This creative thesis functions as a two-part exploration of locating the intersection of theory and practice as it relates to the overlapping of theatre, performance, and African American studies. This thesis was accompanied with Miami University’s 2010 production of A Song for Coretta. With a specific focus on playwright Pearl Cleage and her play, A Song for Coretta, this thesis examines how African American history, culture, and experiences become an integral part of the total theatre process; be it playwriting, performing, researching, or directing.
PEARL CLEAGE’S A SONG FOR CORETTA:
CULTURAL PERFORMATIVITY AS HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Theatre
By
Khalid Yaya Long
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2011

Advisor__________________________________________
(Dr. Paul K. Jackson)

Reader___________________________________________
(Dr. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong)

Reader___________________________________________
(Dr. Cheryl L. Johnson)

Reader___________________________________________
(Dr. Denise Taliaferro Baszile)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT**

**TITLE PAGE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS:</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION:</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROLOGUE:</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Bigger View of Black Theatre and Performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| CHAPTER ONE:                       | 6   |
| In Search of a Womanist Playwright: A Dramaturgical Analysis |

| CHAPTER TWO:                       | 25  |
| Cultural Performativity in Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta* |

| CHAPTER THREE:                     | 51  |
| Black Directing and Cultural Implications: Directing *A Song for Coretta* |

| EPILOGUE:                          | 66  |
| A Letter to Coretta               |

| APPENDIX:                          | 67  |
| Director’s Power Point Presentation |
| Production Prompt Script           |
| *A Song for Coretta* Playbook     |
| Production Photos                 |
DEDICATION

To my brother Hasan Anthony Long (1977-2005)

You went on to be with the ancestors quite early…
Yet as I traveled on this journey, you were with me all the way.
And for that I thank you!

And To Edythe Scott Bagley (1924-2011)
Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to my collective families: the Longs, the Whites, and the Harpers. I especially want to thank my grandparents who have given me their continued love and support. I would also like to express thanks to my brothers, Hanif and Khaleef, who have told me in small, yet in such large ways, that they are proud of me. And to have their support means so much.

A number of folk have supported me throughout my academic career thus far, including: Dr. Nishani Frazier, Dr. Jhan Doughty-Berry, and Professor Felicia Seamon.

I would like to thank the Department of Theatre at Miami University for their support throughout this process, especially, Dr. Andrew Gibb, Dr. Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, and Dr. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong. I would also like to thank the key players who made A Song for Coretta a successful production, including the performers, designers, managers, advisors, and panelists. Also, thanks go out to my colleagues in the department.

To my colleagues in other areas throughout the University – thanks for the weekly, late night and unexpected runs to BDUBS, Kofenya, Starbucks, and “The Lodge”. The scholarly debates held while making those runs were a main source of inspiration for when I got back home to the computer.

Special thanks are owed to Professor Edythe Scott Bagley for her words of love, encouragement, and unwavering support. May you rest in peace as you take your place amid the ancestors.

Special thanks are also owed to Arianne A. Hartsell-Gundy, the University Humanities Librarian.

Dr. Cheryl “Mama” Johnson and Dr. Denise “D” Baszile have been pillars and I cannot thank them enough. I look forward to the future with them both.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Eric Shane Finnell and Pierre Nix – my brothers-in-spirit. For the good, bad, and ugly, they have been with me throughout this entire process. My grandparents always told me, “Family is very important, but friends are just as important in this thing called life. You cannot go through life without ‘em.”

I owe more than a thank you to my advisor, Dr. Paul Keith Bryant-Jackson, for he has been so much more than an advisor and mentor. He has been a true friend. I remember traveling to Maryland and meeting with Dr. Faedra Chatarde Carpenter and she said, “So, your Paul Jackson’s child.” In that moment of cultural performativity, I realized just how significant it was to have Dr. Jackson in my corner. Dr. Jackson has aided in my growth as an artist, scholar, and person. Most importantly, he has taught me in many ways to humble myself now, in order shine in the future. Upon entering the graduate program, Dr. Jackson has supported me endlessly and for that I am forever indebted and truly grateful.
PROLOGUE

A Personal / Bigger View of Black Theatre and Performance

In 2005, Theatre Journal focused on a special topic: Black Performance. Located directly in Harry J. Elam Jr.’s editorial comments entitled “A Black Thing”, this particular issue of Theatre Journal was dedicated posthumously to pioneering African American theatre and performance scholar, Dr. Marvin Leon Sims, who had previously taken his place amid the ancestors. Elam also paid tribute to playwright August Wilson, who had just announced that he was suffering from liver cancer with only months to live. Surprisingly and yet expected, Wilson joined the ancestors in October 2005, two months before the journal was published.

This special issue, as Elam writes, “investigates when, if, and how black theatre and performance constitute a particularly ‘black thing’” (ix). After a eulogy-like reading of August Wilson and his impact in African American theatre and simultaneously on African American history, the journal commences with a forum among leading Black scholars and artists exploring the question(s): What is a black play and/or what is playing black? Elam declares that:

These are, in fact, old questions of historical import and past weight. These questions go way back before Ralph Ellison's exegesis on what "Black is . . . and black ain't" in Invisible Man, even back before the debates waged by W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke on what should be the purposes and composition of a Negro Theatre. At issue, then and now, in all these discussions is what should constitute the relationship between black play and black politics, between black play and white play, between black play and the social and cultural lives of black people in America. (xi)

Within their multi-perspective responses to the posed questions, the centralizing assertion amongst the scholars and artists was that Black theatre and performance extended beyond the mere fantasy of staged productions and readings of Black dramas. In their words, Black theatre and performance is: “Performing Africa in America” (Carter-Harrison), “The gumbo of theatrical blackness” (Bean), Hurricane “Katrina” (Dicker/Sun), and “Obatálá in revolutionary (postmodern) diaspora” (Bryant-Jackson). Black theatre and performance, with its all-
encompassing methodology, is a “black thing” reflecting a postmodern like notion, where the intersection of theory and practice is evoked. Specifically, Black theatre and performance today becomes synonymous with the acknowledgement, and more importantly, the understanding of “the endurance, the pride, the struggle, and the survival that constitute African American history and experience” (Elam ix).

My creative thesis, both the written portion and the directorial praxis, draws itself heavily from playwright Robbie McCauley’s response within the forum\(^1\). While it may be on the fence between cliché and banal, reading and re-reading her response became a self-governing ritual that gave me inspiration since embarking on this two-part journey. Mainly, her response suggested that Black theatre and performance is a discourse to which Black folk join, primarily from a space of “personal/bigger view (a practice of relating the personal experience to larger public topics)” (583). She goes on to conjecture about several areas of the creative process of theatre and its performance, or rather the performativity that it is inherently accompanying.

First, McCauley talks about the process of being a playwright, which for me was important because I would be doing a study on playwright Pearl Cleage. She states that “Black playwriting is in the tradition of black poets–many of whom are also performance artists and playwrights…[in which they] can trust their own impulses sparked by what they hear from within.” Again, McCauley alludes to the idea that the creative process derives from the space of a “personal/bigger view”. McCauley then goes into a discussion about “playing black”, whereas she asserts that it “of course, pushes buttons.” Yet, she stresses the importance to understand the context of playing black and that to play black is figuratively, the notion of making gospel or jazz.

Nearing the end of her response, McCauley talks about the consideration of race when entering the process of theatre and performance and that there is the possibility of “physical, emotional, and intellectual exchanges…in theatre work and education.” Furthermore, and most significant to me, is her assertion that “actors, stage manager, and tech people must be as involved as possible in the making of the work, [including a] personalization and willingness to think beyond the personal.” McCauley closes with words about theatre and performance that have been the center of my journey, practically and theoretically:

\(^1\) See Robbie McCauley’s *The Struggle Continues*.  

2
I want it to shift views and break silences, which…is theatre of change. [It should] reveal untold stories, which [is] theatre of experience. The vigor has to do with one’s self in the process. Who am I and what am I saying?

This thesis explores my own affinities within theatre and performance, which stems from a space of a “personal/bigger view”. This thesis seeks to join the forum in Theatre Journal and continue to investigate and to locate the intersection of theory and practice. The investigation is thus narrowed with a specific focus on playwright Pearl Cleage and her play, A Song for Coretta. Using the term cultural performativity as an interchanged term for “a black thing”, this thesis examines how African American history, culture, and experiences become, inherently, a part of the total theatre process; be it playwriting, performing, researching, or directing.

Chapter One, “In Search of a Womanist Playwright”, is a dramaturgical analysis of playwright Pearl Cleage and her works within the theatre. In providing an overview of her life, works, influences, key themes, and also paying special attention to A Song for Coretta, I attempt to locate the personal/bigger view of Pearl Cleage as Womanist/feminist playwright and African American activist. In this chapter I also include personal interviews with Pearl Cleage and Edythe Scott Bagley, elder sister of Coretta Scott King.

Chapter Two, “Cultural Performativity in Pearl Cleage’s A Song for Coretta”, is a theoretical examination of the play. I explore how Cleage engages with certain paradigms of cultural performativity, including: mourning, orature, memory, and history. I examine how each of the women in the play come to mourn Coretta Scott King at her public memorial only to have their “personal experiences” situated within a “larger public topic”. Analyzing the play in this manner, I critically survey how Cleage joins fellow playwrights in their use of playwriting as historiographical method to document the African American experience.

