx. Another group of Africans (The Kushites) enters and encounters the Egyptians. The Kushites are pleased with the friendliness of the Egyptians and intrigued by their culture. A ceremony takes place as Ra is crowned as priest and king while joined by the Queen of Sheba and Queen Candace of Ethiopia. Both cultures amalgamate, reflecting how cooperative both civilizations were in establishing Africa as the earliest place of commerce. (Krasner, 90)

“The Gift of Faith” is the third episode. This episode shows the rise of Mohammedanism through clashes with the Songhay. Continued war depletes the
strength of numbers of Africans, which in turn weakens both sides. This episode reflects Africans struggling against internal and external conflicts. (Krasner, 91)

“The Gift of Humiliation” is the fourth episode. In this scene, the Mohammedans and other Africans push their slaves forward to European traders in return for goods. A Christian missionary appears, symbolizing a voice of reason, but the slave trade increases. The scene ends with chaos and objects such as whips and chains. A priest staggers beneath a cross and is crowned with thorns. This episode picks up where the third episode ends. Chaos, the lack of unity and distrust allow the Europeans to invade and begin centuries of pain and humiliation for Africans and their descendants. (Hatch & Shine, 90)

The Gift Toward the Struggle of Freedom is the fifth episode. This scene includes Blacks from various time periods of Black history. This includes Alonzo (the Negro pilot for Columbus) the Maroons, Toussaint L’Overture, the Haitians, Stephen Dorantes, Crispus Attucks, George Lisle and Nat Turner. This episode depicts the heroism of these Blacks who resisted oppression. (Krasner, 91)

The Gift Of Freedom For the Workers is the sixth and final episode. This episode includes characters that were abolitionists or had a historic contribution to the abolishment of slavery. Among these characters are Frederick Douglass, William Garrison, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. This scene shows how the freedom of Black slaves meant freedom around the world. Du Bois wrote the ending of the play in a celebratory manner. Du Bois wrote the ending as follows:

Little children enter, and among them symbolic figures of the laborer, the Artisan, the Servant of Men, the Merchant, the Inventor, the Musician, the Actor, the Teacher, Law, Medicine and Ministry, the All-Mother, formerly the Veiled Woman, now unveiled in her chariot with her dancing brood, and the bust of Lincoln at her side.

With burst of music and blast of trumpets, the pageant ends and the heralds sing:
"Hear ye, hear ye, men of all the Americas, ye who have listened to the tale of the oldest and strongest of the races of mankind, whose faces be Black. Hear ye, hear ye, and forget not the gift of Black men to this world -- the Iron Gift and Gift of Faith, the Pain of Humility and Sorrow Song of Pain, the Gift of Freedom and Laughter and the undying Gift of Hope. Men of America, break silence, for the play is done." (Hatch & Shine, 91)

In the end, Ethiopia triumphs over centuries of evil. Du Bois’s creation of the final scene conveys the message that Blacks, through their ancestry, are a race of survivors. His intent with the end was for Blacks to recognize that it’s in their destiny to triumph over the current evils they face within society.

After 1913, the pageant was performed three more times (1915, 1916, 1925) in different locations (Washington DC, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles). In 1925 the pageants came to an end due to the lack of funds. Despite four successful performances, the pageant had its share of controversy. The controversy surrounding *The Star of Ethiopia* came courtesy of whites. Many whites were angry that a pageant was taking place that reflected the truth about the life, history and culture of African Americans. One of the goals of the pageants was to have many whites in attendance. Du Bois offered an invitation to whites but very few accepted. The majority of whites had no interest in seeing the pageant. These whites were content with the minstrel shows and white “Negro dramas”\(^5\). While getting the attention of white society failed for the most part, Du Bois succeeded in getting Blacks to come and see the pageants in every city in which it was performed. The pageants were conducive with the goal of creating theatre that reflected the “four fundamental principles”.

In the 1820’s, the African Company wanted to create a theater in New York City. Due to racism and the opposition of the white population, it was shut down. Unlike the African Company, Du Bois lived in an era where he was able to get the support of Blacks. Despite the African Company’s untimely demise, they were pioneers who began

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\(^5\) For more information on the views and opinions of white society, see Krasner p. 84.
the earliest Black theatre in America. Their existence paved the way for people like Du Bois to pick up the pieces.

The importance of the 1913 pageant is found in its historical timing. The minstrel shows and white “Negro Drama” represent a significant nadir in the history of African American theatre. Both are examples of drastic measures that whites take in order to stymie the Black voice. The stentorian presence of the pageants establishes a foundation that leads to the reemergence of African American theatre. During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920’s, many Black writers begin to use theatre as a forum to address issues such as lynching, economics, social injustice and politics. The Negro division of the Federal Theatre Project in the late 1920’s-early 1930’s follows that trend during their brief time period. The same holds true for the Black writers that emerged during the Black arts movement such as Baraka in the 60’s and 70’s. The continual timeline of the Du Boisian ideology is reflected through the writings of playwrights today such as August Wilson (1980’s-present) who influences me. The present and future of the Du Boisian influence lies within the up and coming playwrights such as myself that have decided to make it a goal to preserve the voice of Black theatre.

**Joe Turner’s Come and Gone**

The connection between Du Bois and Wilson can be seen in their respective plays. *The Star of Ethiopia* is a play that reflects the traditions and history of African and African American culture. Du Bois’s aim for his play is to connect Blacks in the audience with their roots while educating them about their history. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* falls within the same category. Wilson’s play connects the history of the West African tradition with the history of the African American tradition. Like Du Bois, Wilson’s play allows African Americans to experience and learn the history of their ancestry and culture.

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is set in the year 1911 in the city of Pittsburgh. During this time, Blacks were migrating to the North for better economic opportunities. This is evident in the setting of the play. Pittsburgh is known for its huge steel mill industry, which represents the opportunity for employment. The play depicts the history of painful events such as slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow Laws (which is currently
happening within the play). African/African American history within the play is seen through some of the characters.

Characters such as Bynum, Seth, Bertha and Selig represent various eras of Black history. Wilson’s creation of these characters along with younger characters reflects one of the themes, which is the connection of the past to the present. The difference in generation allows the elder characters to pass their wealth of knowledge to the younger generation. This is clearly evident with Bynum’s role throughout the play. His experience growing up in the era of slavery and living during the Reconstruction era allows him to be a bridge to the younger generations. Selig represents a different perspective of the painful connection of Black history. In act I, scene II, Selig tells the story of his great grandfather’s life as a slave trader. In addition, he talks about how his father would hunt runaway slaves for slave masters. While reconnecting with the past is one of the themes, there is another theme that is important.

The issue of voice is another theme that surfaces in the play. The reference to a character’s song in the play metaphorically connects with the idea of voice. The issue of voice is important in the play because it seems to dictate the characters’ lives. A character in control of his or her voice is in control of his or her life. This is the case for Bynum. He is a key figure because it is through his song that he helps others become extricable from whatever is suppressing their voice. This is most evident at the end of the play when Bynum recognizes Herald as the “shiny man”. This title is a reference to Bynum’s story in the beginning of act I, scene I when he tells the story of a man he encountered while walking. The “shiny man” is the person who is responsible for helping Bynum find his voice. In Bynum’s story, the “shiny man” made Bynum wipe himself with blood in order to “cleanse” himself. This “cleansing” allowed Bynum to discover his song.

Bynum’s story can be seen from two different angles. The Christianity perspective is one option. The “shiny man” is Wilson’s way of comparing him to an angel. When the “shiny man” helps Bynum discover his voice, speech can be seen as a blessing or a gift from God. The blood carries a symbolic meaning. From the Christian perspective, the cleansing with the blood reflects the ideology of cleansing one’s soul from the sins of the world. The African/African American historical perspective is the
other option. In this context, the cleansing of the Blood can represent erasing of the pain and suffering of history and ancestry. Herald’s experience connects in the same context. At the end of the play, Herald wipes himself with his own blood and discovers his voice. Bynum experiences déjà vu as the same shining light that surrounds Herald is the same glow that engulfed the stranger on the road. Like Bynum, Herald’s voice discovery can be seen through either perspective.

Joe Turner, the name in the title of the play, connects with Herald in a negative context. While Bynum is the best example of a character in control of his or her voice, Herald is the best example of the opposite. Prior to his arrest, Herald is known in his community as a deacon, a husband and the proud father of a newborn baby girl. Joe Turner, the brother of the governor of Tennessee, is responsible for taking away Herald’s song. He kidnaps Herald, removes him from a happy life and incarcerates him for seven years. Joe Turner has a reputation of taking Black men and forcing them to work in a chain gang whether or not they commit a crime. In act II, scene II, Herald tells Bynum and Seth the story of how he ended up in Joe Turner’s chain gang. While Herald tells his story, he contemplates what he possesses that would make Joe Turner take him away from his life and do work that Turner could do on his own. Reflecting of the theme of controlling voice, Bynum answers:

“That ain’t hard to figure out. What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he catch he’s looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he’s got you bound up to where you can’t sing your own song. Couldn’t sing it then seven years ‘cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it.” (Wilson, 73)

What Bynum tells Herald reflects Du Bois philosophy for Black theatre. Du Bois and Bynum have some similarities. Bynum, through his song, grasps Herald’s problem and guides him on his path to find his song. After seven years of loneliness and imprisonment, Herald is left to expatriate in search for his previous life. Herald is similar to the state of Black theatre during the period between the end of the African Company
and the African Grove Theatre and the rise of the Harlem Renaissance. After the closing of the African Grove Theatre, Black theatre lost its freedom of cultural creativity as well as its voice. Like Herald, Black theatre’s voice was in the possession of whites during this time period.

   Du Bois’s role during the Harlem Renaissance is reminiscent of Bynum. In his “Bynum” role, his pageants and his ideas encouraged Black artists to help Black theatre regain its voice. African American theatre during the 19th-20th century has encountered many Joe Turner’s who made it their mission to turn Black theatre into Herald Loomis. Du Bois, like Bynum, didn’t create the songs for Black theatre and Herald. All he did is encourage and guide others to find their songs. Herald’s years of travel eventually lead him to someone who helps him find his song.

   The Du Boisian philosophy on Black theatre is what makes August Wilson the great playwright he is today. “Joe Turner” and Du Bois foreshadow August Wilson’s career as a playwright. Like one of the themes in Joe Turner, Wilson did not allow anyone to take away his voice as a writer. Like Du Bois, Wilson establishes a foundation that will inspire future Black playwrights to never let anyone take away their voice and creativity as a writer.

   Wilson’s life has a few parallels with certain characters in his play. Herald was searching not only for the life that was taken from him, but also for his purpose in life. Wilson’s journey to find his voice began when he dropped out of high school as a sophomore. In 1960, Wilson composed a report on Napoleon but his teacher accused him of plagiarism because he was racist and didn’t believe Wilson was capable of writing such a paper. This event in Wilson’s life shows a voice being silenced. The white teacher’s wicked behavior was the Joe Turner to Wilson’s Herald Loomis. The calumniation of plagiarism allowed the teacher to take away Wilson’s voice (his paper) and prevented the rest of the school from witnessing a good writer. Wilson was indomitable in this situation, which in turn put him on a journey that led him to where he is today.

   The other parallel between Wilson and Herald is the contribution of others who already have their song. In the case of Wilson, “the four B’s” had a song they shared with him that helped put him on his playwriting path to finding his own voice.
Confrontational, political plays allowed Baraka to voice his political stance. Paintings allowed Bearden to voice what was on his mind or in his soul through the use of imagery. Borges used an imagination that allowed for creativity to come in various forms in his stories. The blues had its own musical voice for over a century. The contributions from Baraka, Bearden, Borges and the Blues allowed Wilson to have his own song.

Bynum is another character that connects to Wilson. Bynum represents a man whose song helps people find their way in life. If Bynum sees someone who is lost, he leads that person to something or someone who will help that person discover his or her voice. As a playwright, Wilson is in a similar position today. His presence, influence and success are an inspiration to aspiring playwrights. Wilson, like Bynum, represents a connection to the past of African/African American history and culture. Bynum is a former slave who carries within him all the West African traditions that were brought to America during slavery. His presence and stories allow him to pass down his knowledge to younger generations. Wilson does the same through his plays. By creating plays that incorporate the history of African American culture and West African traditions, Wilson allows Black readers and Black spectators to connect with his or her roots as well as learn his or her history.

Jeremy connects to Wilson just like Herald and Bynum. Jeremy is a young and handsome man who enjoys life to the fullest. He is a ladies man, but he also possesses a great talent. Jeremy is a great guitar player and his performance is entertaining to all who hear and see him. Despite the present troubles that exist in the world, the guitar helps him relax. Wilson, like Jeremy, lives his life to the fullest. The best example is how Wilson uses his gift of playwriting to entertain others while using his talent to make a career out of it. When Jeremy loses his job working on the roads, he goes to clubs to compete in guitar contests and win money. When Wilson decided to drop out of school, he educated himself while germinating his playwriting skills. When Jeremy leaves with Molly Cunningham, his exit represents the opportunity to travel and see where his music will take him. When a young August Wilson quits high school, his exit symbolized the chance to embark on an adventure.

Similar to Du Bois, Wilson’s presence and contributions to theatre is valuable to the continual growth of Black theatre. What both men have in common are the individual
goals they set for themselves in regards to their contribution to Black theatre. Du Bois’s aim for his pageants was to create plays that inspired Black artists to express their views through theatre. Wilson’s aim is seen through his plays. Since he’s the top playwright in America, he continually produces plays that reflect African American history and culture in mainstream venues. Wilson succeeds where Du Bois failed by having the general public (whites in particular) attend his plays. Nevertheless, all of Wilson’s plays reflect African American culture and he doesn’t allow anyone to control his work. This is one of the goals Du Bois set for a successful Black theatre.

While Du Bois’s pageants continued the path to ameliorate the legacy of Black theatre, it took some time before Black theatre grew larger in its presence. Through the timeline of Black theatre, there were many Black playwrights who emerged in a particular era. More than other Black playwrights, Wilson reached the pinnacle in the timeline of Black theatre. This is why the Du Boisian ideology is reflected in the work and career of August Wilson. Wilson has inherited the biggest stage at his disposal to continually produce plays reflecting the Black experience. He has opened a door that has been historically closed to most Black playwrights. When Wilson decides to retire, the future will be placed in the hands of the aspiring playwrights like myself who must continue the legacy of Black theatre.

**Spike Lee**

Spike Lee’s cinematic creativity has a connection to Du Bois’s “four fundamental principles”. He creates films that are from his perspective when he’s dealing with certain issues. As a director/owner of his own film company, he is in a rare position as a Black man in control of his voice. He never worries about possible controversy. His purpose of creating films reflecting the African American experience can without doubt connect to the reason why Wilson writes his plays. Both Wilson’s and Lee’s respective works reflect the Du Bois’s ideology establishing the Black voice.

*Jungle Fever* is an example of a film that tackles issues that are relevant to African Americans. Interracial dating is one of the issues that the film confronts. Lee incorporates the murder of Yusef Hawkins (1973-1989) into the film’s background in order to set up racial tension. Hawkins was a 16-year-old Black male from Brooklyn
who went to the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn with some friends to buy a car. Bensonhurst is a predominately Italian section with a minor Jewish population. There was a rumor circulating through the neighborhood that a Black male was going to attend an Italian girl’s 18th birthday party. As a result, a gang of Italian boys began to search the neighborhood for this Black male. Hawkins was mistaken for the male and thirty Italian teenagers with baseball bats assaulted him and his friends. Hawkins was shot and died during the brawl. This story of violently contested interracial dating allows Lee to portray racial tension between Blacks and whites.

Flipper Purify (played by Wesley Snipes) is an African American architect from Harlem, New York. Drew Purify is his wife (played by Lonetta McKee). She is biracial but considers herself African American. Flipper encounters a white woman at his job by the name of Angela Tucci (played by Annabella Sciorra). Angela is from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Flipper and Angie are alone one evening at the office and they begin to have a conversation about race. Minutes later, they have a sexual encounter. Flipper confides in his friend Syrus (played by Spike Lee) who in turn tells his wife (Drew’s best friend) despite having vowed to stay silent. The repercussions of the extra-marital affair prove to be detrimental to both parties. Consequently, Flipper and Angie are thrown out of their respective homes.

In a parallel story, Paulie Carbone (played by John Turturro) of the Bensonhurst community is people friendly and has no problems with people of color. Orin Goode (played by Tyra Ferrell) is an African American woman and a regular customer at Paulie’s store. Paulie gets the courage to ask Orin out on a date. Orin replies that she’s unsure about the likelihood of them dating. The revelation of the final answer is shown in a later scene.

There are some issues that stand out when watching the film. The first is the question of desire and curiosity. Flipper is married to a woman with light skin color and curly hair. Cheating on Drew indicates that Flipper wants a woman with even lighter skin. The white woman is the next step above Drew. Flipper’s success as an architect indicates that he desires to have a white woman as his prize trophy. Being with Angie reinforces the myths and stereotypes that surround Black men who date white women. If this is the case for Flipper, then what’s motivation for the affair?
Angie is Paulie’s fiancée when she becomes intimate with Flipper. Her desire and curiosity raise certain questions for her involvement with Flipper. Dating outside of her race is forbidden but that doesn’t stop her from taking that step. Drew’s take on white women has a connection to questions about Angie and white women in general. In one scene, Drew is having a conversation with her girlfriends about Black men and white women. She mentions rebellion as one of the factors for white women being with Black men. Drew claims that white fathers prevent their white daughters from ever interacting with Black men. When they become adults, dating Black men is on their minds because they are curious as to why their fathers wouldn’t allow them to date Black men.

The answers to all questions in the film are for the viewer to decide. Lee doesn’t provide a definitive cause for interracial dating. Instead, he leaves the door open for the exploration of a number of possibilities to explore. This allows continual debate on the issues of interracial dating.

There are two possible ways to view the interracial romance. Curiosity is one way to examine the affair. Neither Flipper nor Angie comes from a community where interracial dating is common or acceptable. Flipper is from a predominately Black community in Harlem. He may have come across white people while growing up, but he most likely never thought about dating a girl from outside his race. Angie is from a neighborhood that is predominately Italian and partially Jewish. Her upbringing in this community makes interracial romance highly unlikely. Being in each other’s company allows the opportunity for curiosity to be explored. The result is an interracial romance.

Revenge is another way to view the interracial romance. Throughout the film, Flipper is angry with his white employers. Sleeping with Angie can be translated in a couple of ways. One reading is that the affair is an act of revenge. Flipper never gets any respect from his white employers. His answer to the disrespect is to “screw” their women. Angie represents this opportunity. “Screwing” Angie is Flipper’s way of taking revenge for receiving a continual “screw job” at work. Revenge can also be associated with romance from a historical perspective. Throughout American history, whites have used control as a way to dominate Blacks. Lee shifts the power of control through the affair. Flipper, as a Black man, is in a position of power of sexual power over Angie. Having sex with Angie allows Flipper to release the frustration of his history and ancestry.
Flipper and Angie’s relationship generates serious repercussions. Lee establishes the potential backlash in a scene where Flipper and Syrus are at a park. Flipper tells Syrus about Angie and Syrus reminds Flipper that he can’t sleep with white women. Syrus even mentions that messing around with white women is taboo. Once Flipper admits to having sex with Angie, the repercussions come fast and heavy.

Flipper’s backlash starts with Drew kicking him out of the house. In the end he is having sex with Drew, but is still forbidden to move. Flipper’s father (played by the late Ossie Davis) chastises and disowns him for cheating on his wife with a white woman. In a restaurant, Flipper finds difficulty in receiving good service. A waitress (played by Queen Latifah) treats Flipper discourteously for dating a white woman. In the following scene, Flipper and Angie play around by pretending to be in a boxing match. A resident in the neighborhood (who is not visible in the scene) views the action and calls the police. The officer throws Flipper against a wall and points a gun to his head. Angie pleads with the officers and tells them that Flipper is her boyfriend. Flipper denies Angie’s claim in order to prevent personal harm from white men for dating one of “their” women.

Angie is beaten by her father and thrown out of the house. Most of the neighbors chastise Angie for dating a Black man. Paulie faces repercussions as well. He is the victim of an assault for dating a Black woman. His father (played by Anthony Quinn) scolds and disowns him for going out with Orin. Lee never investigates Orin’s repercussions in the film. Her experiences are likely similar to Flipper’s.

Although interracial couples are more common today, there are still people who believe in just dating people within their own race. Bensonhurst is just one example of many places that exist within the U.S. What Lee does very well with the film is not supply a final answer to the issue of interracial dating. It’s up to the viewer to form his or her own opinion. Ten years after the creation of the film, the issues surrounding interracial dating are still important topic and warrant discussion.

Do The Right Thing deals with race in a different context similar to Jungle Fever. Lee sets the location in a predominately Black neighborhood in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn and connects local racial tension to the weather. It’s the hottest day ever in the history of New York City. The temperature is steadily rising and heat gets worse throughout the day. Coincidently, the racial conflict also gradually rises
throughout the film. Business ownership is one of the contributing factors to the racial conflict in the film. Sal, an Italian male, owns the local pizzeria. Sonny, a Korean male, is the owner of the neighborhood grocery store. Both men are frequently in shouting matches with some of the Black characters. There is a scene where Sonny, Mookie, Officer Long, Vito and Stevie have monologues insulting one another using racial stereotypes. In another scene, Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito), Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) and Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith) organize a protest of Sal’s Pizzeria. Buggin Out’s goal is to convince Blacks to stay away from Sal’s pizzeria. An accusation of racism is the motive for the boycott. The protest establishes the following events that eventually cause the huge riot that takes place in the film.

Sal and his sons become participants in a brawl with Buggin Out, Radio Raheem and Smiley. The police arrive to break up the fight and decide to use brute force only on the Black men. Radio Raheem dies as a result of police brutality. The death of Radio Raheem sparks a huge riot that results in the burning down of Sal’s Pizzeria.

The race issue presents problems that still exist within Black communities. There are a number of factors as to why issues of race will continue. Lee points out in his film that the issue of property ownership continues to be a problem. Ethnic groups such as Asians, Italians and Arabs continue to open up businesses in Black neighborhoods. Whites continue to prevent Blacks from acquiring business loans. Lee reveals another contributing factor in the film. Buggin Out looks to other Blacks in the community for support for his protest. Instead, he receives ridicule and chastisement for wanting to protest a white-owned business. While Buggin Out’s reason for the protest is out of the ordinary, the scene exposes a problem within Black communities. The lack of unity, support and organization among Blacks is the reason for other cultural groups coming into Black neighborhoods and opening businesses.

The police in the film symbolize another problem within the Black community. Lee created Do The Right Thing with the reign of former New York City mayor Edward I. Koch (1929) in mind. Koch is the mayor during the time the film takes place (1977-1989). Lee creates the racial tension with the police as his way of indicting the Koch regime for the years of conflict between Blacks and the NYPD. Lee’s assessment of the reason for continued police brutality is the lack of Blacks taking initiative as a collective
in the voting process. Coming together during the voting process can prevent the election of politicians intend to ignore the problems of the black community.

The message that Lee conveys with the film is that as a people, Blacks are sitting around and allowing things to happen in their communities because there’s no voice. The lack of unity allows inner city Blacks to live in a continual state of complacency. This in turn, allows Blacks to be seen as a race that needs to depend on other races to survive. Unless Blacks ban together as a collective voice, the silence will continue.

_Bamboozled_ is a film that deals with the issues of race and voice in a different context. Pierre Delacroix (played by Damon Wayans) is the central character in this satirical film. Pierre is an Ivy-League educated black writer at a major network. Angry after the rejection of his idea for a “Cosby-esque” type of show by the network, he creates an idea to revive the minstrel show. When Pierre pitches the idea for the minstrel show to his boss, Thomas Dunwitty (played by Michael Rapaport), Dunwitty approves of the idea. He tells Dunwitty his hook for the show. Instead of white actors in black face, the show stars black actors in blackface. Delacroix casts two homeless men by the name of Womack (played by Tommy Davidson) and Manray (played by Savion Glover) to play the stereotypical lead roles of Sleep’n Eat and Mantan. He holds an audition to find actors to fill out the rest of the cast. The show becomes an instant hit, but instantly receives backlash from a number of people.

_Bamboozled_ masterfully connects with the past, the present and the future of African Americans, specifically the control of imagery by whites. The connection to the past involves the minstrel show. The history of the minstrel show is one of many painful events in African American history. Its creation stemmed from whites creating negative images of Blacks in order to distort the truth about African Americans. The preservation of power is the reason for the minstrel shows’ long period of success. The control of mainstream theatres and television, gave whites the forum to present whatever they chose. This historically connects with the entire history of African American entertainment. The African Company’s theatre was shut down because of the power by racist whites. Ira Aldrige realized that the opportunities were scarce for Black actors in the early 1800’s. Josephine Baker, like Aldrige, went to Europe in the early 1900’s for the freedom to express and display her creativity. The Negro Division of the Federal
Theatre Project found their theatre shut down because of accusations made by racist whites. Whites in power were responsible for these and various other attempts to silence the Black voice in theatre. The denial of the Black voice allowed whites to control what was presented as Black.

The rejection of Delacroix’s idea for another version of a Cosby Show in favor of a modern minstrel show is an example of the timeline of white power in entertainment. Pierre’s idea is equivalent to the African Grove Theater. The network’s refusal to see African Americans in a positive light reflects how whites with power and control decide to shutdown a voice.

Lee exposes the gullibility of African Americans in the film. In the movie, there are Blacks who speak out against the airing of the minstrel. Al Sharpton and the late Johnnie Cochran spearhead a group of protesters to boycott the television show. Despite the protests, the show continues. Lee exposes a few reasons for the failure to end the show. First is the power issue. White men control the television industry and this gives them the power to say what can go on the air. The second is the ignorance and the lack of unity within the Black community. The Blacks sitting in the live audiences that are enjoying the show reflect the ignorance that continues to hurt the Black community.

Shows portraying Blacks as buffoons will continue as long as whites are in power. The best example is near the end of the film when Womack leaves the show and Mantan follows after seeing the light. Dunwitty expands Honeycutt’s role and tells Manray that there are many Blacks like him who would love to take his place. What Dunwitty tells Manray reflects the problems that will continue with whites in control of entertainment.

The end of the film reveals how the future comes into play. Lee’s message is that whites are always going to always control television, film and other media venues. There will be a revolving door of people like Womack, Manray and other cast members who will sell their soul in order to make a quick buck. The lack of unity and support in making a change will result in Blacks continually allowing film and television to get away with the negative portrayals of Blacks.

While Lee’s films reflect having control of his voice, he is also vocal about the motion picture industry and is very outspoken towards the academy on a number of issues. His decision to be vocal is probably the reason why he’s never won an Oscar for
best director in a film. He’s the recipient of numerous awards at festivals and other award shows but he doesn’t possess the Oscar. Lee is proof that Blacks can have their own voice in entertainment without compromising their beliefs. His refusal to let others control his work reflects Du Bois’s ideology that Blacks must never allow whites to control their work. He doesn’t look for approval from white society whenever he creates a film.

**Social Conscious Rap**

Rap music circa 1979-1993 allowed rap artists to have their voices heard. From its creation, rap music created a forum for artists to talk about the lack of concern for their community by politicians, mistreatment by law enforcement, and drugs. Materialism existed during that period but it wasn’t encouraged as strongly as it is with today’s rap music. The earliest rap artists made party songs but soon ventured into rapping about states of social consciousness. Rappers such as KRS One, Public Enemy and Ice Cube were trying to educate and encourage Black youth to embrace their history, respect their culture and take initiative in educating themselves. In addition, rap artists also addressed local and political issues. Rap artists like X-Clan used a Pan-Africanist rapstyle which incorporated African history and culture to educate the black youth. Queen Latifah, Yo-Yo and MC Lyte represented the voice of Black women by taking stands against the injustices, inequality and misrepresentation of Black women. On occasion, various rappers collaborated on songs that addressed the slow deacying of Black communities, raging war against drugs and poor education.