Chapter Three, “Black Directing and Cultural Implications: Directing A Song for Coretta”, answers the question that McCauley poses: What is black directing? In answering the question, I detail my experience of being both artist and educator while directing A Song for Coretta as part of Miami University’s Department of Theatre’s the 2010-2011 production season. I talk about the process of working with performers who questioned the notion of “playing black” and designers who were challenged with the cultural implications of creating a Black play. The chapter is divided into the following sections: Director’s Vision/Director’s Talk, Auditions, Collaboration with Designers, The Rehearsal Process, When and Where I Enter into
Coretta’s Song: A Pre-show Panel Discussion, and Reflections. The thesis is thus concluded. In the appendix I include the director’s PowerPoint presentation, *A Song for Coretta’s* prompt script, the 2010 production playbook, and production photos.
Works Cited


CHAPTER ONE

In Search of a Womanist Playwright: A Dramaturgical Analysis

*My work is deeply rooted in, and consciously reflective of, African-American history and culture since I believe that it is by accurately expressing our very specific and highly individual realities that we discover our common humanity...*

–Pearl Cleage, *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology*

Introduction

Establishing a dramaturgical connection between Pearl Cleage and her works, the following chapter is divided into eight sections. Section one, “The Life of Pearl Cleage”, offers an overview of Pearl Cleage’s life – from her childhood in Detroit to her grounding success as a writer in Atlanta. Section two, “Creating Her Own Space: Pearl’s Oeuvre”, is a summary of Cleage’s dramas that includes all of her published and unpublished dramas and leads into the following section, “Ibsen, Hansberry, and King: Styles, Themes, and Influences”, a critical analysis of her style, themes, and influences – which aids in locating her among other classical and contemporary playwrights. Within the succeeding three sections, I will discuss “A Song for Coretta”, including the production history and critical reception of select reviews from various geographic locations, and two interviews. I was fortunate to interview the playwright, Pearl Cleage, about her works with a particular focus on “A Song for Coretta”. I was also fortunate to be able to travel to Cheyney, PA, to have a conversation with Professor Edythe Scott Bagley, the elder sister of the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King. The two personal meetings allow me to gain a full understanding of Cleage’s drama in the context of the African-American community and the mourning ritual of a beloved ancestor. “Positioning Pearl in the Context of African American Women Playwrights” concludes the chapter as an overview of Pearl Cleage and her works and places her within the tradition of other African American women playwrights as they’ve not only focused on the African American community, but have done so with a womanist perspective.²

² For further explanation of the term “Womanist”, see Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Walker is credited with coining the term as it is used in literary criticism, theory, and cultural studies.
The Life of Pearl Cleage

Named after her paternal grandmother and the second daughter of Doris Graham and Albert Cleage, Pearl Michelle Cleage was born December 7, 1948 in Springfield Massachusetts. Raised in Detroit, Michigan, Cleage’s passion for civil, political, and social justice is presumably inevitable due to the fact that her mother was an elementary school teacher and her father, also known as Jaramogi Abebe Azaman, was a minister, activist, and founder of both: The Black Nationalist Christian Church and The Freedom Now Party in Detroit. Raised by parents who knew the power of literature and the spoken word and who also imparted upon her family an Afrocentric view of the world with conversations particularly concerning Black liberation and empowerment, Cleage attributes much of her passion for writing and subject matters to her family. In a personal essay, Cleage stated:

There were books all over the place in my house when I was growing up. I came from a family of people who were writing. I’m the first professional writer in my family, but there were always a lot of books and a lot of talk about writers and writing. And a lot of respect for writers. So writing to me was a real occupation, like choosing to be a nurse or a minister, because I knew black people who were writing…I grew up in a context of people who were writing to free themselves. *(Red Clay 50)*

Cleage graduated at the top of her class from Northwestern High School in 1966 and went on to enroll in the B.F.A. program at Howard University – with a focus in playwriting. While at Howard, Cleage studied under three leading African-American playwrights: Owen Dodson, Ted Shine, and Paul Carter Harrison. Also, while attending Howard, the University produced two of her early dramas: *Hymn for the Rebels* (1968) and *Duet for Three Voices* (1969), both one-act plays.

After attending Yale University’s summer theatre program in 1969, Cleage decided not to complete her studies at Howard and relocate to Atlanta, Georgia. Not long after, Cleage married Politician Michael Lucius Lomax; along with whom she gave birth to a daughter, Deignan Njeri.

While repositioning in Atlanta, Cleage held numerous jobs: working as a member of the field collections staff at the King Center; a host and interviewer for an educational magazine, *Black Viewpoints*; and as a writer and interviewer for *Ebony Beat Journal* for radio station WCXI Atlanta, where she later served as the program’s head writer and associate producer.
Cleage later completed her academic studies in playwriting and drama at Spelman College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1971 and in 1972 the college produced her play, *The Sale*. In addition to being taught by Shine, Dodson, and Carter-Harrison, Cleage was under the tutelage of playwright Carlton Molette while studying at Spelman. In that same year of earning her B.A., Cleage published her first book, a collection of poems titled *We Don’t Need No Music*.

Establishing herself as a successful writer, Cleage began work as a columnist for several Atlanta publications, including the *Atlanta Gazette, Atlanta Tribune, and Atlanta Constitution*. Cleage was also the director of communications for the city of Atlanta, instructor at Emory University, and press secretary for Mayor Maynard Jackson, the first Black Mayor of Atlanta. Cleage and Michael Lomax fell victim to a deteriorating marriage and were divorced in 1979. “Cleage refocused her life and decided to devote her energy to writing full-time.” (Marsh-Lockett 74) In 1994, Cleage married writer, performance artist, and longtime friend Zaron Burnett, Jr. Preceding the marriage, Cleage and Burnett, Jr. founded the “Just Us” theatre company and “Club Zebra” in Atlanta where they’ve both served as performers, directors, and playwrights-in-residence.

While being an activist in her own right, Pearl Cleage has also become an accomplished literary figure with her works that are comprised of dramas, novels, essays, performance pieces, and poems. Cleage’s dramas follow in the tradition of socially active and politically aware theatre and join the rankings alongside other playwrights, such as Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Eugene O’Neill, and Amiri Baraka. Besides being a performed playwright, Cleage is an accomplished novelist. Continuing her major themes of sexism and racism as they relate to Black women, her novels include: *What Looks Like Crazy On an Ordinary Day* (1998), an *Oprah Book Club* Selection (September 1998); *Babylon Sisters* (2006), *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (2009), *Till You Hear from Me* (2010), and most recently, *Just Wanna Testify* (2011).

In 2007, Cleage won an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work in the area of fiction and was also a recipient of the William and Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby Endowed Professorship in the Women Studies Department at her alma mater, Spelman College (2005-2007). Today Cleage is continuing to fulfill her passion for writing and is also founding editor of *Catalyst*, a literary magazine.
Creating Her Own Space: Pearl’s Oeuvre

In her article, *In Their Own Words: Pearl Cleage and Glenda Dickerson Define Womanist Theater*, Freda Scott Giles defines Womanist Theatre:

constructed around the major precepts of feminist, Afrocentric, and post-Afrocentric theatre theory, resulting in the reshaping of dramatic form and narrative. Like feminist theatre, womanist theatre subverts traditional Eurocentric dramatic structures to expose patriarchal misrepresentation, bias, and oppression… [And] certainly, these definitions and precepts apply to the theatre created by Pearl Cleage.3

In addition to Giles’ interpretation, Pearl Cleage is grounded within a broad focus of the African-American community, with a particular emphasis on sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia. Cleage’s success as a playwright developed in 1983 with her New York productions of *Hospice* and the avant-garde style *puppet play*. Of the two productions, *puppet play*, selected as the opening play for the seventeenth season of the Negro Ensemble Company, received national recognition. The play featured actresses Seret Scott and Phylicia Ayers Allen (now Rashad), characterized as Woman One and Woman Two. Both actually represent the mental anguish of one woman involved in a decaying relationship with a man portrayed by a seven-foot puppet. The puppet is manipulated by a puppeteer, played by actor Brad Brewer.

Evident in theatre reviews such as the *New York Times*, *puppet play* received mixed reviews. *New York Times* theatre critic Mel Gussow described the play as “a look at a futuristic world that turns people into robots and allows puppets to become a kind of second ruling class” (Gussow I 73). Gussow went on to sarcastically compare the play to the 1982 film, *Blade Runner*, stating, “it lacks, among other things, that films [*Blade Runner*] pulsating sense of authenticity and environment…“Puppetplay”…is brief but languid” (I 73). Cleage identified *puppet play* as her “only avant-garde piece [because] people are not enamored of new forms. Using traditional forms gives me more power in taking the audience’s defenses away” (qtd. in Giles, *In Their Own Words*).

While many of Cleage’s dramas have remained unpublished, they have all been produced at various university, community, and regional theatres, including the Billie Holiday Theatre in

---

3 Freda Scott Giles, “In Their Own Words: Pearl Cleage and Glenda Dickerson Define Womanist Theater”, *Womanist Theory and Research* 2.1/2.2 (1997).
Brooklyn and Cleage’s own Just Us Theater in Atlanta. Her unpublished dramas include: Good News (1984), Essentials (1985), Banana Bread (1985), Porch Songs (1985), and Come and Get These Memories (1987). It is quite evident that from early on, Pearl Cleage has produced critical and timely dramas; however, as Giles argues:

It is through an artistic partnership forged with Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre and its Artistic Director, Kenny Leon, who commissioned Cleage to write Flyin’ West (1992), Blues for an Alabama Sky (1995), and Bourbon at the Border (1997) that Cleage has realized a rare achievement for African-American playwrights: consistent professional production in regional theatres. (Motion 709)

The latter three plays were published along with two of Cleage’s one-act dramas, Late Bus to Mecca (1992) and Chains (1992), in her anthology, Flyin West and Other Plays. Serving as the staple for Cleage’s dramas, Flyin’ West, Blues, and Bourbon have also been initiated as the beginning of historical eras/moments set as the center for her dramas. Even though Late Bus to Mecca takes place two days before the Muhammad Ali and Jerry Quarry boxing match in 1970, the play is not essentially focused on nor revolved around the famous match. It is not uncommon for playwrights to incorporate historical moments as centers for their plays. The most celebrated playwright known for this process is August Wilson and his ten play cycle that dramatizes the African-American experience throughout the twentieth century.