KRS One (an acronym for Knowledge Reign Supreme Over Nearly Evryone) is known as one of the greatest rappers of all time. KRS One and his group Boogie Down Productions, were pioneers of the emergence of the social conscious rap era. He was the equivalent of a PhD because of his scholarly approach to educating listeners through his songs. His songs warned Blacks about potential dangers in the street and in the music industry. He issued warnings against up-and-coming rappers going for the quick buck (*Love Is Gonna Get'Cha*), advised rappers to avoid trendy gimmicks (*I'm Still #1*) and avoid underage girls who are on the prowl (*13 and Good*). KRS One was a huge advocate who worked to educate Blacks about the truth of their history, informed people
about the history of hip-hop, and addressed racial stereotypes. His album covers also made strong statements. By Any Means Necessary, features KRS One standing by a window with an automatic rifle emulating one of Malcolm X’s most infamous photos. Another album, The Blueprint of Hip Hop, shows KRS One sitting on a stoop confronting with a police officer. He seems to be asking the cop if there is a problem. You Must Learn (from The Blueprint of Hip Hop album) is an example of a socially conscious song that talks about the problems with public education:

I believe that the teachers in history  
Should deal with straight up facts not mystery  
Teach the students what needs to be taught  
So Black and White kids won’t get short  
When one doesn’t know about the other one’s culture  
Ignorance swoops down like a vulture  
Cause you ain’t know you weren’t just a janitor  
No one told you about Benjamin Banneker  
A brilliant Black man that invented the almanac  
Can’t you see where KRS is coming at?  
Or Eli Whitney, Halie Selassie  
Grantville Woods made the walkie-talkie  
Louis Latimer improved on Edison  
Charles Drew did a lot for medicine  
Garret Morgan made the traffic lights  
Harriet Tubman freed the slaves at night  
Madame CJ Walker made the straightening comb  
But you wouldn’t know if you weren’t shown  
The point I’m getting it might be harsh  
When kids are walking around brainwash  
(You Must Learn, 1990)

Public Enemy’s style of rap was confrontational and “up in your face”. Public Enemy was the rap equivalent to Amiri Baraka. Like Baraka, Public Enemy was political in thought and created material that addressed social and political concerns. Like KRS One, PE made album covers with powerful statements. On the cover of It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back, Public Enemy was in a war room with the FOI (Fruit of Islam) planning a strategy. The cover of Fear of A Black Planet shows the universe with Earth turning into the color black. “Party For Your Right To Fight” (from It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back) is a song that tells Blacks to stand up for their rights:
Ice Cube brought another element into this era. Ice Cube’s rap lyrics are vulgar but he channels that vulgarity into constructive rants about his frustrations with the government and their politics. Ice Cube was like the Black version of CNN. He reported information about what went on in the inner city Black communities of Los Angeles. While the media portrayed Blacks and gangs in LA negatively, Ice Cube set the record straight on life in the ghettos of Los Angeles. Ice Cube is a former member of the rap group NWA (an acronym for Niggas Wit Attitudes), a group known for their controversial rap lyrics. After leaving NWA in the early 1990’s, Ice Cube continued to create the same type of music as a solo artist.
On his early solo albums, Ice Cube talks about issues such as the everyday scrutiny and oppression that Black men face at the hands of the LAPD. The title of his first album, *AmeriKKKa’s Most Wanted*, gives listeners a strong indication that his album will address a number of social and political issues. “Endangered Species” is a song that addresses the violence of young Black males at the hands of the LAPD. Tricia Rose’s article points out a specific sentence in a verse that indicts the LAPD slogan. “‘To serve and protect’” to serve, protect and break a nigga’s neck.” (Rose, 535) “The Product” is a song that talks about Black men that grow to become a statistic because of traps set up in their environment. “Who’s the Mack” addresses a number of scenarios used by some Blacks to get what they want through manipulation. “The Mack” can be a pimp who exploits young women to work for them, a person that pretends to be homeless or a man in a club feeding lies to women in order to have sex.

All three rap artists represent how powerful rap music can be when it is controlled by the artists and not the record companies. This is where the Du Boisian influence has a connection with rap music circa 1979-1993. Rap artists during this time created music that followed the Du Boisian principles. Social conscious rap allowed rap artists to address various issues within the Black community as well as the beauty of African American culture. The rap music that is dominant today, contrasts with the social conscious rap era.

After the demise of the conscious era, another era has taken over. The “bling-bling” era circa 1994-present, is the dominant rap era in rap music. The term “bling-bling” refers to rappers boasting how bright all of their jewelry shines (bling). Material objects like money, cars and clothing seem most important to the rappers in this era.

At a Miami University lecture, Spike Lee gave his take on the “bling” era of hip hop. In one of the lectures, a student asked Lee a question about his view of the present state of hip-hop. Spike Lee told this student that hip-hop is the “new minstrel show”. This is a very strong indictment from someone known for his once heavy inolvement with hip-hop. Lee went on to say that rap music today isn’t as good as “back in the days”. Lee’s reference to “back in the days” was a reference to the social conscious rap era.
There are similarities between Lee’s opinion of contemporary hip-hop and the old minstrel shows. Young Black males are imagined as materialistic, disrespectful, lazy, sex crazed hoodlums and criminals. Rap videos and images displayed by rappers only enhance these stereotypes. Since rap videos are broadcast worldwide on BET, MTV and VH1, white Americans and other ethnicities around the world visualize African Americans according to what they see on television. The “bling-bling” era is responsible for this negative imagery in hip-hop.

The social conscious era’s ruin reflects the termination of the African Company. It’s not by accident that the socially conscious, political rap that was dominant at one time found itself a victim of silence. The whites that shut down the African Grove were the ones who established the foundation for the eventual creation of the minstrel show. The owners of the record labels that ended the social conscious era are the ones responsible for the “bling-bling” era, which Lee called “the modern minstrel.” The owners of the record label may have had a silent co-conspirator. The federal government had been heavily involved throughout the social conscious rap era. They acted as advocates to persuade the public not to buy albums from artists like NWA, Public Enemy, Ice Cube and many others. Parental advisory stickers were used to prevent record stores from selling selected rap albums to children under the age of 18. Despite such efforts, the socially conscious rappers were still popular. Spike Lee was helpful to their existence because he incorporated their music into his films and soundtracks. The cooperative effort between the government and record owners succeeded in silencing the voice of the social conscious rap era. The year 1994 represented the successful silencing of the voice of the social conscious era. The foundation for the “bling-bling” era was being established and later became the face of hip-hop.

Tricia Rose’s article *Fear of a Black Planet* has an interesting insight into one of the reasons why the social conscious rap era unexpectedly lost its voice:

During the centuries-long period of Western slavery, elaborate, rule and laws were designed to control slave populations. Constraining the mobility of slaves, especially at night and in groups, was of special concern because slave owners reasoned that revolts could be organized by
Blacks who moved too freely and without surveillance. Whites were rightfully confident that Blacks had a good reason to escape, revolt, and retaliate. Contemporary laws and practices that curtail and constrain Black mobility in urban America function in much the same way and for similar reasons. (Rose, 538)

This connects with the reason for the silencing of the social conscious rap era. Replacing that era with today’s rap allows the monitoring of potential “threats” that may create music that can wake up the collective Black community. Monitoring rap music prevents a potential modern civil rights movement. The silencing of rappers, who can enlighten, encourage and educate the Black community and the Black youth, lessens the likelihood of Blacks emerging as a nation with a voice. As long as most of today’s rappers continue to produce negative music, the Black youth will remain distracted from really important things like good education.

The rap artists of today’s generation are in the same dilemma as the Black artists who performed in minstrels. The wearing of blackface and portraying stereotypical characters from the past, has been replaced by a modern, more covert version. Modern stereotypical images include baggy jeans that droop below the waist, obscene gestures, swearing and having an angry face. The characters of the “modern minstrel” include the thug, the gangster, the drug dealer, the pimp and many others. Few rappers literally fall in these categories. Rappers continually reinforce the stereotypes that stigmatize young black males and portray the images that makes the public (whites for the most part) content with skewed perceptions. The “bling-bling” era and the minstrel shows have a historical similarity. Whites control the mainstream venues and performers have to subject themselves to the demands of whites. Rappers, like the actors, can only make it into the mainstream by conforming to present standards. The majority of the top selling rap artists are the ones that keep the “bling-bling” image alive. This is reminiscent of the history of the minstrel shows. Black actors’ only chance of finding steady work was to perform in minstrels. Rappers aspiring to become successful have to conform to the same conditions.
In her book *Raising The Dead*, Sharon Holland summarizes what O-Dog from the film *Menace To Society* represents. Rap artists (and young Black males), “as quintessential black imaginary subjects are produced as objects of our disontent and sites of our pleasure and desire-although we are deathly afraid of being confronted with the mythic black man in the alley with a gun, we clamor to consume the image of him performing the same crime on movie screens across this nation”. (Holland, 27) The suburban population reflects this statement. Suburban white kids are a main factor for the continual success of today’s rap music. The suburban kids are in love with the imagery and lyrics of these rappers. These images are seen as “cool”. “Cool” translates into more record sales for the rap artist. None of these kids would ever want to be confronted by these Black men on inner city streets late at night. Nevertheless, they still love to see the imagery on television. If these suburban kids decide one day to stop listening to the current rap music, the majority of “bling-bling” rappers won’t be able to make nowhere near the money that they currently make. The white power in this scenario deals with money. Like the whites during the minstrel era, whites today (primarily the youth) continue to pay money in approval for the sheer entertainment of negative images of blacks. Blacks have become their great source for entertainment.

As the title of Public Enemy’s second album said *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back*. This is referring to whites and shouldn’t apply to Blacks. Unfortunately, there are Blacks who buy into the product that hip-hop is producing today. This only further enhances the continual destruction of the legacy that was established by the “old school” rap artists. Similar to the Black audience members in *Bamboozled*, Blacks who support the negative problems in hip-hop allow hip-hop to stay in its current state. The Black audience in the film reflects some of the Black population that takes delight in what they view on television and hears on the radio. The Black youth are the victims in this case. They emulate what they see on television and don’t comprehend what’s truly taking place. Like the audience in the film, Black youth are susceptible and accept whatever they are given.

Since the voice of the social conscious rap era is in the hands of a “Joe Turner,” what will it take for that voice to reemerge? A modern W.E.B Du may have to emerge in order for a new era to emerge. There are socially conscious rappers that exist in today’s
generation of hip-hop. They are the keys to taking a stand and helping the socially conscious voice of rap music regain the presence it had before 1994. These artists are few in numbers but they can be the leaders if they create a movement. If artists begin to stop to emulating Italian gangsters, drug lords, foreign dictators and pimps, they may cause others in the industry to follow their lead. If today’s rappers breakaway from promoting negative images and negative lyrics, a new era of social conscious rap can become the face of hip hop once again. The music would allow the voice of the Black community to be visible heard. If a Harlem Renaissance type of rap movement emerges, it will help revive the voice of the social conscious rap era.

There are some critics who believe that gangsta rap and not materialism kills the social consciousness in the rap industry. While these critics present valid arguments, I contend that materialism plays as great or even a greater role within the rap industry. Today’s rap artists put a huge emphasis on material possessions, which can be seen in music videos, magazines, commercials and reality shows like “MTV Cribs.” While the debate between gangsta rap and materialism can go on all day, both problems are destructive to the social consciousness in hip-hop.

The Social Conscious rap era’s untimely demise is just one of many examples of problems Blacks have come across in the historical timeline of Black entertainment. For every era where the Black voice is taken, one person or group emerges to regain the Black voice in another era. This is evident with the African Company and Du Bois. This is also evident with the Federal Theatre Project and Hansberry as well as the Black Arts Movement. These examples are proof that it’s possible for Blacks to regain the Black voice after whites take it away. For the socially conscious rap era to regain its voice, social conscious rappers as a collective, have to emerge in order to revive the powerful voice of the previous rap era. History shows that it’s not impossible, but it’s up to whether or not certain rap artists are willing to make that sacrifice like their predecessors. The rappers from the socially conscious era have proven that the Black voice in music is very powerful when it is completely in the hands of Blacks.

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6Hip-Hop critics such as Ernest Allen Jr. and Todd Boyd have written articles in which they give their respective takes on the issue of the impact and effect that gangsta rap has within the rap industry. For further information, see Allen Jr., pp. 159-185; Boyd pp. 325-329.
Chapter II: Setting The Record Straight

Setting The Record Straight (a tentative title) was the name of the title that I decided for my play. I chose that particular name for my title because I felt compelled to dispel certain stereotypes that stigmatize Black males.

There were a couple of incidents at my graduate institution that motivated me to write my play. Both events occurred during the 2004 fall semester. The first incident took place with two classes I taught. All of my students were required to see Bourbon at the Border by Pearl Cleage, in which they had to write a critique. The play is African American themed and consisted of an all Black cast. There were many issues that revolved around racism, social injustice and the psychological effects from the Civil Rights Movement in relation to Blacks. The white students that saw the play handed in extremely racist and ignorant critiques. The revelation in most of the critiques was that a majority of the white students gave clueless reasons for their dislike of the play. Most of my white students didn’t know that the Civil Rights Movement took place. In addition, they never knew that there were plays that had an entire Black cast. The most disturbing factor was that none of them took into consideration that their comments had to be read by an African American teacher.

During the same semester, there was another incident I will never forget. As I walked toward the campus post office, a white female student switched her purse to the other side when I was approached from the opposite direction. This woman automatically assumed that I was a threat and reacted in an ignorant manner. She was representative of certain people on campus and one of the other reasons as to why I created my play. I wanted to let people and students like her know the truth about Black men.

While I have my four influences that I previously mentioned, another individual played a major role in the creation my play. George C. Wolfe, a Black playwright, has impacted in the way I wrote my play. His play, The Colored Museum, was responsible for giving me the layout of how I wanted to present my play. The Colored Museum (written in 1985) was a play that addressed old and new stereotypes about Blacks. Wolfe created his play as a presentational piece that is written in one-act. An ensemble of five Black actors was used to perform the eleven scenes in the play.
Using Wolfe’s style, *Setting The Record Straight* consisted of eleven scenes and a multi-racial ensemble of six actors. Like *The Colored Museum*, my play addressed both old and modern stereotypes. *Setting the Record Straight* differed from *Colored Museum* in relation to content. A few scenes included historical outlooks, which connect to the reason for today’s stereotypes. I wanted the play to enlighten the audience about the issues the young Black males face in today’s society. In addition, I wanted the audience to understand that Black stereotypes have an extensive history.
Setting The Record Straight

Characters

Name that Preacher
Host*: Early- mid 40’s
Nathan: Black male in his 30’s
Thomas: Black male in his mid-late 50’s
Leslie: Young black woman in her 20’s

Sports Is the Only Ticket For College
Jamal: Black male, 18 years old
Marcus: Black male, 18 years old
Coach: Early 40’s
President: Early 50’s

The White Prize Trophy
Amina: Black woman in her 30’s
Charles: Black male in his early 20’s
Michael: Black male in his 30’s
Donald: Black male in his mid-late 20’s

Bad Fathers
Father: Black male late 40’s
Son: Black male, 18 years old
Secretary: Black woman, 30’s

Thugism
Young Man: Early- late 20’s
CEO: Black male, Early-late 30’s
Man
Woman

Always Guilty/ Always Under Suspicion
1st Young Man: Black Male, Late 20’s
2nd Young Man: Black male, Early 30’s

* The host should be portrayed like a typical TV type of game show host.
Salesperson*: Mid-late 20’s
1st Cop: Early: Late 30’s
2nd Cop: Early 20’s

**The Lynch Myth**
Willie Lynch: Late 30’s
Owner 1: White Male, Early 30’s
Owner 2: White Male, Late 20’s

**The Diaspora**
African: Mid 20’s
African American: Early 20’s
West Indian: Late 20’s

**Insecurity**
Black Male: Early 30’s
Black Female: Late 20’s

**Always Angry**
Man: Black male, mid 20’s

* Can be male or female
Prologue

There’s a picture of Christopher Columbus projected on a scrim. There are members of the ensemble singing while moving in a circular motion.

In 1492
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

In 1492
Columbus ain’t discover doo doo.

Searching for India but never had a clue,
He saw strange land in his view.

After pretending to befriend the natives, he then forces them into labor that they weren’t use to.

After they were no longer of any use, off to Africa to find someone new.

After seeing the good work Africans can do,
He brought into the New World, stereotypes too.

Lights fade
Name that Preacher

Scene
Lights come up. There is theme show music playing in the background. The stage is set in a game show type of setting. There are three contestants and a host. The music begins to fade.

Host
Welcome back. After the two rounds the defending champion, Nathan, is in the lead with 180 points. Thomas is in second place with 160 and Leslie is in third place with 120 points. There are six more questions to go. The first to 200 points is the winner. Let's first meet our contestants. First we have Nathan.

Nathan
Hey

Host
So Nathan. It says here that you are a janitor.

Nathan
I would prefer the term environmental cleaner.

Host
Oh. Well I can understand adding some glamour to such a dull job.

Nathan
(Irritated)
Go to the next damn person.

Host
Alright then. Next we have Leslie.

Leslie
How are you?

Host
I'm fine. It says here that you're a college student.

Leslie
That is correct.
Host
College is always a good thing. Good luck with your studies. Next we have Thomas. How are you Thomas?

Thomas
I’m great. Most people call me Uncle Tom.

Host
Okay. Uncle Tom. It says here that you are a Supreme Court judge.

Thomas
That’s correct. It took hard work and perseverance to become a token sambo for my country.

Host
Interesting you would say what most black folk think of you anyway. It says here that people such as Thomas Sowell, Malcolm X, and Richard Wright influenced you. Plus you were Black Panther?

Thomas
First of all, I grew up. It's not easy being a black conservative.

There’s an offstage ensemble shouting at Thomas.

Host
I see you have a fan club. Let’s continue on with the game. Here is the question from the category, Preachers and Sex Scandals for 20 points. What preacher was crying and praying for forgiveness on national television after being caught in a hotel room with a prostitute?

Thomas hits the bell first.

Thomas.

Thomas
Jesse Jackson.

Host
Wrong.
Nathan hits the bell.

Nathan.

Nathan

Al Sharpton.

Host
Wrong. He’s always on TV but nothing to do with sex scandals.

Leslie hits the bell.

Leslie.

Leslie
Pastor Jenkins because I saw my local news when they showed a prostitute coming out of his hotel room.

Host
Definitely wrong. I saw that one. The woman coming out of the room was his wife and he was crying for the forgiveness of using money from the collection plate. The answer I was looking for was Jimmy Swaggart.

All 3 Contestants:
Who?

The host shakes his head in disgust. The host reads from the next card.

Host
Next question for twenty points. This preacher had an adulterous affair but was never found guilty at the trial due to a hung jury.

Nathan hits the bell.

Nathan.

Nathan

Jesse Jackson
Host
No. Again.

Leslie hits the bell.

Leslie
Some black reverend in one of those black comedies?

Host
Interesting but that’s incorrect. Though I did like Bernie Mac’s reverend in *Friday*.

*Thomas hits the bell.*

Thomas

Thomas
I don’t know, some guy named Henry.

Host
(Surprised)
That is correct. Henry Ward Beecher, the brother of the famous American writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, was the answer. You are now tied for the lead with Nathan and 20 points away from winning. Next question.

*He pulls out another card.*

Host
In this book later turned into a movie, this reverend was the real father of Hester Prynne’s child but dies without ever having to face the consequences.

*All three contestants are stumped. The host is puzzled.*

You can’t be serious. At least one of you had to have read this book at some point of your life in your education.

*Thomas hits the bell.*

Good at least one of you has read it.

Thomas
Umm. He was a reverend. Umm. Oh! Reverend Dumbdale.

Host
What do the judges think?
(Awaits a response)
The judges say they’ll accept that answer; they just want to get the damn show over with.
Congratulations Thomas, you’re the winner. Thank you Nathan and Leslie for playing. We have some nice parting gifts for you.

Nathan and Leslie exits. Thomas and the host move down center, facing the audience.

Thomas, are you ready to try and win some money today?

Thomas
That’s what it’s all about.

Host
(With a phony smile)
Right. Okay. Here’s your question. You’ll have sixty seconds. This preacher was the founder of a well-known religious group in the United States. He was also known for having 16 wives who all bore him children. Good luck.

Thomas
(Thinking)
Founded a religion? Sixteen wives? Hmm… Preacher… I wish there was a clue like if he’s black or something. Is this real or from a book? Let me think back to my education, I don’t ever remember any of this in a history or social studies class. I know I had to learn about this person in elementary school. I’m sure this preacher had to be black. Only a Negro would do something like that.

Host
Time is up.

Thomas
I got it. Elijah Muhammad.

Host
I’m sorry Uncle Tom. That wasn’t the answer I was looking for. The answer was Brigham Young.

Thomas
That can’t be right. He was a great man and he wouldn’t do anything like that.

Host
Sorry, Uncle Tom. You’re wrong. We do have a consolation prize for you though.

Thomas
(Excited)
Really? What is it?

*The host is touching his earphones as he's receiving a message.*

Host
I’m getting word that the Nation of Islam is outside. Word is they’re not happy about your remark about Elijah Muhammad.

Thomas
(Paranoid)
How many are there?

Host
Well do you remember the Million Man March?

Thomas
Yeah

Host
Well…

Thomas
This isn’t right. Don’t you have security to escort me? I am a high-ranking government official dammit. Do you know who I am? I demand assistance.

Host
Oh no my brother, you’re on your own.

*The Host exits. The lights begin to dim.*
Thomas
(Panicking)
Oh boy. How will I get out of this one? Did I do something wrong? Did I say something wrong? I’ve been an upstanding citizen. I look out for the citizens’ best interest. Why do so many Blacks have a problem with me? Have I done anything wrong to Black people? I look out for their best interest.

As the lights dim.

I wish I could find a way to escape those guys waiting for me outside. I swear that I will get back to my roots and maybe become a liberal or something if I can get out of here untouched. I want to be just Thomas from Georgia instead of being a puppet. I wish Marshall were still alive; I wouldn’t be in this predicament right now.

Lights Fade
Sports Is the Only Ticket For College

Scene
There are two young men playing a game. A man dressed professionally observes the men playing and proceeds to come on to the court. The men see him and stops playing for the moment.

Coach
Hello, homies. How do you say it in the hood? What’s down!

The young men laugh

Jamal
Who are you?

Coach
I’m the coach of Great University. What is your name son?

Marcus
Marcus.

Coach
Nice to meet you.

Jamal
Wow. I watch your school on TV all the time.

Marcus
Yeah. I would love to go there.

Coach
(To Marcus)
Well I’ve seen you play against Tech yesterday and I was pretty impressed. I wonder how you slipped through the radar of all the experts.

Marcus
This is my first year playing for this school. I had no intentions of playing basketball but coach liked my size and begged me to join the team.

Coach
Well then, that would explain that. How would you like to join Great University?
Marcus
Really?

Coach
Yeah, I have a full scholarship waiting if you accept.

Jamal
Hey, what about me?

Coach
Who are you?

Jamal
My name is Jamal.

Coach
That’s nice son.
(To Marcus)
What are your stats?

*Jamal picks up his backpack and walks to the edge of the stage. He pulls out a book to read.*

Marcus
Twenty-three points per game, five rebounds, 5 assists and 3 steals.

Coach
Hey, those are some very impressive stats. We need a point guard and I think you are what we’re looking for.

Marcus
That sounds great. I’ll be happy to sign on….

Coach
That’s great, I can stop by your house. Excuse me; crib. I will come with the paper work and talk with your parents. You’ll love the school.

Marcus
But…

Coach
But?

*Marcus pulls out a piece of paper.*

Marcus
My mama has a list of criteria for anyone who comes to recruit me.

Coach
(Puzzled)
This is odd. I never heard of any athlete who carries a criteria list. So, what is this list?

Marcus
The first question my mama wants to know is, how much emphasis do you put on me having a good education?

Coach
Well, we put a great deal on that.

Marcus
What is the graduation rate of the players on the team?

Coach
(Scratching his head)
We have a 100% graduation rate.

Marcus
How many of your former players have made it the pros?

Coach
Oh. Well…they’re around but what’s important is getting you into the pros.

Marcus
That’s good to know. What are your most recent graduates doing now who never made it pro?

Coach
(Pulls out a handkerchief and wipes his forehead)
Umm… That is a good question. I’ll have to get back to you on that one.

Marcus
(Makes a mark on the list)
Okay. What courses would I be offered in my first semester?

Coach
Anything easy to keep you eligible.

Marcus
My mama says that I need a challenge, so easy may not be what mama wants for me.

Coach
Oh. Well. That can be arranged. We have everything possible to offer.

Marcus
What is the average GPA of your current players?

Coach
Geez kid. Your mother asks some pretty tough questions.

Marcus continues reading the list. A man enters.

President
Hello there Marcus, I am the president of Big U. I was told that I would find you here.

Marcus
I know who you are. I remember you from the college fair. What are you doing here?

President
I saw your game yesterday and was very impressed.

Coach
You weasel; you were following me weren’t you?

President
No. I was here checking out a recruit from another school but heard from the grapevine about Marcus.

Coach
Well you’re too late; he will be joining Great State next fall.

Marcus
Hold on now; let’s see what this man has to offer.

President
First of all, your grades are definitely good enough to get into Big U. You even scored a 1200 on the SAT, not bad. I’m sure coach knew that.

Coach
Umm…..

Marcus
No, he didn’t even know that nor asked.

Coach
I was going getting there.

President
Just as I expected. No wonder why each year there’s always a few players caught in a scandal.

Marcus
Scandal?

President
That is correct. Grade fixing, easy courses that have nothing to do with their majors, etc.

Coach
Well that’s a malicious lie and I will sue.

President
It’s funny you said sue because Sue is the woman who will be on ESPN today to blow the whistle on you.

Coach
(Panicking)
Sue? Oh my God!

(To Marcus)
Hey kid, don’t you worry, whatever will be said is false and I will clear this up. I’ll be back very soon.

The 1st coach exits.

President
Take your time. Now Marcus, according to your teachers, you have a great interest in history and music.

Marcus
Yes. That is true.

President
Well do you know that you can major in both?

Marcus
No, I did not know that.

President
Well then, we should sit down and talk about all your options.

Marcus
That’s great and all but I want to play for a big school in a much bigger conference.

Marcus exits

Jamal
(To the audience)
I have good grades. I have an A average and a 1500 on my SAT.

Jamal sits down. The Coach reenters. The President slowly heads toward the exit but turns around after hearing Jamal speak.

Coach
(Breathing heavily)
Hey, umm… Whatever your name is. Where’s Marcus?

Jamal
My name is Jamal and Marcus is gone.

Coach
Gone? Now how will I replace the loss of Marcus? Maybe I still have enough time today to check out the opposing guard Marcus played against.

(To the President)
You’re wasting your time here buddy. All the good ones are gone.
President
(To Jamal)
Did you say that you scored 1500 on the SAT and have an A average?

Jamal
Yes.

Coach
Didn’t even know that score was possible.

President
(To Jamal)
Well then. You’re just the guy I’m looking for.

Jamal
I thought you were looking for somebody else.

President
That person can wait. Besides, I have more than one scholarship to offer. I know opportunity when I see it. So how about Big U?

Jamal
Wow! This is an honor. What do you require?

President
Nothing but your signature. I have the papers; all we have to do now is talk to your parents.

Jamal
I’ll definitely sign. I’m on the school’s basketball team. Can I also be part of the Big U engineering program?

Coach
Give me a break. Like black nerds can play basketball.

Jamal
I’m very good.

(Pulls out a newspaper article)
Here are the stats of the entire roster.

President
I am impressed by your stats. Nineteen points, eight assists, four rebounds and forty nine percent from three-point range. I will make sure you’re on the basketball team.

Coach
(To the audience)
Is it me or did I miss something here?
(To Jamal)
Hey!!! There’s a scholarship for you if you want it. I think you’re better than Marcus. Say yes kid. We have lots of pretty women. I can get you easy schedules. Anything you want, name it.

Jamal and the President exits. A cellphone rings. The coach picks it up.

Coach
(Hesitant)
Hello…No. I lost out on recruiting him. I didn’t get him either. Yes sir. I promise I will find some recruits just give me some more time.

The coach is pacing back and forth with his hands on his head.

Now what am I going to do? I’m on the hot seat. If I don’t bring in a prize recruit, I’ll lose my job. I better go to some other playgrounds and see if I can find some players. I guess I’ll have to start paying attention to all types of people now. Maybe I should resign so I won’t get fired. I have to find a way to duck those reporters. They’ll be all in my rear about this scandal

Lights Fade
The White Prize Trophy

Scene
There are images of famous black men who are involved with white women displayed upstage. After all the images are project, the lights upstage fade. The lights come up. There is music playing in the background. The stage is set like a TV show. There are three men sitting in chairs and the host is sitting in her own chair.

Amina
Welcome, I’m your host, Amina. Today’s topic is “Black Men: Are White Women Really Their Top Preference?” Today we have three men who are involved with White women and would like to hear what they have to say. Meet Charles, Michael and Donald. Gentlemen, welcome.

All 3 men
Thank you.

Amina
Charles, let me begin with you. Why is such a handsome brotha like you with a white woman?

Charles
You see Amina; I’ve been dating white women for a long time. I grew up in the suburbs and my family was the only black family in the neighborhood. All of my friends were white.

Amina
I see. So you’re saying that based on your environment, this is why you date white women.

Charles
Yes. They are the same race as I, human.

Amina
Have you ever dated a black woman?

Charles
No.

Amina
Never? Not even one?

Charles
No.
Amina
Have you ever thought about dating black women?

Charles
Have you ever seen those women on BET? MTV? and other TV shows? Who would want to be with women like that?

_Amina is shocked and speechless for the moment._

Amina
_(To the audience)_
Oh no he didn’t! He made his final conclusion about us based on TV and magazines. Somebody needs a cultural experience. Are both of your parents black?

Charles
Yes

Amina
Have they ever taken you to the hood or wherever they’re from?

Charles
No. They said that they worked hard to leave such a place and never want to look back.

Amina
You’ve been fed the wrong information about us black women. I’m not going to force you to start dating sistas but someone needs to set you straight about black women. I’m going to make you my guest for a convention of professional black women that I will be attending this weekend.