While Blues explores the lives of Black artist and activist during the time when the jubilation of the Harlem Renaissance suffered at the hands of the Great Depression, Bourbon is the most contemporary in terms of both: the play’s setting and its authentic historical moment. Set in 1995 Detroit, Bourbon is angled around the 1964 Freedom Summer program in Mississippi that aided in Black voter registration. Relating to authentic historical moments, Flyin’ West is the best example. Flyin’ West dramatizes the Exodus of 1879. Detailing her inspiration for Flyin’ West, Cleage states:

The characters are already talking; the task becomes finding the story that they’re in...The voice that I heard talking was a woman who had been born in slavery...And I realized she was a homesteader. I went and read the Homestead Act of 1860 and then went and read diaries and journals and tried to look at movies about women on the frontier...Once I got this place in the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, I had to figure out where she came from, because it wasn’t
like she was born in Kansas. I’d read excerpts of Ida B. Wells’ journals, where she talked about how two of her friends had gotten lynched and she said, ‘Sometimes I wish I could just gather my people up in my arms and fly away West. Because we need to leave a place where they don’t respect us and our lives aren’t worth anything’… (qtd. in Greene 42)

According to Women’s Studies and theatre scholar Lisa Anderson, Cleage uses history as a method to “expose her audience to something about which they may not be familiar” (33). For example, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* engages with figures from the Harlem Renaissance, including Josephine Baker and Langston Hughes. Yet, of rather significant importance, the play introduces activist Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and artist Bruce Nugent, two lesser known figures of the Harlem Renaissance⁴. By integrating the Freedom Summer initiative as the center of *Bourbon at the Border*, Cleage has presented to the audience an intricate part of the Civil Rights movement. And with *Flyin’ West*, Cleage not only dramatizes the Exodus of 1879, she engages with other ignored moments of African-American history, including the relationship between African-Americans and Native Americans during the post-slavery, pre-civil rights era.

Entering into the twenty-first century and returning from a hiatus of scripting dramas, Pearl Cleage continues her zest for placing Black female characters and authentic historical moments on the stage. *A Song for Coretta*, the play of consideration, was written in 2006 and produced by the 7 Stages Theatre, in Atlanta, Georgia. Cleage’s most recent play, *The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years*, starring performer Jasmine Guy, premiered at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in September 2010.⁵

### Ibsen, Hansberry, and King: Styles, Themes, and Influences

Describing herself as “a third-generation black nationalist and a radical feminist”, Cleage states:

> The primary energy that fuels my work is a determination to be part of the ongoing worldwide struggle against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. I approach my work first as a way of expressing my emotional response to

---

⁴ In terms of “lesser known”, I am referring to a comparison between Baker and Hughes, whom are in all probability more celebrated than Powell and Nugent.

⁵ This was revealed to me in a personal interview in advance of its premiering production.
oppression, since no revolution has ever been fueled purely by intellect, no matter what the boys tell you; second, as a way to offer analysis, establish context, and clarify point of view; and third, to incite my audience or my readers to action. My work is deeply rooted in, and consciously reflective of African American history and culture since I believe that it is by accurately expressing our specific and highly individual realities that we discover our common humanity.” (Artistic Statement 46)

Discussing those who’ve influenced her style and choice of dramatic assembly, Cleage credits various writers, such as Harlem Renaissance pioneer Langston Hughes, playwright Henrik Ibsen and author Alice Walker. Cleage contributes her earliest desire for playwriting to Lorraine Hansberry:

I saw *A Raisin in the Sun* when I was young, in Detroit…It was a great production, and the audience was just ecstatic. I mean, we all wept and hollered and screamed. It was just great. And it was a tremendous influence on me because it was a black woman writing about things I knew to be real…And that was like my dream. That was all I wanted: A black theatre, in a black community, full of black people listening to what I had to say. So I said, “Okay, this is possible. If she can do this, I can do this.”…She was the one who made it very real to me.

(qtd. in Craig 285)

Along with paying homage to Hansberry, Cleage does not dismiss the influence of other Black female writers and is “very conscious of being part of a tradition” (qtd. in Greene 36). Beth Turner notes of Cleage that “In her articulation of feminist opposition to the interlocking oppressions of sexism, racism and classism…[Cleage] resonates with the spirit of both Ntozake Shange and Alice Childress” (*Feminist/Womanist Vision* 100). While Cleage distinguishes Shange and her drama/choréopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, as inspiration to create plays with a womanist/feminist vision, she is more directly related to Childress’ realism. Like Childress, Cleage also employs the well-made play structure; and uses historical African American moments for the settings of her dramas.

With a tightly constructed plot, a climax set near the end of the play, and an altogether happy ending, Cleage “has chosen to invert the well-made play structure to attack, rather than support, the status quo”, as opposed to many African-American playwrights who’ve either
challenged or completely dismissed European concepts of dramatic structure (Giles, *In Their Own Words*). Previously discussed in the chapter, Cleage explains, “I like old-fashioned, well-made plays, where there’s a lot of talk. I’m not an avant-garde kind of a person…I tend to have an old-fashioned structure” (qtd. in Greene 35). Cleage also credits Woodie King Jr., founding director of the New Federal Theatre in New York for his advice about the shape of a play:

I always believe ‘The Woodie King Advice,’ which is ‘If you want to have a play produced, Pearl, don’t have more than five characters. That’s it…You can put twenty characters in it if you just want to print it somewhere.’ And I thought that was such Woodyish, good advice. (qtd. in Turner)⁶

**A Song for Coretta**

“The last stanza and the highest note of Coretta King’s freedom song remains to be sung”.

—Shirley Franklin, Mayor of Atlanta⁷

The date is February 6, 2006. The time is 11:30pm. In the cold rain, Zora, Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen hurry down to Ebenezer Baptist Church to join the dwindling line of mourners to say their farewells to the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King, whose body lies in state. Through personal narratives, quarrels and while reflecting openly on Mrs. King’s influence, these women come to realize that they are closer in more ways to the beloved woman, now ancestor, than they’ve ever imagined. As each of the character’s join the line in a spur of the moment, they each have come to ask, “What would Coretta do?”

Pearl Cleage says she was inspired to write *A Song for Coretta* after watching the news footage of the mourners who waited and waited in a long line outside of Ebenezer Baptist Church to bid farewell to a woman they’ve never met. While intensifying the paralleling themes and bringing to the stage recent events and very contemporary concerns of American history, *A Song for Coretta* completes the quartet of Cleages last produced and published dramas: *Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border*.

---

⁶ See Beth Turner’s *Turn the Ship Around!*
⁷ Mayor Shirley Franklin stated the above quote while eulogizing the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King at her funeral in Atlanta, Georgia.
In *A Song for Coretta*, each mourner shares her very individual and unique story. Whereas the level of intensity varies in each character’s story, the women are undoubtedly linked together because of one common concern: the continuum of oppression, subjectivity, and marginalization of Black women in America. *A Song for Coretta* also presents very contemporary issues such as the New Gulf War and Hurricane Katrina. The play achieves exactly what Cleage attempts to do within each of her dramas in response to the common concern and new obstacles; that is to “name it, describe it, analyze it, and protest it.” Cleage states:

I purposefully people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise. (Artistic Statement, 46)

In addition to sharing their individual stories, the characters experience contrasting moments with one another, which only creates a deeper understanding of generational, geographic, and educational differences and strengthens their bond as Black women. After a very-serious climax, the women finally enter the church to view the body of the ancestor, while singing Coretta Scott King’s Freedom Song, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”.

**Production History and Critical Response**

*A Song for Coretta* opened at the 7 Stages Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, January 17, 2007 and premiered at Spelman College February 15, 2007 as part of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the drama department. *Song* also opened at various community, regional, and university theatres throughout the nation, including: the Bushfire Theatre in Philadelphia, the St. Louis Repertory Theatre, the Detroit Repertory Theatre, the Liddy Doenges Theatre of the Tulsa Performing Arts Center in Oklahoma, the South Bend Civic Theatre in Indiana, the Lincoln Theatre of Ohio State University, and the Thrust Theatre at the University of Louisville. In the following section I will review a few of the critical responses from theatres in select geographical locations.

Curt Holman, Arts & Entertainment critic for *Creative Loafing Atlanta*, was surprised that the 7 Stages Theatre produced the play: “One of the most surprising things about 7 Stages’ production [of *Song*]…is that it’s playing at 7 Stages. The Little Five Points Theater has a
history of staging avant-garde, experimental material.”

Directed by Spelman professor of drama, Crystal Dickinson, and starring Andrea Frye as Helen, the civil rights pioneer, Song received a positive review from Holman. Holman’s surprise was subsided towards the end of the one-act drama, stating that the climax felt less natural and “more like the jumping-off point of an angrier, more expressionist work – the kind you’d be more likely to find at 7 stages.”