Charles
Well I’m not one to turn down a freebie.

Amina
_(Irritated)_
What the hell do you mean by freebie?

Charles
_(Nervous)_
I meant a free trip. That’s all.
Amina
You’re were skating on thin ice buddy because I would’ve jumped on you very quickly if you were going to make black women sound like two dollar hoes.

(Catches her breath)
Let me go on to Michael because Charles is going to make a sista get locked up. Hello Michael.

Michael
How are you?

Amina
I’m fine. Now tell me why you date only white women?

Michael
It’s not that white women are the only kind of women I date. I date Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Puerto Rican, and Portuguese just to name a few.

Amina
Really?

Michael
Yes. I just don’t date black women.

Amina
(Perplexed)
Oh! What’s wrong with us?

Michael
There’s nothing wrong with you Amina. I’ve dated black women most of my life until recently.

Amina
Recently? I have to hear the reason for this. Why did you quit dating black women?

Michael
I am sick and tired of being used, gold digged, and dealing with ex boyfriends who are either really aren’t exes or are still in the picture. This black man had enough. I’m tired of being hurt.
Amina
I can understand you being tired of dealing with certain sistas but we all aren’t like that. There are white gold diggers, Asian gold diggers, Spanish gold diggers and many more gold diggers of other races. We’re not the only race of women who have drama in their romantic lives.

Michael
That’s true but you can thank all those trifling sistas that have caused me to look elsewhere.

Amina
Wow. How are all the sistas responsible for your situation?

(To the audience)
Can you believe this brother? Like somehow he’s dated every black woman in America to come up with that conclusion. You would think the brother wrote a thesis or dissertation. If I weren’t such the professional, I would slap him out of his seat.

(To Michael)
Maybe the sistas are better off without you. Next we have Donald.

Donald
Hello Amina.

Amina
Now Donald what is the reason for you dating white women?

Donald
It’s like this, Amina. Just like Mike, I date women of other races besides white. Unlike Mike here, I have no problems with some brown sugar you know what I mean?

Amina
Okay, I see we’re one for three today. So what do you like about white women?

Donald
They’re fun, outgoing and have wild streaks. Have you ever seen Girls Gone Wild? MTV Spring
Break? Jerry Springer? What brother doesn’t think Pamela Anderson or Carmen Electra is fine?

Amina
(Laughs)
Oh brother. So you’re telling me it’s a sexual thing?

Donald
That’s such a degrading term. I would say curiosity. Like white women aren’t curious about black men.

Amina
I can’t argue with you there. There are some curious ones.

Donald
Does it really matter why we would date white women? Let’s just keep it real; we are all the same color when the lights are off.

Amina
(Laughs)
You just had to go there. I can’t be mad at you for that.

Donald
Last week for example, I was at the movies with a white woman and the sistas were just staring at me and giving my date and I nasty looks. When my date went to use the restroom, these two women come over to me and say, “what’s the matter, we’re not good enough?” I said, “I came here all the time solo and none of you sistas wanted to give me the time or day.” It seems that some of us brothas who don’t get the time of day with some sistas get their attention when we’re with white women or any other women. Excluding Latinas of course. There are a lot of similarities between them and Black women.

Amina
I agree with that. You need to let Michael know that. So do you think some black men use white women as a way of getting attention?
Donald
Probably. I’m sure there are some cases.

Amina
Michael. Do successful black men as yourself feel that having a white woman shows that you have arrived in the world of success?

Michael
I would say no.

Amina
Charles?

Charles
No comment.

Amina
Well I see someone has something to hide.

(To the audience)
Do black men think of White women as their dream woman? Are black women to blame or are they just the scapegoat? What are the repercussions of seeing more and more successful black men running into the arms of White women? Are there any quality brothas out there for us sistas? When we come back from this commercial break, we’ll try to explore and answer these questions.

Lights Fade
Bad Fathers

Scene
The scene takes place in the present. The set is a typical kind of office. There is a desk, two chairs, a telephone and various desk items. The Son and a pregnant woman are in the office.

Secretary
(Rubbing her belly)
It’s been a while since I’ve seen you. How are you?

Son
I’m fine. Just hear to see my dad.

Secretary
That’s good to hear. You’re father is in the break room.

The phone rings. The secretary picks it up. The Son browses around the office.

Secretary
Hello Fences, Inc.
(Pause)
Yes we make all types of fences… Our motto is if you want them out we will make sure to keep them out… I can send someone in an hour, thanks for calling. Goodbye.

She hangs up.

It was great seeing you but I have to get back to work. I’ll get your father.

Son
Thank you.

The secretary exits holding her back. The father enters. The secretary gives him a look but he purposely avoids eye contact.

Father
To what do I owe the pleasure? It’s been a while since you’ve come here.

Son
I have some great news.
Father
What is it?

Son
I’ve got accepted to a university.

Father
Okay.

Son
Well I guess it’s not exciting to you.

Father
So what do you expect to do in college?

Son
I want to major in history and play golf.

Father
That’s what you want to do?

*Father goes by the desk and pulls out a baseball bat.*

Son
Yes.

*The Father takes out some golf balls and proceeds to hit them with the bat. The son dodges the balls.*

Father
That’s a sport for rich folk. You sure ain’t rich. Not one of those clubs will let you even be a member anyway.

Son
Things are different now. The world’s best golfer is black.

Father
There’s only room for one and he’s the token so you better rethink what you want to do.

Son
I like golf and the university has a golf team.
Father
Well if that’s what you want to do then so be it.

Son
That’s it? That’s all you have to say about it?

Father
Am I supposed to do a damn cartwheel over it?

*The father puts down the bat.*

Son
I came here because mom wanted to see if you
would help her pay for my tuition.

Father
(Sarcastically)
If that’s the case, you can go to college back in my
homeland. You can go for free since I am a citizen
of the islands.

*The Father laughs to himself.*

Son
I’m not from there and I didn’t think that was
funny. I don’t know why you’re smiling.

Father
I’m not one of your damn friends in the street. You
better watch it.

*The phone rings. The father picks up the phone.*

Hello… Hey baby. What’s up? Really?

*The father goes into his desk and proceeds to pull out dolls and continuously tosses them across stage. A woman enters opposite stage trying to catch each doll that is tossed. She is wearing a short dress with slippers, rollers and a headscarf.*

Well I’ll look at my schedule to see when we can
drive him there to visit the school. Let me go
because my son is here talking to me about
something. Whatever it is…Okay. I’ll see you
when I get home.

*The father hangs up the phone and stops tossing the dolls. The woman exits.*
What do you need college for? You can get a city job or a civil job and retire in about thirty years. Collect a pension and be set. You’re 18. When I was your age, I joined the armed forces and worked hard to make a decent living today.

Son
What good does that do for me? Retire around fifty and have nothing else to look forward to? I would still be twenty years away from social security.

Father
At least you would earn a living and be your own man.

Son
I’ve been my own man from the time mom left you. I had to learn at an early age about being the man of the house.

Father
Please. I sent her money every month.

Son
You gave nothing. That child support could only take care of one child. That wasn’t enough for my brothers and I. How can you be proud of that?

Father
Shit! What do you want from me? A damn Hallmark card for sympathy?

The father goes into his desk and proceeds to pull out dolls and continuously tosses them across stage. The woman re-enters across stage trying to catch each doll that is tossed with a baseball mitt.

Proud? I’ll tell you about proud. I served my country and I’ve worked hard my whole life. There were many times I had worked overtime to bring home extra money. I always made sure that I fed you and your brothers. When one of you was sick, I took you to the doctor. When I was with your mother and after she left me and took yall, I still took care of my responsibilities. That’s what I’m proud of. You can go somewhere else with that bullshit. I’m mighty damn proud of my life.
Son
Yeah you helped out sometimes, before I became a teenager. Then you spent a lot more time putting everyone and everything in front of your own children. I can start from your girlfriend on down. I guess someone forgot to give you the memo that there’s another stage in a child’s life called teenage years.

*The father stops tossing the dolls. The woman exits*

Father
Where the hell you get off talking to me like that? You’re a man now. You can take care of your damn self. If you need help with money, you better go and earn it. I have more important things to think about than your financial concerns.

Son
Maybe you weren’t paying attention. I’ve been working since thirteen. Mom made sure I learned very early to do for myself.

Father
I don’t know why she had you working anyway. She works and I gave her child support all those years.

Son
Well I had to help my mom out because she needed the assistance. All I want to know is if you’re going to help me out with college?

Father
Go call the damn United Negro College Fund.

Son
Don’t worry, I will. Unlike you, my mind didn’t become a terrible waste. Well don’t let me keep you. You always have time for everything and everyone else that’s not your children.

*Father approaches the Son with his bat.*
Father
I’ve about had enough of your smart mouth. I’ll be very glad to something about that.

*The father raises hand with the bat. The son stands in the same spot while the father grabs him.*

Son
Oh! You’re going to hit me? Will that satisfy you? It’s not going to accomplish anything. How do you think that will look? You strike me for coming down here to ask if you were going to help mom and I with my college expenses. You may be my father but I will not let you get the best of me. You want to be angry? Then go ahead and be angry. Be angry with yourself for how you played no role in making me what I am today.

Father
You can go ahead and be foolish and think that you’re a man but all I see in front of me is a boy with a lot of mouth. As far as I’m concerned you’re nothing but a punk. Only a fool thinks he’s going to make it in this world by going to a school to take some classes for two or four years instead of getting a good paying job with benefits.

*The Father throws the son against the wall and raises his bat.*

Son
You don’t have to worry. I didn’t need you up to this point and I won’t need you for anything else. I have my mother to help me like she always has.

Father
Well if you’re such a man, why do you need your mother to take care of you?

Son
I am a man because I’m responsible for going this far in life. I’ve made it this far, so know I can go even further.

Father
There’s the door. Now get the hell out.

69
Son
I’m happy to oblige. You can act all tough if you want to but as far as you’re worthless butt is concerned, you no longer have a son.

*The Son exits.*

*Lights Fade*
Thugism

Scene
A young black male enters from upstage. He’s wearing baggy clothes, sneakers and carrying a backpack. There are ensemble members walking back and forth from stage right and stage left. Puppet strings suspend all the ensemble members. A woman passes by and switches her purse to the other side. He tries to approach a man only to see the man distance himself and walks faster away from him. The people disappear leaving only the young black male on the stage. He walks downstage to address the audience. A spotlight is on the man.

Young Man
What’s up with people these days? You try to ask for the time but they act as if you’re a bum begging for change or a crook telling them to hand over the cash. There’s nothing wrong with me. What kind of impression could I be giving them?

He looks at his clothes
I know they can’t possibly think my appearance is threatening. This happens all the time. No matter where I go, I’m judged by what I am wearing. Take yesterday for example. I went into this store to buy some snacks and when I was looking at what I want to buy….

A spotlight is lit upstage right. There is a store clerk, member of the ensemble, standing in the spotlight. The store clerk will lip sync when the man quotes the Store Clerk.

The clerk says “hurry and buy something, if you don’t have any money then get out. I don’t want any trouble from you thugs.” I looked at him as if he was crazy. I wanted to go to the counter punch him right in his face but then I would only make him a believer. I left and told him that I’ll take my business elsewhere. I can’t believe he called me a thug.

The spotlight fades on the clerk. He opens his backpack and pulls out a dictionary and begins to flip through some pages. He shows it to the audience. He opens the pages and takes a glimpse.

Too often I hear this term loosely thrown as a label on black men and black men loosely using this term. It doesn’t stop there because white kids and
kids from other cultures are now doing that as well. According to the dictionary, the definition for a thug is, a vicious or brutal gangster or ruffian. It doesn’t say a vicious or brutal young black male who wears baggy clothing. For all I know someone will try to use that definition for their next edition.

He puts the dictionary back in his backpack and pulls out a magazine.

The question becomes, who is responsible? Who or what has allowed these images to stigmatize the young male population of a race?

The lights come up upstage. The stage is now set in a boardroom like space. There is a desk and a man sitting in a chair with a male and female on each side. The Young Man moves upstage and enters into the set.

CEO
It’s nice to meet you.

They shake hands.

Have a seat. I see you’ve made it here without a problem. So let’s get down to business. I heard a tape of you singing at your church.

Young Man
I never made a demo.

CEO
Hey. We will go anywhere to find talent and you have talent. I can picture seeing you as a big time rhythm & blues singer.

Young Man
Really? Well…I like R&B. I listen to people like Barry White, Stevie Wonder, Babyface, etc. Do you see me somewhere along those lines?

CEO
Vocally…yes.

Young Man
What’s the catch?

CEO
I envision you as a more updated version. Meaning you have a voice like the singers you named but a little more gangster. Very thug like. That type of image sells. Where you ever part of a gang? Do you have a criminal record? Have you ever sold drugs?

*Everyone freezes except the Young Man. The spotlight is on the Young Man while the lights are dinned around the rest of the set. The Young Man speaks to the audience.*

Young Man
Can you believe what this fool just asked me? I know that type of stuff sells with rap artists but that’s not what r&b singers use to do to sell records. Smokey never had to do that. Barry didn’t have to do that nor did Stevie Wonder. Why is it necessary to portray a thug image in order to sell records and woo the ladies?

*The rest of the characters unfreeze and the lights come back up on the rest of the set. The Young Man resumes the conversation with the CEO.*

Young Man
No.

CEO
No? You dress like the kids in the streets. You have the right type of clothing for the image.

Young Man
I’m a big man. My clothes are only big due to my stature.

CEO
Oh! Well that’s okay. Just like we’ve done with the some artists in the rap industry, we can create a fraudulent image for you as well. It’s all about making you marketable. You can be on BET, MTV, and VH1. The kids will love it. From suburb to slum, we’ll get these young impressionable minds hooked to you like their favorite candy.

*Everyone freezes except the Young Man. The spotlight is on the Young Man while the lights are dinned around the rest of the set. The Young Man speaks to the audience.*
Young Man
Every station you turn to, there’s always some rapper who has half to butt-naked women dancing in their videos while they talk about how big of a pimp they are and proclaiming that they’re thugging. Even R&B singers are claiming to be thugs. Every young kid is walking around wearing the same kind of clothes like myself and singing their lyrics and trying to act out what they see on television. When a young black man is seen wearing baggy clothing, the first perception from people is what they see on TV. Clothes don’t make a thug. Thugs don’t need baggy clothes to be a thug. Some guy wearing tight jeans and a cowboy hat can be a thug. There are gay men who are thugs but that is a whole different subject altogether. I’ll let Oprah handle those kinds of topics for her show. For a black male wearing baggy clothes, he’s a thug. For a white male, it’s just a rebellious phase or a new fashion. The rest of the world, it’s a fashion. I’m not a rocket scientist but something is definitively wrong with this picture.

The rest of the characters unfreeze. There is contemporary r&b music playing in the background. The Young Man moves downstage of the set. The woman comes downstage to the man. She alters her clothes to look very revealing and provocative. She dances in a provocative manner to the Young Man as he speaks to the audience. The Man comes downstage with a video camera to portray a video shoot. As the video shoot takes place, a song from the WU-Tang Clan is played. When the song ends, the Man and Woman return to their original place. The Young Man addresses the audience.

CEO
I see nothing but big things in the future for you son. Just imagine all the ladies just throwing themselves all over you. You know the women will like to see a rough, thuggish looking man who can melt their hearts with smooth music vocals.

The lights dim in the area of the CEO and employees.

Young Man
There is another big dilemma as a result of the thug image that has been created. Some of our black women have gotten caught up in what we in the hood called “thug passion”. In some cases it has been an issue between black men and black women.
in relation to dating. There are a number of sistas out there who say “I need a thug”; “only a thug can do for me what others can’t”, “he’s gotta be over 6 feet tall with muscles and a six pack”, “only they can protect me”. Somehow being a nice guy is wrong. Why does a brotha have to be a thug to get the girl? I know everyone has his or her own preference when it comes to dating. I’m not saying that the sistas are the cause but I think the sistas really have the power to make a great change. Imagine what would happen if the sistas who are hooked on to that thug image joins the rest of the sistas who aren’t caught up in the thug image. What effects would that have on record sales? Would that make the music industry take a new approach on the image of r&b and rap artists?

The music stops. The woman returns to her original spot. The lights come back up on the CEO. The Young Man returns upstage and resumes the conversation. The CEO pulls out a piece of paper.

CEO
I’m sure you want to get signed on and start your career.

Young Man
I like r&b but I never said that I wanted to be an r&b singer.

CEO
Really? Gospel music is good but that won’t sell like rap and r&b.

Young Man
I like Gospel music a lot but that’s not what I define myself as.

CEO
What do you define yourself as?

Young Man
A classical singer.

CEO
That is different. I think I can work with that. Hmmmmm.
The man and woman elbow the CEO. He looks at both of them as they nod their heads indicating their disapproval.

CEO
I mean. No way. That won’t work. Our buyers want to see black folks be everything that they see blacks folks do and say on TV. So just put your soul, I mean signature, here and we’ll be all set.

Young Man
I’m sorry. I won’t be signing anything. Somebody out there will appreciate my music.

CEO
It doesn’t matter. There are many others that look like you who are willing to sign their life away. The streets are filled with many young black men who I can use as a puppet.

The two ensemble members reveal puppet strings that are attached to the CEO. They exit with the man and woman still displaying the puppet strings. As they exit, an snippet from “Check The Rhyme” by a Tribe Called Quest is playing in the background.

Young Man
(To the audience)
Who is responsible? It’s easy to throw all the blame on the men who own these big record labels. You have the rappers, singers and other artists who display these images on our television sets, magazines and billboards. The blame could be placed on them. Maybe it’s the consumers. They buy all the products, which continues to allow all of this madness to go on. It seems that no matter where the blame is placed, it can’t just stick to one area. Someway, some how, we as a people need stop feeding into the stereotypes that stigmatizes us. We have to stop letting the media dictate how we should be portrayed. We have to make people of other nationalities and cultures know what our people are really about. So I ask any of you out there, who is responsible? Where do you see yourself in this situation? Do any of you feel that you’ve possibly contributed to this madness unknowingly?

Lights Fade
Always Guilty/Always Under Suspicion

Scene
There are images of black men who were famous for trials, cases and incidents where the public either convicted the men or victims of the law. Two young men enter inside a department store like space. They are browsing around. There is a salesperson that is watching the young men intensely.

1st Young Man
There is this jacket that I’ve been wanting since last week. You should get one as well.

2nd Young Man
Well I am in need of something new.

The second young man glances over at the salesperson. The salesperson walks over to the men.

Salesperson
Can I help you with anything?

1st Young Man
No thank you. We’re fine

Salesperson
(Condescendingly)
If you guys are interested in those jackets, we have a great layaway plan.

2nd Young Man
(Annoyed)
Thanks for the suggestion.

The salesperson slowly walks away but frequently turns around to look at the men.

2nd Young Man
Is it just me or have you noticed that the salesperson has been staring at us the whole time?

1st Young Man
No I haven’t but that ignorant suggestion makes me wonder what the motive was behind it. I wonder if we’re being watched.

2nd Young Man
Don’t sweat it, it’s not like we’re trying to steal something. I am curious as to what that salesperson thinking.

The young men continue to shop while the salesperson walks over goes over to the desk and makes a phone call at the desk. The young men are still shopping. They are trying on the jackets.

Salesperson
(To the audience)
They look like the two men we saw on that video. I really couldn’t make out the faces but the clothes look familiar. Not to mention the fact that they are over by those particular jackets. The thieves in that video stole two jackets from the same rack they are at right now. I remember those jackets as well. It’s definitely out of their price range…. Ok. I’ll call the police. In the meantime, I’ll keep an eye on them. No one has ever escaped out of this store with any item under my watch.

The salesperson is following the men. The young men are browsing. The men eventually go across stage to a space representing a dressing room like space. They are trying on the jackets. The salesperson goes by the counter.

1st Young Man
What do you think?

2nd Young Man
It looks good on you. I think you should buy it.

1st Young Man
Yeah, I think I will.

Two police officers have entered the store and are both observing the two young men. The salesperson points out the two men to the police officers.

2nd Young Man
What is going on here? First the salesperson was acting funny and now suddenly there are cops?

1st Young Man
I don’t like what’s going on but we didn’t do anything so just be cool and lets just buy the jackets.
2nd Young Man
I’m down with that.

The two young men go to pay for their clothing. The two police officers follow behind them.

1st Cop
Turn around and show me some ID.

2nd Young Man
(With his back to the cop)
May I ask why officer?

2nd Cop
We ask the questions here. Turn around.

1st Young Man
We would like an explanation officer. We are just here shopping and minding our own business.

The two young men turn around and are now facing the police officers.

1st Cop
Now as I said before, show me your ID’s.

2nd Young Man
I still would like to know why and what is the problem?

Both men pull out their ID’s.

2nd Cop
You two men have been identified on a surveillance camera for stealing clothes from this very store a week ago.

1st Young Man
Well you’ve identified the wrong men. We are not shoplifters, so I’ll just purchase my items and be on my merry way.

He turns around to pay and is struck from behind by the 1st cop. The 1st young man falls to the floor.

2nd Young Man
What the hell did you do that for?
The 1\textsuperscript{st} cop pulls out a gun.

2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop
(To the 1\textsuperscript{st} Cop)
Is this necessary?

1\textsuperscript{st} Cop
(To the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop)
I have the seniority here. I have the years of experience. Just shut up and do your job.

2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop
That was just wrong.

1\textsuperscript{st} Cop
(To the men)
An employee of this store has identified you two as the men on the video camera.

1\textsuperscript{st} Young Man
I don’t know what you’re talking about.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop takes the wallets of both men and pulls out their job ID’s. The 1\textsuperscript{st} Cop snatches the wallet from the hands of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop.

2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop
What is this? You two men are employees of a record company. They could be part of a hip-hop posse. Check to see if they have any marijuana or other illegal substances. They may have firearms as well.

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} cop pats down both men but has not found anything. The 1\textsuperscript{st} cop is running an ID check through his walkie-talkie.

1\textsuperscript{st} Cop
Are you sure? … Okay.

2\textsuperscript{nd} Cop
What’s wrong?

1\textsuperscript{st} Cop
They’re innocent. The two men on that video camera were arrested for shoplifting at another store an hour ago.
Both men get up and are given their ID and wallets back.

1st Cop
We’re sorry about that.

2nd Young Man
Cut the bull. You’re not sorry. You’ll be the one who’s sorry.

1st Young Man
Did you get the badge numbers?

2nd Young Man
Yeah. I’ve memorized them.

Salesperson
I’m sorry about that, will you be using cash or credit card?

2nd Young Man
I’m very sure you were the one that called the cops. I will no longer do any sort of business with this store. I’ll expose you.

Salesperson
I was just doing my job sir. There’s nothing you can do to me.

2nd Young Man
Oh! Well, I am a reporter and I was investigating your store. I received numerous complaints about the mistreatment of minorities who come to this store. I see your not smiling anymore. It’s all on camera so expect to see you and your company on the ten o’clock news.

1st Young Man
(To the audience)
I’m sure you feel all happy and safe now that the bad guys were caught. The problem is, who do you think are the bad guys? Who’s to say that the suspects who were nabbed aren’t innocent? They could be victims of false accusation just like I was. They say that courteousy is part of a salesperson’s job. How is it that the number one consumers in this country are African Americans but the most
mistreated customer is the African American?
What measures can be taken to stop this madness?

Both men exit. The sounds of news reporters asking questions are heard.

Lights Fade
The Lynch Myth

Scene
The scene is in a classroom setting. A map of Africa is projected. There is a man wearing glasses and has a stick. There are two ensemble members sitting in chairs while Lynch begins to speak.

Lynch
Gentlemen. I greet you here on the bank of the James River in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and twelve. First, I shall thank you, the gentlemen of the Colony of Virginia, for bringing me here. I am here to help you solve some of your problems with slaves. Your invitation reached me on my modest plantation in the West Indies, where I have experimented with some of the newest and still the oldest methods for control of slaves.

Points to the map.
Let’s begin shall we. I am not here to enumerate your problems; I am here to introduce you to a method of solving them. In my bag here, I have a full proof method for controlling your Black slaves. I must tell you what type of niggers we bring here to this land to buy and sell. There are some things you need to know and look out for. First we have to look SeneGambia, which consists of Senegal and Gambia. These niggers are some good workers. Strong as an ox. You will want to be careful of the Mandingo. They have really huge cocks and the last thing we need is our wives, daughters and sisters having the pleasure of sampling these tree trunks these men carry. There have been some cases of our white women having sex with these Mandingos. It makes it hard for us to pleasure our women if those big nigger penises going inside of them. Over here is Sierra Leone. There are very good workers as well but they’re very resistant in working if you tell them to so you have to break these niggers down. There’s rumor that there are diamonds in this country. I see a future if we find that. Over here is what we call the Winward Coast. There are some damn good niggers there. Be very careful of the Gullahs. They seem to be very
resistant and may be successful if the opportunity exists. There are some now in Jamaica and it’s possible you may acquire some in a trade in the future. The Gold Coast is very profitable and you can get a lot through trading here. The Ashanti kingdom is in this area and you know you will do well in trading with them. They’re pretty much suckers just like the Dahomey kingdom. With kingdoms it’s easy to snatch up royal blacks as well when they are too comfortable thinking that they won’t have to worry about being sold. That last place I will mention is Angola, which is here in the western central part of Africa. Here is where you will find the greatest abundance of slaves. When you’re traveling from a particular area to the coast, there are these short little niggers you’ll find as you’re traveling will fascinate you. They’re called Pygmies. There are faster than a cheetah and excellent climbers like their ancestors, the monkeys. If you try to catch them they will kick your ass. It took me one time to learn my lesson. I have a reputation to maintain. So I leave you with that bit of information when you buy your slaves. You’re not going to want members of the same kingdoms or blacks from others kingdoms banning together in order to kill us. A rebellious nigger is a dangerous nigger.

The men turn to one another and all make sounds of agreement.

A bunch of niggers from the same place and same language in your homes or plantations is very dangerous. Having niggers of different dialects and language will be of a great benefit. They would become annoyed with one another. They are less likely to try and rebel because they will spend most of their time fighting against each other. It is very important to divide and conquer in order to have success with these people. First you must pit the old against the young. We have to make sure that the young niggers can care less about their elders, which in turn will make them not respect their elders. We have to make the niggers respect us and we have to make the young respect and fear us so when they have children, they can teach their children the same thing. The next thing you must
do is to create a hostile atmosphere between the light skin and the dark skin Negroes. This can be easily done in a number of ways. Take the light skin Negroes and lift them higher than the dark skin ones. This will make the dark skin niggers jealous because they will assume that the light skin niggers are treated better because of their skin. You must never forget to make sure that you create the battle of the sexes, the nigger versus the nigress. I don’t think I need to tell you about punishing them. You are all specialists in whipping and hanging. That’s good enough for any nigger that gets out of line. This concludes my speech gentlemen. I pray you take heed of what I said and apply it with the utmost excellence. I guarantee that this will last for 300 years. Many of your generations will enjoy their lineage of dominance.

Owner1 raises his hand.

Lynch

Yes.

Owner 1
Now you said this will last 300 years. How do we know if that will happen?

Lynch
Trust me. It will happen.

Owner 2
Who told you that this would take place? What if the niggers become so large in numbers that they will rebel? Where are you from? I never saw you in England before. I know of a Charles.

Owner 1
The only Willie Lynch we know of is Judge Willie Lynch here on this land.

Owner 2
Are there any resources you may have to back your claim of this 300-year plan? The question is, are you really Willie Lynch?

Lynch
I am offended by such questions and doubt. Mark my words; if you don’t take my advice, you will lose your property.

*The owners talk amongst themselves. Lynch is able to slip away from the crowd.*

Owner 1
We can’t lose our property but what guarantee is there that 300 years down the line my descendants will prosper from what was handed down by each generation?

Owner 2
He wasn’t saying anything that we already haven’t done. We know how to cause problems with our slaves. I want my money back from this nonsense of a pamphlet.

Both Owners
Yeah!

*They both turn around and notice that Lynch has already left.*

Owner 1
That bloody bastard has made of with our money. This man may have bee nothing but a hoax. We’ve been had.

Lights Fade
The Diaspora

There is a desk with an empty chair. There are three people on sitting in chairs. There is a West Indian sitting in the chair stage right of the African, an African sitting in the middle chair, and an African American sitting in the chair stage left. All three are dressed professionally. The African stands up and moves downstage to address the audience.

African
I represent Africa. The Motherland. When I came here to America, I thought that this was the “Land of the Free” “The Land of Equal Opportunity”. Don’t get me wrong; some of us are able to make a living working here while others come for better education opportunities. I was prepared for that. When I came here, I was ready to be greeted with open arms by fellow brothers and sisters. What I wasn’t prepared for was the problems I’ve had with some people who are the same race as I. Whether West Indian or African American, I feel that some of them mistreat Africans for no reason. I would say the African Americans more than the West Indians. Look at these movies where they make fun of us. Any comedies towards Africans are all the same no matter what country they place us. The same stereotype language and customs are used for all Africans. It’s the African American comedians who do this. Look at comedies in the past where our accents are made fun of, our clothing is made fun of, even my customs. They’re also troublemakers as well. They’re always angry about something no matter what the situation is. West Indian’s are little easier to get along with than African Americans. Some of them have a tendency to smoke a lot of marijuana like those Jamaicans. I notice that they have a gold cap or two in their mouth. I guess that’s common with West Indians. In the work place, they are very arrogant when they get a high position.