Staged in Dallas, Texas, at the African American Repertory Theater throughout the month of April 2010, Song received a less favorable review. Critic for The Dallas Morning News, Lawson Taitte, described scene designer Bryan Wofford’s set as elegant, but stated that even though “Director William (Bill) Earl Ray has guided the actors into sharp characterizations…A Song for Coretta…tries to do too much. It preaches, then stops preaching and goes meddling.”

Taitte carped that “the last 10 minutes of the play abandons naturalism completely…and even makes us wonder whether the playwright is honoring Coretta Scott King or exploiting her memory to express its own preconceptions.” This review makes one wonder what the reviewer was expecting.

Caitlyn Montayne Parrish, reviewer for Time Out Chicago, said of the 2009 premiere at the Eclipse Theatre:

For all its anecdotes, it’s difficult to locate a story in Cleage’s Song…With both Chris Corwin’s imposing brick-wall set and Kaitlyn Kearn’s subtle, marvelous costumes reinforcing a sense of barriers, be they racial, economic or generational, a hopeful ending feels stitched on and unearned.

Contrasting with the latter two reviews, Reyhan Harmanci described Brava Theater’s 2009 premier as “sharp, funny”. Setting the tone of the review, the San Francisco Chronicle staff writer began his review with an anecdote of the then Senator Barack Obama and his speech to a congregation at Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama commemorating the 1965 voting rights march. After President Obama shared with the congregation a biblical story of Moses, he asked, “What do we do in order to fulfill that legacy; to fulfill the obligations and the debt that we owe to those who allowed us to be here today?” Channeling from Obama’s question, Harmanci wrote,

---

8 See Curt Holman, A Song for Coretta: Turning into Freedom.
9 See Taitte Lawson, African American Repertory Theater’s A Song for Coretta.
10 See Caitlin Parrish Montayne, A Song for Coretta.
11 See Reyhan Harmanci, A Song for Coretta at Brava.
“That question is at the heart of “A Song for Coretta”…As [the play] shows, the legacy of King is bittersweet…this work, conceived as a memorial to King, brings a measure of hope.”

Not all of the reviews were favorable, and some questioned its ending. Perhaps this questioning is a continuing concern of white writers reviewing African American plays and not understand Afrocentric magical realism. In response to all of the reviews, A Song for Coretta is quite accessible, along with being full of essential themes, concerns, and that one repeating question: “What would Coretta do?”
“In Her Own Words”: An Interview with Pearl Cleage

During the Month of June 2010, I had the pleasure of interviewing Pearl Cleage, via email, about her dramas, specifically *A Song for Coretta.*

**KL:** There are a number of social issues in *A Song for Coretta,* but what dominates the play are your characters and how the issues relate to them, individually and collectively. Could you discuss the characters and their relationship with each other and how the social issues relate to them?

**PC:** I was moved to write the play after seeing the long line of mourners wrapped around to wait their opportunity to pay their respects to Mrs. King at Ebenezer Baptist Church. I was struck by how different all the folks were that were interviewed as they waited. The only thing that brought them together was great respect and love for Mrs. King, who most of them had never met. I wanted to create five African American women characters whose differences bring the tension to the moment. Each one has a different challenge to meet. Zora is a witness to their struggles. My intention was to take the big issues that these women are facing -- aging, homelessness, war, single motherhood, etc. -- and distill them down until the issues aren't the point anymore because what you're experiencing is their common humanity.

**KL:** How does *A Song for Coretta* fit into your body of work?

**PC:** I have no idea where it fits into the body of my work. I don't think about the plays that way. I just write 'em! YOU have to analyze 'em!

**KL:** In the play, I find Helen Richards very intriguing, what were you thinking about when you created her? How did she find her way into the play?

**PC:** I love Helen. She’s so righteously cranky. I was thinking about my generation of folks who are often so critical and disappointed at young people today. I wanted to put Helen next to one of the kids she is so annoyed about and see if I could give them at least a glimmer of understanding of each other.

**KL:** *Song* is centered on the death and viewing rituals of the late Coretta Scott King, however, Mrs. King's life is not contextually discussed. Why did you choose to set the play around the public viewing of Mrs. King?

---

12 Following the tradition of many African American writers, Pearl Cleage uses lower case letters as she responded to the interview questions. African Americans who’ve employed lower case letters as a means of resistance in literature include playwrights Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange, and cultural scholar bell hooks (Gloria Watkins).
PC: see answer #1.

KL: I would describe your dramas as accessible and complex - because they deal with many contemporary social issues surrounding the African-American community. Through your dramas, what do you want to communicate to the African American Community?

PC: i am hoping to communicate with anyone who sees the plays, not only african americans. i think stories with african american characters, like my plays & books, are also part of the american literary canon. these characters and stories are american characters and stories. in this age of racial transition and change (obama’s election is a milestone, but simply reflects the changes already underway...) i think african american writers have to give themselves/ourselves permission to think of ourselves as American writers. it’s our country, too, and these stories are as much a part of the fabric of america as any white american writer. ditto for latino american writers, native american writers, asian american writers. it takes every story, told truthfully and with compassion, to give us any semblance of an idea about the complexity of this time and place. i think of myself as a storyteller, whatever medium i’m exploring. i want to create characters that make people think: "that sounds just like me! that's just what i think!" once we all realize that we're all just trying to figure out a way to move through life with some passion and honor and love, we're stop fighting so much and figure out how to get that damn oil out of the ocean! ... sorry. just a little bp rant! hope this helps.

KL: Ms. Cleage, I thank you. Your interview is a great contribution to my thesis, production process, and overall love for your work. Again, thank you.

PC: you're welcome. fact is, I have a new play premiering at the alabama shakespeare festival in september and moving to the alliance in atlanta in october. very long title is "The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years." peace!
A Conversation

During the month of June 2010, I had the opportunity to travel to Cheyney, Pennsylvania to interview Edythe Scott Bagley, elder sister of the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King and retired professor of Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. After the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Prof. Bagley left academia for a while to join Mrs. King for several years in the fight for Human Rights. Prof. Bagley served as a special assistant to Mrs. King and surrogate mother to the King children. Prof. Bagley currently serves as a lifetime member of the Board of Directors of the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Earning an M.F.A. in theatre and founder of the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts at Cheyney, I was all the more delighted about the interview. I knew that she would not only contribute familial dialogue of Mrs. King, but we would be able to discuss *A Song for Coretta* in the context of academic theatre and performance. Instead of the general voice-recorded interview, Professor Bagley insisted that we have a conversation. Below is a hand written-record of our conversation:

KL:  As a scholar and practitioner of theatre and as the sister of Mrs. King, I assume you were able to interpret the play with a dual perspective. What were your initial thoughts about *A Song for Coretta*?

ESB:  When I started reading the play script, I realized that Pearl Cleage was showing the ordinary people. When four presidents, two republican and two democrat and also other speakers were so much involved ...John Conyers said plane loads came from Washington...It was just uplifting. But Pearl Cleage was showing the ordinary people, because she [Coretta] was revered by the ordinary people. She had earned their respect and love. What did impress me was the fact that Cleage asked, “What Would Coretta do?” Usually, its “What would Jesus do?” which is what Martin [King] said. . Cleage was teaching what Martin and Coretta were about. What is significant...it’s truly a great play...is that it ends with the women who come from [Hurricane] Katrina and the Gulf War. All that disaster and disaster has struck again. The intent is that love is the one force to bring us all together...Stop bickering about the spill and decide what to do about

---

13 Professor Edythe Scott Bagley is the first African American woman to attend Antioch College and also the first to earn an MFA in Theatre Arts from Boston University. Professor Bagley also served as a Consultant in Black Theater for Michigan State University during the 1970s. Michigan State was developing a major in Black Drama studies at the time.
it. Martin and Coretta lived according to what Martin taught: Love is the answer. And Coretta got behind him and did not get involved in bickering.

KL: Reflecting on the characters in the play, what character reminds you of Mrs. King, or as I would say, her surrogate?

ESB: Helen Richards is Coretta’s surrogate. It’s being a mother to the other characters. Helen and Coretta raised their children and carried on the movement.

KL: Would you share with me the story of when you first arrived in Atlanta for Coretta’s funeral service. I believe that you arrived in Atlanta the same night that A Song for Coretta is set.

ESB: In the first place, I was so pleased about the setting. I went there 11:30 that night and was moved by the mood and seeing all of the people with small children. There was a drizzle, but they did not seem to mind and that made it significant. They were there waiting…waiting. There was a reverent spirit in the air.

I felt a little…They had stopped everything for me to enter the church. I knew I would not stay long. I felt compassion for those waiting. I did not feel sad; for my sister was such an exemplary – I felt her time had come and she’d gone to a better place. There were only a few of us. They wheeled me in and I looked at the casket and looked at her and it was real. I was crying and didn’t realize it – because they were handing me tissues. I closed my eyes for a while. I decided to look again – the last glance and I said, “I’m ready to go” and no more did I cry. God did it, so I didn’t feel that sad. I decided not to go to the service due to my health. It was so exalting.

KL: What are your overall thoughts of the play as it memorializes Mrs. Coretta Scott King?

ESB: Coretta had thirty eight years after Martin and Pearl Cleage has come up with a great play. It’s very tight. I’ve read a lot of things that had to do with Coretta and they never get it right. Pearl Cleage got it just right.
Positioning Pearl: Final thoughts of a Womanist Playwright

Some of America’s greatest black female educators and civil rights activists wrote plays and pageants as a means of educating the race.

–Kathy A. Perkins, Black Female Playwrights

In the introductory chapter of his book, “Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook”, Editor Philip C. Kolin writes that:

Black male playwrights historically had a commanding voice in American theatre. But African American women playwrights are also taking their place as the leaders of the American theatre, creating their own theatrical space, history and mythos. They are the heirs of Lorraine Hansberry’s legacy…” [Contemporary African American Women playwrights] “Have radically departed her realistic techniques and boldly interrogated and amplified her protests against racism and classism.” (1)

Whereas Kolin correctly stated that “Hansberry’s legacy [is] perhaps the most widely taught and staged African American woman dramatist”, it would be remiss if I did not note the fact that Black women playwrights have been contributing to the American Theatre spectrum since the nineteenth century. “Prior to the 1950s, black women published over sixty discovered plays and pageants, as well as numerous unpublished scripts…” (Perkins 1). Preceding and along with Kolin, the argument has been made that Black women playwrights have not received their credit for their significant contributions. I would argue, however, that these women have and are continuing to claim their space.

Freda Scott Giles references in her article, In Their Own Words, that the first published collection of plays by African-America women, 9 Plays by Black Women, did not appear until 1986. Today there are numerous anthologies, biographical publications, and critical essays that bring forth to the public the legacy of Black Women playwrights. While the plays of past and present Black women may vary in terms of style, publication, performance and overall success, it is without a doubt that collectively they have been significant to American theatre history.
Alongside her pioneers, influences, and contemporaries, Pearl Cleage joins the rich legacy. Theatre scholar and editor of *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, Paul K. Bryant-Jackson writes that Cleage’s plays:

Revisit, recreate, and reanimate challenging historical spaces in such a way that they compel the audience to reconsider those central questions of gender, race, and community identity within a paradigm of past, present, and future...Cleage’s spaces of history, marked by violence, encompass, chronicle and reflect a Diasporic experience and culture that are further marked by struggle.¹⁴

Creating a space of her own, Cleage employs Black Feminist Aesthetics to interrogate the continuum of oppression and subjectivity of not only Black women, but the African American community in general.¹⁵ Cleage’s work “construct and reconstruct history and identity…incorporate history…that…reveal an otherwise hidden history…[and] embrace[s] the questions of representation of black women and work to refine and reshape them” (Anderson 115-126). As a playwright who considers herself a Black Feminist, Cleage’s primary concern is to present very real situations on the stage in order to educate and awaken the activist spirits within her audiences.

---

¹⁴ See Paul K. Bryant-Jackson’s *Exploring the Cultural Spaces of Pearl Cleage*.

¹⁵ See Lisa Anderson’s *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* for a description of Black Feminist Aesthetics.
Works Cited


Bryant-Jackson, Paul K. "Exploring the Cultural Spaces of Pearl Cleage." *Program Article for University of Iowa Summer Rep Playbill*. Iowa City, 2002.IA. Print


Cleage, Pearl. Email Interview. 16 June 2010.


CHAPTER TWO

Cultural Performativity in Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta*

Knowing grief and expressing sorrow are central to the process of self-actualization. All over the world, women play a central role in public expressions of mourning.

– bell hooks, *the woman's mourning song: a poetics of lamentation*

**Introduction: Setting the Stage**

In *A Song for Coretta*, the central action takes place at the public memorial for the First Lady of the Human Rights Movement, Coretta Scott King. Playwright Pearl Cleage has illumined the Black experience from a relatively narrowed perspective through her dramatization of five African American women patiently waiting in line to view the body of King. By and large, the perspective can safely be placed under the scope of a womanist positionality. Individually, the women have been asked why they’ve each come to mourn the late ancestor – particularly, when they’ve never even met her. In order to answer the question, the women must recall their past. As they tell their personal histories through oral tradition, thereby evoking a West African practice of remembering and documenting, collectively they situate their memories within the social, political, and cultural context of African American history.

While Coretta’s public memorial is a multi-dimensional space to celebrate her life and accomplishments, and simultaneously mourn her loss, Cleage manipulates her characters to mourn a loss while engaging with the concept of embodied experiences. The embodiment of such experiences is a mesh of history, memory, ritual, and future correlations thereof.¹⁶ Specifically, this space inhabits a phenomenological moment where the oral testimonial exchanges between the women serve not only as recognitions of history and enactments of memory, but even more emphatically, the collectiveness of the women’s testimonies serve as a search for identity and unity through sisterhood. Furthermore, in this moment of public mourning, it can be said that through their collective oral testimonies, essentially what is being

¹⁶ For further detail on the theory and practice of embodied experiences, see Harvey Young’s *Embodying Black Experience*. 
mourned is not the loss of Coretta Scott King. So, the question materializes: What is being mourned?

The objective in this chapter is to examine how Cleage engages with certain paradigms of cultural performativity. My use of the term cultural performativity is used here to embrace and be inclusive of the theory of embodied practices. For the purpose of this chapter, these practices, or rather performances encompass chiefly: mourning, orature, memory – which, inherently, all lie at the helm of history. In reading the play through several critical lenses, my goal is to discuss each of the previously listed tropes within African American culture as historiographical method to document the African American experience.

**Mourning Coretta, Mourning Self**

As *A Song for Coretta* opens, Zora Evans, a twenty-two year old senior at Spelman College appears on the stage speaking into a recording device. Due to the nature of her speech, the audience can safely assume that she is a journalist or news reporter. More importantly, it is the message of her speech that sets up one of the primary themes of the play, mourning Coretta Scott King:

> ZORA. It is a cold and rainy night outside of historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, but that doesn’t seem to matter to the hundreds of people from all walks who have left the warmth of their homes and come here to say goodbye to Coretta Scott King...a woman they have never met. For those born after the civil rights era who never experienced the sit-ins and freedom rides and marches, it is difficult to understand what motivates these patiently waiting people to stand hour after hour for the briefest glimpse of a stranger...some simply said that she was a great lady. Others, that she was the heart of the civil rights movement. Some said they just wanted to be a part of history. Witnesses to the end of an era. Whatever their reasons, they have all been deeply touched by something they cannot define...(7)

As the play continues, we are introduced to the remaining four characters: Helen Richards, a senior citizen who met Coretta twice as a little girl during the civil rights era; Mona Lisa Martin, a Hurricane Katrina survivor who hitchhiked from New Orleans to Atlanta to attend Coretta’s memorial; Keisha Cameron, a seventeen year old who is pregnant for the second time; and Gwendolyn Johnson, a New Gulf War soldier. Due to Zora’s persistence, each of the women...
have agreed to be interviewed by her on why they’ve come to the church on the spur of the moment to say goodbye to Coretta. As the women simultaneously memorialize the ancestor and give her reverence for their own personal journeys, one begins to recognize the distinct cultural significance of mourning and its placement within the African American community.


The anticipation of death and dying figured into the experiences of black folk so persistently, given how much more omnipresent death was for them than for other Americans, that lamentation and mortification both found their way into public and private representations of African America to an astonishing degree …Black culture’s stories of death…were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experiences, perceived, and represented African America. Sometimes it was a subtext, but even the ghostly preserve of these narratives reminded us that something about America was, for black folk, disjointed. Instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of our daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience into the culture’s iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility. (6)

The “disjointed” and “black cultural sensibility” that Holloway speaks of is very much rooted in and an indication of the critical history of Black America. Not only is this history demonstrated in countless forms, moreover, this history continues to be memorialized. Holloway explains that, “the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture’s narrative…some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death” (7). 17

Holloway’s discussion of death as being a part of Black America’s daily social fabric resonates intensely throughout the play, specifically in the speeches of Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen. Inviting Mona Lisa to share her umbrella, Helen acknowledges the passing of her husband of thirty-four years: “I’m glad I brought this big old umbrella…The undertaker gave

it to me at my husband’s funeral” (13). Symbolized in the upcoming stage direction, one can assume that Mona Lisa feels unease with Helen’s comment: (Mona Lisa steps back out from under the umbrella immediately) (13). Indicative of Holloway’s suggestion that death, for black folk, is a social expectancy, Helen responds to Mona Lisa’s unease: “I didn’t mean to spook you. I know some people don’t like to talk about death, but to me it’s all part of life, you know?” Mona Lisa replies: “Talking about it ain’t the hard part” (13). Mona Lisa’s snappy retort is later recognized in the telling of the recent death of her grandmother.

For Gwen, the occurrence of death is posited in the sense of being both, past and future. Death as past is revealed when she talks of her experiences while serving as a medic during the Second Gulf War. In addition to preparing for her return to the war, it is Helen who foreshadows Gwen’s future death—referring essentially to Gwen’s mother—who is assumed to be cancer stricken:

Helen. How’s your mother?
Gwen. The chemo was hard on her, but she’s doing okay.
Helen. I need to go by and see her.
Gwen. She’d like that. (32)

Similar to Gwen, death for Keisha is also multifaceted. Unlike Gwen, however, death has already preceded and therefore, proceeded to disrupt Keisha’s reality. While engaging in a verbal quarrel with Helen, Keisha’s states: “Old people always talkin’ about people died for us, like that means something. Well, people die all the time nowadays, in case you didn’t notice, and it don’t even matter what for. They still just as dead!” (28). What is interesting about Keisha’s rebuttal is that she not only mirrors the statement made earlier by Helen regarding death and dying being routine, but more importantly, that she is intimately responding to a triple-death: the death of motherhood as she gave up her baby for adoption, the death of her own relationship with her mother, and the death of Coretta. Subsequently, after Helen and Keisha’s quarrel reaches its climax, Mona Lisa interjects, speaking primarily to Helen:

The thing you gotta remember, Miss Helen, is that Coretta had a whole movement full of people, clapping and singing and feeling that freedom in the air. It must have been quite a time, but there isn’t any movement anymore. There’s nobody coming to put their arms around Li’l Bit [Keisha] and her baby any more than
Mona Lisa’s interjection into the argument as Keisha’s protector is not a singular happening. In fact, she adopts the role as Keisha’s guardian throughout the play – defending her at various moments against the other characters. During Mona Lisa’s own performance of orature it is revealed that while clinging for survival during Hurricane Katrina, she encounters a young girl who is being sexually harassed by a group of men. Failing to save her, Mona Lisa treats Keisha, in a spiritual sense, as the girl from New Orleans. It can also be said that death for Mona Lisa is also multifaceted: the death of her grandmother and the plausibly assumed death of the girl from New Orleans. However, the death for the New Orleans girl does not necessarily have to be in the corporeal sense. If the goal of the men were to rape her, then naturally she could experience the death of her spiritual psyche and innocence.