The African sits down. The West Indian gets up and moves downstage to address the audience.

West Indian
When it comes to African Americans, they are a bunch of complaining people. Back home on my
island, the men don’t complain. They take action. They’re always complaining about the man. That’s just an excuse to cover up the fact that they are lazy and have no desire of backing up what they speak. They love to start trouble don’t they? You have to be leery of when the men are in a group because they’re just itching to start trouble. They have no goals and aren’t that educated. If you give them an opportunity, they find some way to blow it. Africans are okay but they are very noisy neighbors. When they are supervisors, man I have never seen anyone get real big headed with a position but them. They try to boss you in a disrespectful manner.

The West Indian returns upstage to the seat. The African American gets up.

African American
The problem we have is the way some Africans look at us. Because they are from the Motherland we seem to hear things like “you’re not African”. Today there are DNA tests that trace our ancestry so they’re wrong. There are some Africans who have nasty attitudes with us when we come in their store to buy things. If they get a position higher than you, they really take it to the head. They try to talk to you like children. That pisses me off because they can come up in this country and take what some of us bust our butts to achieve. Why is it that they are always selling bootleg products? They have bootleg movies on VHS and DVD, bootleg designer bags, and anything else you can think of. I think most of them be putting on a front like they’re poor but they’re like Prince Akeem in “Coming to America”. You know, those Dashiki color hat wearing people. West Indians are a trip. I will admit that most come highly educated but somehow have this idea that they are better than us. If someone West Indian is interviewing you for a job, they have the nerve to talk down to you as if you’re not as smart as them. They are very negative and critical when it comes to African Americans. They have a comment for everything pertaining to us. For example I over heard someone telling a West Indian man about a black owned business that was coming. He said, “You better watch it because it
may be a scam” and starts to laugh after his comment.

The African American returns upstage to the chair.

African
I just can’t understand why we’re all the same color but have such negativity and hostility towards one another. These are supposed to be our brothers and sisters?

West Indian
I don’t dislike every last person from either ethnic group. There are just some that I’ve encountered that makes it look bad for everyone else in their respective groups.

African American
I don’t dislike every West Indian or African. I just can’t stand some of them who believe what they see and hear about African Americans through the media. I remember a classic rap song by Public Enemy called “Don’t Believe the Hype”. Chuck D talked about the media and how they distort every and anything about blacks. Our people have to take a stand and don’t believe what they see.

African
In some parts of my continent and other countries around the world, we only see blacks in America based on what we see in the news and shows like BET and MTV.

West Indian
It’s all about thinking for yourself and not letting others think for you.

Looks at a clock.

I’ve been here for quite a long time. Why haven’t I been seen yet?

African
I’ve just realized that it’s been that long.
West Indian
Yeah. The secretary said that the interviewer was in a meeting but would see us as soon as the meeting was over.

African American
It’s been over two hours.

*The secretary walks in and sits down at the desk.*

Excuse me.

Secretary
Yes?

West Indian
We’ve been here for over two hours but have yet to be interviewed.

Secretary
Oh. I forgot about you people. Oops! I mean you three. The position has been filled a few hours ago.

(Condescendingly)
Sorry for any inconvenience. Have a nice day.

*The secretary exits.* *All three look at one another in shock. All three stand up from their seat.*

African
Did I miss something?

West Indian
Can you believe this?

African American
I can believe it. Why are you so surprised?

African
What does this mean? Were we unqualified?

West Indian
We could have at least been given an explanation.

African American
I doubt we’ll ever get one.

African
Why is there so much arguing among black people?

African American
I know where this constant bickering amongst us comes from. It’s history.

West Indian
I can agree. Look at Du Bois and Garvey. These two intelligent black men could never see eye to eye.

African
The Monroe doctrine is an example of a devastation that hit African soil. The natives developed a hatred for these people who look just like them coming over and taking away the natives of Liberia’s freedom.

African American
Slavery in America caused many dissensions. That made it very easy for different groups like ours to preserve animosity because of the division that occurred between enslaved blacks from different parts of the world.

African
There were wars between different kingdoms back in Africa but even the conquered were still treated respectfully.

West Indian
Once they were taken away from their homes, they had to create a new life and community in the West Indies. I do have to say that Africans and their offspring have had some successful rebellions when they banded together to fight the Europeans.

African American
Harriet Tubman came back and forth to free all her people from bondage and that meant African Americans, West Indians and Africans. That’s why even Canada has such a very big population of blacks. I’ve never seen so many West Indians in such large numbers as I have seen in Toronto.
So then where did all of this dissension among all black people begin?

West Indian
How did we as a race become so susceptible to believing everything we’ve seen and heard from just one point of view?

African American
Europeans?

West Indian
Maybe but their descendants live and enforce this hostile climate in our countries.

African
That maybe true but whoever started believing and falling for this trickery hasn’t exactly help any of our people as well.

West Indian
I guess the problem lies within how we can change people’s perceptions from what they see on the media.

African American
Is it impossible for us to get together as an entire race and become a much more united front?

West Indian
Are we as a race putting our energy and efforts in the wrong place?

African American
It’s a shame how we continually fight amongst one another instead of looking at the bigger picture.

African
(To the audience)
How could we allow this to happen?

Lights Fade
Insecure

Scene
A male and a female enter. They take off their coats and then sit down at a table. The man takes some food out of the bag and sets it on the table. The woman sets the plates and utensils. They are both sitting in chairs but don’t speak to one another. They look at one another back and forth as both eat.

Female
(Annoyed)
Well.

Male
Well what.

Female
I want an answer.

Male
I don’t have anything to say.

Female
Now you have nothing to say but you had plenty to say when we’re on the way home.

Male
I had every right to.

Female
There was nothing going on. He is someone that works in the same building. That’s all.

Male
I don’t trust him.

Female
There’s no need for you to act that way. Don’t you trust me?

Male
Of course I do. I don’t trust people like him.

Female
I don’t know why you’re being so insecure.

Male
Who says I am? I know what other men think. I know he was up to something.

Female
It was nothing. You know I wouldn’t do anything like that. Speaking of up to something, what were you doing coming out of the bank?

Male
Nothing.

Female
It had to be something. It’s not like you have any friends in banking.

Male
I was just handling some business.

Female
It must have been important because I was looking at our account and there’s $60,000 missing.

Male
I took it out to make an investment.

*The Female gets up and collect the plates and utensils and walks to the counter. She is standing upstage from the male.*

Female
Invest in what?

Male
Something I always wanted to do. I shouldn’t have to answer that.

Female
All I want to know is what did you do with the money you took out of our account.

Male
Like I said before, I don’t have to answer.

Female
Most of that money in the account belongs to me. I think I deserve to know what did you do with the money.
Male
I have a right to take out what ever I put in.

Female
You should have consulted me. As the breadwinner of…

Male
There we go again.

*The male gets up.*

Female
There goes what?

Male
You throwing your salary up in my face.

Female
I’m no throwing my salary up in your face. I can’t help it that I make more than you. What’s the problem?

Male
When you decide to throw it up in my face. That’s the problem

Female
That’s not what I’m doing. I’m sorry that you’re intimidated by my income.

Male
Intimidated? Far from it, I have a problem with you controlling what I have.

*The Female goes to her chair. She takes her chair and moves it next to the male. She sits down and proceeds to put one arm around the male and holds his hand.*

Female
I’m only thinking about our future and us.

*The Male pushes her hand away.*

Male
You don’t think I care about the future? I took money out so that I can open up my own business.
Female
You have a good job at the plant. You make a lot of money. You are the manager.

Male
Well I want more than that. It’s easy for you to say that. You were able to get all your degrees and create your own business. I got degrees and nothing to show for it.

Female
You should have thought about that a long time ago. You can’t just up and leave now. You can’t predict if you will turn out successful.

Male
(Sarcastically)
Well thank you for the vote of confidence. I’d rather try then never have tried at all. You’re always telling me what I can and can’t do. You try to act as if you’re the man of the house.

Female
Just because I’m aggressive and don’t take crap doesn’t mean I’m trying to wear the pants. You’re my husband. You are the man of the house and my man. All I am doing is having your back. That’s what I’m supposed to do.

Male
You never bothered to ask what I wanted to do. What type of business venture I was thinking of.

Female
What is it this time? You always say things but that’s all it is, talk.

Male
Well I’ll prove you wrong.

Female
Where are you going?

Male
I need to get some air
He stands up.

Female
Just like a man. Always quick to run away when they can’t handle the heat from us women.

Male
I want to leave because you get on my nerves.

Female
Why can’t you just sit down and talk to me.

Male
Because I’m talking to a brick wall. Why stay around for that?

Female
I don’t know what is up with you brothers running away from responsibilities. Never want to commit.

Male
Never commit? There’s a marriage license that says I have committed. I’ve been at my job for over ten years. I pay my share of the bills. I cook for you. That’s being responsible.

Female
I have to admit that you are dedicated and responsible.

Male
It’s about time I got recognition.

Female
That still doesn’t let you off the hook. I want you to consult me when you go into our account.

Male
Fine

Female
Fine. What type of business do you want to open up?

Male
A restaurant. There are no West Indian restaurants here and I know some of my relatives who would move here and help me start this business.

Female
I can’t remember the last time I had that. Sounds like a great plan.

Male
I knew you would like it. So, do you know where I can find an available space for my restaurant?

Female
I know someone in realty. I can check that out for you.

Female
I just know that I would have my hands full because the men in your family don’t like women making more than them. I know your father can’t stand that. I know he’s my father in law but he’s the last person I want to see right now. I have to know when and if he’s coming.

*The doorbell rings*

Female
Who is that?

Male
Him.

*The Female gives the Male a mean look. The male turns the opposite way and scratches his head.*

*Lights Fade*
Always Angry

Scene
There are random images of various contemporary black males that will appear on a scrim as the scene begins. The scene takes place in the subway on a train. There is a man who appears center stage facing the audience. He is reading a newspaper and displays a look of frustration.

Man
There is a very bad misconception with black men when it comes to anger. I’ve constantly hear many jokes about the angry black man but I think it’s a joke how many people out there believe that black men are always angry. Now when I say angry, I mean the view of what white folks think. There’s a perception that we walk around with angry faces, hostile attitudes and are mad with the world. Somehow we have an uncontrolled, violent anger and take it out on innocent people. Now the thing is, we are angry but it’s a different type of anger. Take a look at what we face as black men. We always face racial profiling of all varieties whether driving, buying homes, looking for loans or shopping.

He pulls out and displays the classified section to the audience. An image of the classifieds is projected on the scrim.

When we apply for jobs we find many people being picked over us even if we are the most qualified. An employer is very quick to tell us “we’ll get back to you” or the position is filled. If we have a job where you have a prick of a boss who you would tell off, we couldn’t say anything because he would be quick to have us on the unemployment line.

He crumbles up the classifieds and tosses it across stage.

Some of us are stripped away of many rights even if we are no longer incarcerated. Look at financial aid applications. If you check yes for ever being convicted of a felony, you can’t get financial aid, which in turn prevents some of us from going to college. You can even forget about a scholarship. We live in a generation where clothes and money determines you. If we wear certain clothes, we are
stereotyped. Wouldn’t all of these types of things make a black man angry? It sure as hell does. We have a right to be.

The sound of a subway door opening is heard. Members of the ensemble enter the train and take notice of the man and whisper to one another. The man rolls up the newspaper and begins to hit the other hand with the paper. He stands up and moves downstage to address the audience. There are random images of famous African Americans and moments in African American history that will be displayed on the scrim.

Whenever we speak in a loud tone, automatically people are quick to say, “Will you please stop yelling at me”. Who says that speaking up means yelling? Whenever we debate an issue, we are looked at as angry. As black men in America, we have a history of being angry. Take Dr. King, he was angry about inequality and injustice for his people. Malcolm X was angry about the state of blacks in America and he took action. The black men of the Harlem Renaissance like Dubois, Locke and Hughes were angry about the lack of the voice of their people and took action. These men were angry and had every right to be. That type of anger allowed them to pursue and succeed in their objectives. They’re not mad men. They were men who channeled their anger in the right direction. There’s an encyclopedia of these kind of “angry” black men. They’re kind of anger is the kind of anger most of my people carry. We’re angry about all the barriers that the institution of racism has created. We have every right to have anger inside us. What do you think black men who were born before 1964 feel deep inside? Anger. Look at what they had to deal with as children then as adults. Lynching, Jim Crow Laws, fire hoses, police brutality and many other things. Those eras in their lives have had a traumatic impact on these men. How do they display their anger? I’ll tell you. It’s by passing their history on down to their sons, daughters and grandchildren. So people like myself are carrying not just anger with in my life but also the anger of history. It doesn’t make us go out and start going crazy trying to get back what my grandparents were deprived of. We channel that anger to whatever way we use it to our advantage. So do black men have a right to always be angry?
Another sound of a subway door opening is heard. More members of the ensemble enter the train. All the ensemble members gather closer to the man.

So to all of those out there who wonder why were angry. Think for a moment when you see that black man all the possible things that can be flowing through his mind. For those who could care less or just view an angry black man as anything but human, you’re probably part of the reason for his anger.

The ensemble looks at one another in agreement while the Man sits down.

End
Chapter III: The Post Reading

On April 21, 2005, Setting The Record Straight was performed as a stage reading with some movement in Studio 88 at Miami University. The audience consisted of a mix of people of various ethnicities, which was what I desired. As my acting ensemble read through each scene, the audience enjoyed various moments. One of my goals for the play was met as far as starting from funny to serious. The audience response reflected that goal. By the end of the reading, I felt the seriousness in the audience. They recognized that the theme and the content were extremely compelling. I was looking forward to their comments.

Feedback From the Reading

Before the public reading, my acting ensemble was responsible for the first round of feedback and suggestions. Their input was responsible for the revisions I made to the script. This process was critical in understanding the collaborative process between the playwright and the actor. For example, their input included personal experiences that related to dilemmas facing the characters in the play. Creating ways to prevent alienating someone of a particular ethnicity was another example of their input. After the first rehearsal with the ensemble, I made numerous revisions. After the final rehearsal, the ensemble performed the following evening.

Overall, I felt that the content was pretty good but I recognized that parts of the play needed changes and adjustments. After the reading, a discussion took place where the audience had a chance to give their opinions about the play. The feedback by members of the audience was helpful as well as insightful.