It is here, I argue, where the concept of mourning is signified as being performative. Performative in the sense that the “exigencies of everyday life” for Zora, Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen, are thus “acted out” (Kear and Steinberg 7). Genevieve Fabre supports my argument, suggesting that “the action is not only seen and acted out but are also told and often presented…from which a moral or message should be drawn: each recorded event is turned into a message” (Drumbeats 220). Coretta’s memorial therefore becomes a site that inhabits a collective of experiences which is further inhabited by the cultural memories of the women. In this moment of memorialization, the women’s subjectivity becomes the mourned center at the very moment they deliver their narratives.

Seen in this light of public mourning, the death of Coretta acts as a stimulus for agency, wherein the characters deliver, in a metaphorical sense, a self-eulogizing performance. The absent Coretta, or rather her body, consequently, plays a very significant performative role within this mourning-act. Joseph Roach, scholar of English, theatre and performance studies, has shed light on the deceased’s performative role within the context of mourning rituals, writing that “the body of the deceased performs the limits of the community called into being by the need to mark its passing. United around a corpse…the members of a community may reflect on its symbolic embodiment of loss and renewal” (Cities 14).

Scholar of religion and psychological studies Peter Homans has led me to understand that an anthropological reading would speculate Coretta’s death to be a “social-symbolic context of
loss” (2). Homans furthers this notion, this time re-reading Victor Turner’s theory of liminality to aid in understanding the transformation that occurs amongst the women as mourners. He writes:

[Liminality] refers to a transitional period between two well-established roles.
The liminal stage characterizes the mourners and mourning. The mourners are “between” roles…Both deceased and mourners pass from attachment to society to a liminal or transitional state (not attached to society) and from this transitional state back to society…Together, the deceased and the mourners undertake parallel journeys. (2)

Noticeably, Homans does not use the term grief in his analysis of mourning and liminality and its placement within society as interpreted through the mourner’s reaction to the “social-symbolic context of loss”. He explains that while many will use the term grief and mourning interchangeably, there is a significant difference. For grief refers to emotional reactions to death which inhabits sorrow, anger, guilt, and confusion and that mourning refers to “culturally constructed social response to the loss of an individual” (2-3).

Homans makes an enthralling argument; yet, it is Holloway, again, who positions the community’s response to loss within a cultural space, specifically the space of African America, stating that “When the community [comes] together for a funeral [or memorialization], there [is] a collective expectation for the moment. It serve[s], in a sense, as a periodic catharsis for the weight of living black in the United States” (162-163). Holloway’s interpretation of loss and the relationship with the African American community actually blends the concept of mourning and grief. For A Song for Coretta, mourning is the collective performance, while grief is the individual performance of each character. Furthering her argument, Holloway writes:

Although the ritual formality and spectacle of black funerals…were clearly deliberate attempts to make the “home-going” ceremonies of African Americans underscore or encourage a view of each life as important and notable, there were occasions when the struggle of black life and black event was instead the surviving message of the ceremonies. The community ownership of and commentary on these events are haunting indicators of the way in which black death and dying envelope both a national and public space, as well as intimate, neighborhood spaces of black cultural memory. The territorial exchange of these narratives contributes to their permanence. They appear and reappear like an
ephemeral but persistent remembrance, a ghostly embodiment of national and cultural memory. (185-187).

This “ephemeral but persistent remembrance” is repetitively evident throughout the play. After each character briefly discuss Coretta’s influence and why she felt it necessary to say goodbye in person, quickly the public expressions of mourning shifts focus from Coretta to each character’s self-eulogizing narrative. The women each summon personal histories that are contributory to the collective Black experience. Helen remembers her childhood and the developing moments of Black freedom and liberation at the helm of the civil rights movement, while at the same time juxtaposing it with her concern of the current condition of the Black community. Mona Lisa’s piercing comments of her own experience eventually leads up to a full-length remembrance of the 2005 disaster, Hurricane Katrina. In order to discuss Coretta and her reasons for attending the memorial, Keisha must first remember a prior prenatal period and now second pregnancy that is at the forefront of her current calamity. As a result of Zora’s prodding, like Keisha, Gwen remembers extremely critical moments of her term in Iraq during the Second Gulf War. So, it can be reasoned that while the women initially unite to mourn (a) loss (es), there is an indicating exploration happening; indicating in the practical sense of first remembering and secondly, documenting. This indicative exploration, as a result, evokes other cultural performances that concurrently revisit history, while establishing a new history.
Performing Orature

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

– Audre Lorde, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action

Helen: Okay, Miss Zora Evans. Turn on your tape and I'll tell you what I know.

– Pearl Cleage, A Song for Coretta

Keisha: If I wanted you to turn off the tape, I wouldn't be talkin' to you at all, would I... Do you want to hear this or not?

– Pearl Cleage, A Song for Coretta

The above epigraphs create a rhythm that finds itself embedded within the overall arc of this section. The rhythm allows for the intersection of various positions for the performative role that the speaking voice plays. It initiates the call and response among the women. Most importantly, it grants a space for the women as oral performers to tell their story in the present; therefore to place their histories in the continuum. The notion of storytelling is very pertinent to the African American drama. Geneviève Fabre offers insight:

Oral expression, which encourages exchange and immediate response, serves as a model for patterns of participation and involvement...Because the oral tradition has long remained a living practice in Afro-American culture, the dramatic artist has been tempted to emulate not only the art and techniques of the storyteller, but also his prestigious social function – that of recording and reformulating experience, of shaping and transmitting values, opinions, and attitudes, and of expressing a certain collective wisdom. (Drumbeats 219)

Again, as one of my focal points within this chapter, storytelling through oral tradition is a key trope in Song. Situated in front of Ebenezer Baptist Church and having nothing to do but communicate amongst those who are also waiting, the performance of storytelling thus commences. Storytelling, however, is not a performance that goes without its discussion of the African primaries. Generally speaking, in spaces that are demarcated for cultural existence and expression, there happens to be a common form of participation. That participation for Black
folk, diasporically speaking, is the use of language. Yet, in order to discuss language one must discuss the duality in which language exists. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o posits that duality into the areas of *culture* and *communication* (13-16). Theorized in and stemming from the diasporic terms – oral tradition, oral literature, and orature – the oral performer uses language as an “image-forming agent” (15). Echoing Harry Elam Jr. and his study of characterization in the dramas of African American playwrights, namely August Wilson, the women in *A Song for Coretta* perform as oral historians or New World African Griots – in this case Griottes\(^{18}\) – as they are “repeatedly speaking their history as they and we consider its meaning within their current circumstances” and thus creating an “authentic historical record with multiple and multilayered meanings” (*Past as Present* 12). Moreover, it is here, Elam points out, where the “oral mode of historical transmission, communication, and performance embodies…orature” (12).

Orature, a complex term, is a performance in and of itself. The term was originally coined by Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu; his idea for the term was to avoid an oxymoron with the usual term, oral literature.\(^{19}\) Zirimu defined the term as “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression” (Ngũgĩ, *Notes* 4). The credit for bringing the term into the academic fold is given to Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who acknowledges that the term has certainly spread to encompass new and manipulated meanings but “remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary” (*Notes* 4). Storytelling is profoundly rooted in the oral system as one of its aesthetic principals, with the originating purpose of historical documentation.

For the remainder of this section, I want to focus on two specific characters in *Song* for a couple of reasons. They are Helen Richards and Keisha Cameron. First, in the sense of Western theatre, they represent the traditional roles of protagonist (Helen) and antagonist (Keisha). As noted earlier, this is best observed through the tension that exists between the two; which eventually results in a climactic quarrel. Additionally seen through their sporadic bouts, their histories are placed at polar opposite moments in Cleage’s overall discussion of African American history: spanning from the Civil Rights Era through the 21\(^{st}\) Century. Finally, as a

---

\(^{18}\) Griottes is the feminine term for Griot, a West African originated term that can designate a person as a historian, storyteller, poet, etc. For further clarification, see Thomas A. Hale’s *Griots and Griottes*.

\(^{19}\) See Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the States in Africa* and *Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature*. 
result of Cleage’s use of dramatic structure, Helen and Keisha are the only two that perform orature which envelopes Pitika Ntuli’s use of the term. He explains:

Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is a capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit…In poetry it is not only the images but also their present action. Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and a fusion of both within one individual, a group, a community…It is a weapon against the encroaching atomization of life. It is the beginning come full circle on a higher plane. It is a gem, an idea, a reality that beckons us to be part of it. (215)

Although scripted, both Helen and Keisha remember the basic elements of orature, including its improvisational qualities.

After listening to Zora’s journalist reporting, Helen immediately catches her attention with a daunting question: “You’re not much of a journalist, are you?” (7). Zora responds to Helen with general and respectful answers to her continued line of questioning. The line of questioning immediately switches from Helen to Zora once the two women are introduced and the premise of Zora’s reporting is discovered. Zora learns that Helen not only witnessed the Civil Rights Era, but that she in fact met Coretta Scott King. Conversely, Helen is reluctant to participate. Helen mistrusts the printed word over the oral, and rightly misinterprets Zora as young, therefore naïve:

Helen. What do you call yourself doing anyway?
Zora. I’m doing a piece on Mrs. King.
Helen. What kind of piece of piece on Mrs. King?
Zora. Her life, her work, what it was about her that would make people come out here on a night like this to say goodbye to someone they’ve never met.
Helen. You keep saying that like it’s a fact, but you never asked me. (8)

Finally, Zora admits that her inquiry is more than a chance to have her show on National Public Radio, but she is interested in documenting candid experiences of folk who were a part of the Civil Rights era of Black America’s national fight for liberation and equality:

Zora. Look, I was born after the civil rights movement, but I always wished I had been there. Most people my age have never experienced that kind of commitment
to an idea. We’ve never had to face dogs and fire hoses and lynchings. We’ve never really been tested. I just want to understand what that felt like.

Helen. What’s your name?

Zora. Zora Evans.

Helen. You named after the writer?

Zora. Yes.

Helen. Okay, Miss Zora Evans. Turn on your tape and I’ll tell you what I know.

(8-9)

One could argue that Helen’s initial reservations were not only impeded when Zora gave her final plea, but that she agreed to participate in the interview when there was an association detected concerning Zora’s name and the great writer from the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston. Cleage exemplifies specific characteristics within Zora to further resemble the writer in the mere fact that Zora Neale Hurston herself, along with being a writer of many fields, was also an anthropologist and folklorist. Precisely, as replicated in the characterization of Zora, Hurston conducted interviews and formed a working relationship with the participatory act between storyteller and listener.

Helen eventually invites Zora into her world and as a result performs her orature. Again, Helen’s performance of orature finds itself manifested in Ntuli’s description. Not only does she deliver her history in the manner of oral tradition, but her orature exhibits “the conception and reality of a total view of life.” Helen starts off by providing thorough details involving an array of her public and personal life – all situated at the root of the Civil Rights movement:

Zora. So you actually met Mrs. King?

Helen. Yes, I did. I met her twice. Once at the beginning of the bus boycott in 1955 and once again on the day it ended.

Zora. The Montgomery Bus Boycott?

Helen. That’s the one. (9)

Helen’s story then shifts from the surface of the Civil Rights to a more local place in her history:

Zora. So how did you meet Mrs. King?

Helen. I met her the first time after one of those meetings. My mother was on the Maids Committee...A lot of the women who were walking worked as maids like my mother, and the white folks’ houses were way on the other side of town, so my
father and some of the other men who had cars would pick them up in the
morning and take them out to work and then pick them up at night and carry them
home. After awhile, some of the white women started driving their maids
themselves to be sure they got there on time. They told their husbands hey needed
to be sure some-body was there to cook and clean and take care of those kids, but
in private, they knew it was wrong, making people sit in the back just for being
Negroes. (She smiles at the old-fashioned word.) That’s my mom talking out f my
mouth. Everybody said Negro back then. If you called somebody black you had to
fight. (9-10)
Helen continues her story and shares specific moments of her encounter with Coretta Scott King. Yet, at this point the locale of her history becomes extremely personal and reminiscent of the past climate of the Black community – which she seemingly longs for:

Zora. What do you remember most about meeting her?

Helen. I remember how pretty she was and how good she smelled. Like a birthday
cake.

Zora. What about the second time.

Helen. The second time it actually was my birthday and we had won. After
walking for a whole year, the bus company had to take down those “colored” and
“white” signs and we could sit wherever we wanted to. Daddy said he had a very
special birthday present for me and that me and Mama should put on our Sunday
dresses and come downstairs as quick as we could.

Daddy…took my hand and Mama took the other one and we walked three blocks
to the bus stop. We rode that bus all the way to the end of the line...Daddy
brought me and Mama each a chocolate ice cream cone, even though we were
going to have birthday cake later.

Zora. So when did you see Mrs. King that day? On the bus?

Helen. Right after we left the soda shop. We were walking home past Dexter
Avenue Baptist Church …and Mrs. King was standing on the front steps beside
her husband, talking and laughing with some other people who had been on the
bus with us. Mama and daddy stopped to say hello to everybody and Mrs. King
smiled and said , Well, Miss Brown, how do you like your freedom? And I said, If
freedom feels this good, I want to be free every day! All the grown-ups laughed,
but I think they felt it, too. (10-11)

As Helen concludes her story, the moment of revelation begins to fester. Helen confesses to Zora that she rarely shares her history, but even more emphatically, one easily assumes there is a bitterness within Helen as the kindred spirit amongst the Black community is lacking: “I haven’t told that story in a lone time. Saying it out loud kind of got me back in the right spirit” (11-12). Zora responds with a typical comment and Helen’s concern for the current condition of the Black community is thus revealed:

Helen. Sometimes when I think about what we used to be as a community of
people, and then I realize what we’ve become, it gets me down.
Zora. When you say we, you mean we under thirty, don’t you?
Helen. I guess I do. I don’t understand young people anymore. The music, the
clothes, the way you talk, what you talk about. (She’s getting wound up.) People
weren’t fighting and dying for somebody’s right to sell crack and hang their
pants off their behind.
Zora. All of us aren’t like that.
Helen. I didn’t mean to start fussing. The older I get, the crankier I get. Sorry.
(12)

Although Helen clearly has a likeable affection towards Zora, later in the play she shows her disdain for the younger generation twice over. At this point, it is with Keisha when Zora asks her to be interviewed:

Helen. You think NPR is going to care what Li’l Bi has to say about Coretta
King?
Zora. I can always edit the piece if she says anything...inappropriate...I do want
to show a cross-section of the community and I don’t have any young people yet.
Helen. Lord help us if that’s the face we’re going to show to the world... If you’re
going to tape her, then erase me. I don’t want to be on the same tape with a fool.
(21-22)

The second time is an actual confrontation between Helen and Keisha. Reacting to Keisha’s ignorance towards the Civil Rights Movement, Helen says:
You don’t see what all the fuss was about? (She speaks with rising anger.) You’ve got a lot of nerve even coming down here. Look at you! Even worse, listen to you. Everything coming out of your mouth sounds crazy! People died for your freedom and the best thing you can think of to do with it is have a bunch bad babies and get a drug dealer to pay your rent. Coretta King would be ashamed of you! They shouldn’t even let you go inside! (28)

There are two points to pull out with the above examples. The first deals with Helen and her age. While her comments are short but blunt, one can argue that she ascertains the fact that she is no longer of the younger generation and times have certainly changed. For the second, Helen recognizes that there is a distinction to be made regarding the generational gap – and that distinction is best observed between Helen and Keisha. As oral historian, Helen’s orature therefore carries a central and persistent magnitude of ancestral embodiment. In reference to Robbie McCauley, Harvey Young explains in his book, *Embodying Black experience*, the ancestral body “represents, and indeed re-presents, the bodies and the embodied experience of her ancestors whose previous actions invoked her current presence” (138).

Keisha is also an oral historian; though her history is situated within the current climate of African America and she is of the generation that Helen has a specific disdain for. While Keisha’s performance of orature surely resonates within Ntuli’s description, it is more expressed within Afrocentric scholar Molefi Kete Asante’s description. Joining the aforementioned scholars, Asante establishes that orature “is the comprehensive body of oral discourse on every subject and in every genre of expression produced by a people” (96). Asante, being an African American scholar, has added to the description of orature as he discusses the use of the “word” from original African retained practices throughout its permeation into African American culture. Perhaps the significance in Asante’s description of the term orature is his argument of African American history having an essential linkage within the performance of African American orature. He writes:

A central aspect of African American history is the persistent public discussions related to our American experience…That a principal dimension of black history is encompassed by platform activities in the form of lectures, sermons, and agitations should be understood without question…The study of black speeches,
then, emphatically imposes itself upon any true investigation into our history and orature… (95-96)

Dissimilar with the other characters, Mona Lisa calls upon Keisha to share her story:

Mona Lisa. That’s the one you need to interview. Get a young’s person’s point of view.

Helen. You’ve got to be kidding.

Keisha. I’ll do it. Contrary to some people’s opinion, I got a lot of stuff to say… (20-21)

As an oral historian, Keisha’s performance of orature invites the audience/listener to participate. In the telling of her story, she forces the listener to question the change in African American history – as juxtaposed with Helen’s narrative – and therefore the concern of African America shifts from local to national.

Zora asks Keisha a similar introductory question: “Can you tell us why you came down here to pay your respects to Mrs. King.” Keisha responds: “Yes, I can, but first I gotta go back a little ways and talk about something everybody don’t know about me or the other part won’t make no sense. Is that okay?” (22). Assuming that Keisha may not want to air her personal history – already in a local space in front of the women, but becoming national as it will be aired on the radio – Keisha responds in her usual tort-tone: “If I wanted you to turn off the tape, I wouldn’t be talkin’ to you at all, would I?” (22-23).