One of the suggestions I received was to construct a narrative within the text. This person felt that certain characters had a connection when going from one scene to another. For example, she mentioned how she saw Young Man in Always Angry as the Son in Bad Fathers. I had asked the question of how much of the play seemed to sound more like a lecture than a play. The lecture is something that came to mind when I was listening to the reading. The audience members didn’t find the play overly didactic. The general agreement was that one or two scenes fell into the lecture category. Another
suggestion was to make some scenes as outlandish and even as well as even go more extreme with scenes that were already outlandish.

Besides feedback from the audience, a faculty member gave suggestions that will help in the future. The direct address to the audience was suggested as something that I should develop in depth. She mentioned, “Direct address is tricky and can really wear out the audience.” There were certain characters within the play that addressed the audience at different times. Reflecting on that suggestion, I can understand the trickiness that is involved when creating moments for characters to address the audience. In addition, there was the suggestion to look at the rhythm, metaphors and ways that I use the characters in order to position the audience in each scene.

Another suggestion was variety. The reason that was mentioned was to avoid someone in the audience thinking, “here comes the lecture!” when a scene appears. This piece of information helped me come to the realization that there is always the chance of falling into the trap of becoming too much of a teacher. I had been told in the past that I had a tendency to lecture when writing plays. That is something I have always continued to work on with my playwriting.

Another member of the faculty gave me feedback about the play reading. He discussed the play in the order of which the scenes appeared. The Prologue was the first scene that we discussed. The first comment I received was to consider the possibility of adding an epilogue. The Prologue began with a nursery rhyme so I understood the reason why the epilogue was suggested. A beat was suggested with one of the lines because of its impact. More use of Christopher Columbus’s picture in the Prologue was the other suggestion. Columbus was the central character in the scene. The goal of the Prologue was to expose Columbus as the man that brought Black stereotypes into the New World. His picture throughout the Prologue was an excellent suggestion in order to emphasize this goal.

“Name That Preacher” was the next scene that was discussed. The only suggestion that was made was to push the envelope with the scene. His suggestion was based on the outrageous comedic moments within the scene.

“Sports Is The Only Ticket For College” was considered to be problematic. His feedback was in relation to the entire scene. The content was obvious but the stereotype
never developed. Breaking the realistic scenario was suggested as a way of bringing more out of the stereotypes. Since Spike Lee was part of the reason for the creation of the scene, having a Lee character come on stage and give the lecture was also suggested.

The comment about “Bad Fathers” comment focused on the tension in the scene. There was a sense that the tension was still under experimentation. That suggestion related to a conversation I had with my thesis advisor. In a way, Wilson cheated people of really seeing all of Troy Maxson. Troy was still a mystery because there were certain questions about him that were left unanswered. In my case, the tension must be explored to reveal how deep the tension is between Father and son.

“Thugism” had some similar comments to the Sports scene. Breaking the realistic scenario and going beyond the stereotype was mentioned. There was nothing that was surprising.

“Insecure” was discussed in a similar way to Sports and Thugism. This scene was less problematic than the other two, but it was suggested that tension could use more development. He also mentioned that the surprise element in the end but could also use more development.

“Always Angry” was considered to be a little didactic. He felt that scene lacked emotional pull. One comparison that was made was to Dutchman by Amiri Baraka. It was suggested that I think about how to create intense moments similar to that play.

“Symbiosis”, a scene from The Colored Museum, was suggested as an example to use in relation to the character. Angry man’s conflict with his alter ego was suggested as a way of adding more intrigue into the scene which is what Wolfe did with “Symbiosis”. This suggestion can be connected with the comment about the climactic moment. The climactic moment was thought to be non-existent because the scene only stayed at one level.

As far as comments towards the entirety of the play, adding vignettes was suggested in order to create different rhythms and time. The lesson-conflict issue was suggested as something else to further investigate.

The feedback from students, faculty and friends gave me the opportunity to grasp a better understanding about writing for the audience. Reflecting on The Colored Museum, Wolfe created a lot of variety throughout the play. Wolfe was subliminally
giving a lecture in each scene but he masterfully never allowed the audience to sense the lecture by use of comedy. The characters that addressed the audience didn’t set the viewers up for predictability. The feedbacks presented the goal of going back to the script and clean up all of the problems. On the other hand, the theme of *Setting The Record Straight* was understandably clear to the audience that saw my play. The various responses and commentary from the audience revealed that my voice was heard. Even though numerous revisions need to be made, my play may possibly one day be the millennium version of *The Colored Museum*.

**The Writing Process**

*Setting The Record Straight* and my thesis shared a number of similarities and differences in relation to the entire writing process. For both projects, the main goal was to use my voice as a foundation of development. Research was one of the main contributing factors to the development of my play and my thesis. As a writer, researching people that influenced my writing created an opportunity to learn various writing styles and philosophies. My research of Wolfe’s play, *The Colored Museum*, provided ideas for the structure of my play and the creation of an acting ensemble. Researching Wilson’s writing process granted the opportunity for both projects because Wilson’s influence resonates in my play as well as my thesis. Wilson inspired my ideas of incorporating Black culture, but Du Bois’s philosophies provided an opportunity to formulate a project that reflects the Black voice. Hip Hop presented an aspect of Black culture that reflects my musical influence. Spike Lee’s influence served as a reminder of what it is to be a Black male and have creative control. These collective influences established a foundation for the creation of my thesis and my play.

There was another similarity I recognized during the entire writing process. After I had established my ideas that I wanted to write, transferring it to paper was a challenge. Based on the way that I generally speak, I was getting into the habit of writing in that style of language on paper. I had realized that writing what I thought was a major flaw that needed correction. While I have improved in this area, my skills are still under development.
Writing my play and my thesis had its share of differences based on the people I am writing for. When I wrote the play, the main objective was to keep the audience in mind. As a playwright, I must remember that the audience is comprised of people of various nationalities and backgrounds. The language of the writing is the biggest factor. All the characters’ lines must be clear and concise in order for the audience to understand the dialogue or monologue. The actors are also in the equation. Writing material that is clear is the most important factor for the actors to have an idea of the direction of the script. It is my responsibility to make sure that an actor understands his or hers character.

*Setting The Record Straight* provided various writing challenges. After writing the first draft for my acting ensemble to read, a number of issues arose. Having a multi-racial cast as my ensemble provided a challenge because I wrote a play with an African American theme. The cast was comprised of Black and white actors from various backgrounds. Having Black actors with various life experiences revealed casting issues for my play. The original Black actress in my acting ensemble came from a different background in comparison to Blacks from the inner city. She came from a background of living in various places around the world and didn’t have the necessary experience to relate to the female characters in my play. As a playwright, understanding the actors that I’m specifically writing for when I’m creating characters was always something I kept in mind. In addition, this circumstance provided a learning experience in understanding how to write for people of the same race but different backgrounds.

Writing my thesis had a different challenge in comparison to my play. My thesis presented the challenge of writing a scholarly paper that consists of material that is clear and to the point for the reader. Unlike plays where I’m writing for spectators, I am required to write my thesis for a specific audience. My thesis is in the hands of an academic committee who will determine if the content I write meets the required standard.

The content that I had to write for my thesis was a little more complex than writing my play. While the language was important in my play, it was even more important in my thesis. An extensive vocabulary is required in order to deliver an effective paper according to academic standards. My background never included the use of big and unfamiliar words in order to express a point or write a sentence. In academia,
the expectation of writing differs from level to level. As a current graduate student, I had
the opportunity to witness the difference between my undergraduate and graduate studies.

Writing a theoretical paper was the biggest challenge I faced as a graduate
student. My undergraduate years were supposed to introduce me to some type of
theoretical practice in order to help put me on the path to continue beyond my bachelor’s
degree. Unfortunately, this never happened during my years as an undergraduate. My
graduate peers have theoretical backgrounds, which allowed them to easily comprehend
all theory that they encountered. The dearth of a theoretical background made my
understanding of theory a little abstruse. Being theoretically deficient was a challenge
when I began writing a scholarly paper for academics that practice theory. I have noticed
this problem since I’ve written papers at my graduate institution. Being a graduate
student has taught me how to write a theoretical paper. My thesis contains chapters
written in a theoretical framework. I am hardly a theorist, but graduate institutions
demand theoretical papers in every academic field.

As a writer, my projects face judgment in two areas. In academia, writing a paper
or article in a theoretical framework is an emphasis of all graduate programs. The faculty
or program determines whether I am worthy of continuing a specific program. As a
playwright, various theatre professionals and audiences determine the success of my play.
The type of criticism is different between a thesis and a play, but those who view the
respective works closely examine whether or not I have a good product.

**Future Plans For My Script**

Revisions are my first task. The ideas and the feedback from various people are
under great consideration for future revisions in my play. I intend to further examine
certain scenes to decide what I want to ultimately achieve. A few scenes may alienate
certain members of the audience if the scene doesn’t pull them in emotionally.

The rhythm of the play is another problem I will continue to work on in the near
future. The organization of the play is well in tact but I have to ameliorate the entire flow
of the play. The language should be more mellifluous. More fluidity in certain scenes
will allow the action to reach its climatic point instead of leaving the audience in
confusion. The entire structure of the play should be more dulcet from the beginning to the end.

A goal that I have in mind for my play is to add a greater mix of cultures to the audience of future productions. The reason for this idea is to examine the reactions of each individual. Black culture affects numerous cultures one way or another and I am curious to see the audience reaction when viewing each scene. It is likely that different ethnic groups will have different reactions and observations towards the play.

While a reading is a great way to allow the public to hear and visualize the play in their mind, a stage production is my next goal. After making my final revisions, I want to have a script that is ready for a stage production. The next graduate institution I attend provides one possibility for a production. If the script is complete, I will try to persuade the faculty to allow me the opportunity to showcase my play. *Setting The Record Straight* is a play that will provide something new and original. If the faculty sees the play as worthy of performance, this will present a great opportunity for notoriety.

Another possibility is networking with fellow theatre artists. I would like to collaborate with a performance group and a director. A friend of mine is a directing major and an MFA candidate at a university. She has a performance group that enjoys material such as *Setting The Record Straight* and wants to look at my play. I am not one to make assumptions about what will happen, but having the opportunity to make connections is beneficial in theatre. It’s a difficult task in to find ways to showcase a play. This just proves that in certain cases, it takes a collaborative effort in order to make the public hear a voice.

Reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance, collaborative effort is responsible for the creation of pageants and a movement toward resurrecting the voice of Black theatre. It is this same collaborative effort that is responsible for allowing the public to hear a voice. One day, I hope my play will have the same type of impact and success when attempting to display my work.
Conclusion

As a playwright, I now recognize that writing in general is a challenging task no matter what literary genre or academic field a person studies. A writer in any academic field must write a particular way according to the requirements in their field. The process of a writing project can be long, stressful and frustrating at times. However, if a writer is passionate about what he or she writes, the motivation allows the opportunity to work.

There are a number of challenges that I currently face on my journey as a playwright. These vary from issues such as writing mechanics to scene development to balance. While I am presently facing such challenges, I learn in the process. My playwriting influences have at one point in their career come across the same trials and have become a success as a result. Writing my play has its share of good and bad moments but I enjoy what I am writing because it is my passion.

In writing my thesis, I have become a critical thinker when writing for academia. My thesis has to prove that I am erudite in what I write. The passion in writing my thesis must match my passion as a playwright. My thesis reflects what I am writing through my voice but in a scholarly manner. It is a “presentational piece” like my play, but its performance is on paper. My committee is reading a presentation of my writing process that reflects my voice. In my thesis, I must make the reader understand my thoughts and views about my role as Black male writer.

Black male writers such as Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin are examples of Black intellectuals with legacies in literature and theatre. These Black writers have numerous essays, articles, poems, novels and plays that reflect their voices. In literature, these writers’ respective works reflect their philosophical thoughts and views about specific issues during specific time periods. In theatre, their plays present opportunities to put on a production that reflects the thoughts, views and intentions that each writer has for his play.

Like my predecessors, I have to intelligently and eloquently write in accordance with the writing demands of my time period. Despite such limitations, Black writers are known to historically rise to the occasion and write with unique voices. With the challenges I currently face, I will not let obstacles discourage me from writing with my voice.
The history of the Black voice reflects a road of struggle, resistance, temporary defeats and victories. During its temporary existence, the African Company’s powerful voice is the reason why whites shutdown the African Grove theatre. The creation of minstrel shows is a result of suppressing the Black voice. As a collective, Black theatre artists during the Harlem Renaissance didn’t capitulate their positions on various issues. The Negro division of the Federal Theatre Project is another example of a voice that is so powerful that whites in shutdown their project out of fear. The Black Arts Movement is responsible for resurrecting the Black voices of the past while taking stands on various issues. The legacy of this movement reflects in the works of today’s Black playwrights such as August Wilson and George C. Wolfe.

The conundrum of my role as a Black playwright is where do I envision myself within the timeline of Black writers. In the future, I want to make an impact with my writing. I am one of a number of young, Black male playwrights that are looking for an opportunity that will allow the entire nation to witness the voice of a contemporary Black male playwright. My road begins with my thesis and my play. One day a student may have an idea to conduct research on the many elements that contribute to my development and evolution as a playwright. When the researcher reads my thesis, he or she will grasp an understanding of my development as a writer.

August Wilson’s advice to me about making believers out of non-believers with my plays holds true with my thesis. The creation of my thesis is to show the reader the process of what formulates my voice as a playwright. My thesis committee members are the first people who will read and examine this paper. It is my goal with the encouragement of August Wilson to make them a believer with my thesis. I want my committee to believe that they can see my voice when reading my thesis and my play. If I make a believer out of the committee with my writing, then I will have proven that I can write felicitously.

The future of where my playwriting and academic path will lead is unknown. My thesis and my play are the first steps in creating the opportunity for people to witness the development of my voice. As a Black male playwright and future scholar, I have a mission. The mission is to find my song. I have a song, but I still need to discover what type of song I possess. Like Wilson, my song will reveal itself as I continue my journey
as a writer. Like many Blacks in academia, I have to find my niche within the academic world. In the end, I want my voice to impact others as Wilson, Wolfe and other Black playwrights have in my development in finding my voice as a playwright. As a Black male writer, I want the opportunity to one day become “the shiny man” instead of the invisible man. A playwright without their voice becomes just another Herald Loomis that suffers at the hands of a modern “Joe Turner”.

The Black male writer has a responsibility. The Black male voice can only exist if Black male writers in every generation accept the responsibility of having a presence within their era. As a Black writer, it is my responsibility to make an effort to contribute to the preservation of the voice of the Black male in theatre. The only way the Black male voice will have a continual presence in theatre is for every generation to produce successors for their predecessors. The future of continuing to blaze the trails for future generations is in the hands of Black playwrights such as myself.
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