Right away Keisha performs her orature. With the knowledge of the difficulties of being a young, single mother, she explains that she gave up baby for adoption at the age of fifteen. Her orature also addresses that she is currently pregnant with a second baby and her mother removed her from the family home as a result. What I want to identify here is the use of the “word”. Asante addresses this in his discussion of orature. Specifically, Keisha’s orature is laden with an African cosmological element that invokes the power of the word: nommo.

---

20 I emailed Molefi K. Asante, Temple University Professor of African/African American Studies and asked him to clarify the origin of Nommo. This was his response: Nommo was first introduced by Janheinz Jahn in the book, Muntu, for American audiences. I met him many years ago as a graduate student at UCLA. He was a German who lived in France and wrote also in English. He found the word in the language of the Dogon people of Mali. So it is an African word, popularized by Molefi Asante and Janheinz Jahn.
Since the Africans brought to America a fertile oral tradition augmented by the pervasiveness of nommo, the generating and sustaining powers of the spoken word…the word influences all activities. Everything appears to have rested upon the life-giving power of the word: life, death, disease, health, and…liberation.

(96)

Prior to Asante, Paul Carter Harrison inserted and popularized nommo within the field of theatre and drama in his early work, *The Drama of Nommo* (1972). Harrison asserts, “We are concerned with the activation of images rather than the creation of forms, through manipulation of the forces in the mode until they give up the power of our designated reality” (xix). Harrison’s statement is very much reminiscent of Thiong’o’s comment referenced earlier regarding the use of language/word as an “image-forming agent”. Additionally, Harrison contributes that nommo has a vigor “which activates all forces from their frozen state in a manner that establishes concreteness of experience. Reality. When Nommo is activated properly [it has] the power to designate all life forms, be they glad or sad, work or play, pleasure or pain, in a way that preserves…humanity” (xx).

When Keisha tells her story, nommo is thus activated and forces the other characters to change their prior perceptions of the young women. This change of perception is especially noticeable with Helen. Before Keisha begins her story, Helen exits offstage to inquire about the expected length of time the women would be waiting to enter the church. As Keisha dwells on her current pregnancy and contemplates an abortion, Helen’s stage direction best depicts the vigor of nommo: *Helen reenters. She doesn’t speak to others, but she is clearly listening to the interview* (23). At the completion of Keisha’s story, Helen then initiates a dialogue that seems to insinuate care and concern:

**Helen. Don’t you have any clothes for that doll?**

**Keisha. You just don’t know how to mind your own business do you?** (25)

Naturally, Keisha is familiar with Helen’s haughty attitude towards her. Therefore Helen’s change of perception does not seem genuine:

**Helen. All I’m saying is when your teacher looks at the picture that’s going to prove to her what a good mother you are, do you want this doll’s naked behind staring her in the face?**

**Keisha. I guess not.**
Helen. *Let me see that bag… Why don’t you put these on her?* (25)

Another example of nommo is observed when Keisha is near the end of her story and the images of her experience come full circle; where the death of Coretta as stimulus for agency is the primal influence:

Keisha. *The way I figure it, Mrs. King saved my baby’s life and I wanted to say thank you, and big respect, and ask her permission to name my daughter Coretta. I know she dead and can’t really say yes or no, but I think I would feel it if she didn’t want me to, and I would respect her wishes.* (24)

Zora assumes the story is complete and Keisha is quick to remind her that she attended the memorial for two reasons:

Keisha. *The other reason is while I was talkin’ to that cryin’ girl at the clinic, she asked me did I know that Mrs. King wanted to be a singer before she got married, and I said no. What did she sing? And the cryin’ girl said, she sang everything, but after she got married, she only sang freedom songs because her husband was leadin’ a whole movement. I had never heard of no freedom songs, but the cryin’ girl said those songs really helped give people courage when they had to stand up to the Klan and stuff like that… I wouldn’t mind being able to sing something that will help me stay strong while I figure out what me and li’l Coretta need to do next. I thought somebody down here might know one of those songs and could teach it to me.* (24-25)

Helen’s change of perception, once again, is depicted in the stage direction: *Listening to Keisha’s story, Helen’s face moves from disgust to compassion* (25). After a brief moment of dialoging among the women, they began to discuss the critical necessity of freedom songs during the Civil Rights movement. At Keisha’s request, Helen and Zora sing a key anthem of the Freedom Rights Movement, *We Shall Overcome*. Singing the song is another example and principal aesthetic within the African retained practice of oral tradition.

The performance of orature in *A Song for Coretta* is ultimately a method of historical documentation for the women. Through the use of the spoken word, the women not only claim their identity through positionality, but the legitimation of their histories is given a weight of importance; presumably because of the accuracy that the spoken word demands. Even more significant is the cathartic effect that the spoken word sanctions. As Audre Lorde suggest in the
epigraph, the spoken word – regardless of its ending effect – is certainly beneficial at the very least for the speaker.

**Memory En Route of History**

*A black play is not ignorant of history.*

–Suzan Lori Parks, *New Black Math*

*The academic preoccupation with textual knowledge – whereby a culture continually refers itself to its archives – tends to discredit memory in the name of history*

–Joseph Roach, *Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World*

Memory does not exist without history. And vice versa. Both are broad and complex topics as they concurrently intersect and relate to African Americans. As a cultural performance, memory acts as a means to provide historical accuracy through personal experiences. Such examples can be identified within the narratives of each of the characters in *A Song for Coretta*.

As a dramaturgical method, Cleage is known for her engagement with history. Even more emphatically, Cleage has been recognized for her engagement with paradigms of trauma and traumatic memory. Theorizing about those paradigms as they relate to Cleage’s staple plays, Benjamin Sammons writes: 21

Though neither packaged nor produced as such, these plays constitute a trilogy [now a tetralogy with the addition of *A Song for Coretta*], as they employ the same formal structure to explore a common subject matter, namely the nexus of violence, freedom, and traumatic memory in African American experience. Set in disparate geographical regions and historical eras, the plays each address the problem of constructing and maintaining a space in which black men and women can pursue personal liberation by escaping the grip of a traumatic past…The work of memory, in fact, claims so prominent a position in these plays as to require a theory of its own. (99-100)

---

21 In chapter one, I list Cleage’s staple plays: *Flyin’ West, Blues for an Alabama Sky, and Bourbon at the Border.*
Many scholars have written on the subject of memory and trauma in the form of collectivity; in all probability, among them are Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys. Concentrating on major American events of the twentieth century, Professor of Sociology Arthur G. Neal have also contributed to the discourse in his book, *National Trauma & Collective Memory*, arguing that “a national trauma differs from a personal trauma in the sense that it is shared with others” (4). In his final chapter Neal discusses how the documenting of past histories has always privileged dominant groups. More importantly, Neal distinguishes two subgroups that, historically speaking, have always been at a disadvantage when it comes to collective memory and historical accuracy. The two groups are African Americans and women. Offering perspective, he states that “very little attention was given to the brutality of the institution of slavery from the vantage point of the victims” and that “while women constitute more than half of the population, their experiences have been underrepresented” (214). Neal goes on to finalize his exploration concluding that there is a new, modern consciousness of the two groups where they are “call[ing] for a new look at the ways in which history has been written in the past” and it grows primarily “out of an interest in broadening the scope of historical analysis” (214-215).

This section of the thesis self-locates at Neal’s observation. Neal’s premise is illumined in *A Song for Coretta* towards the end of the play with a scene reminiscent of magic realism between Mona Lisa and Gwen. In the scene and in a structural format that borrows heavily from the trope of “call and response”, Mona Lisa and Gwen recall their harrowing experiences. For Mona Lisa, it is the treatment of poor African Americans during Hurricane Katrina, and for Mona Lisa it is a “war crime” incident in the 2nd Gulf War. Mona Lisa’s story privileges the memory of African Americans, while Gwen’s memory rights the presence of being a woman. In comparison to the stories of Helen and Keisha, Mona Lisa and Gwen demand that the idea of collective memory be situated and performed within a context of duality. Specifically, collective memory is triggered in the communal telling of their traumatic experiences; however, it takes on a more theoretical meaning as both of their stories no longer remain personal. Mona Lisa and Gwen reinvent not only themselves, but the collective community of African Americans and women by “performing their pasts in the presence of others” (Roach, *Cities* 5).

---

22 See Cathy Caruth’s *UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Ruth Leys *Trauma: A Genealogy*. 

43
In his book, *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach offers a hypothetical framework for this type of performance. He calls it surrogation. For Roach, surrogacy is branded at the intersection of memory, performance, and substitution – yet the specific setting of Roach’s thesis is pointedly the performance of memory as substitution (4). In his exploration of hybridity within culture and performance of the Circum-Atlantic World, Roach explains:

In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure…survivors attempt to fit satisfactorily alternates. (2)

Roach clarifies that “Because collective memory works selectivity, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds…The fit cannot be exact. The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus” (2). At this idea, my use of surrogacy is to clearly examine the performance of memory as a substitution “for something else that preexists it” (3). “Performance, in other words”, states Roach, “stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace” (3). In other terms, “surrogacy designates multiple levels of substitution in representations…the past standing in for the present-that trouble the identities and subjects they depict as well as those they indirectly invoke” (Paulin 417-418).

Precisely, Mona Lisa and Gwen no longer represent themselves in the telling of their traumatic experiences, but their performance of collective memory through the process of surrogacy exceeds beyond the mere documentation of history. They both embody Black America’s continuance of oppression and marginalization. Specifically, their traumatic memories further identify and mark the subjectivity of women. Mona Lisa stands in for Hurricane Katrina victims. Gwen stands in for women in the U.S. military. It can also be argued that Gwen stands in for victims of war crimes. However, for this section I want to specifically focus on the subjectivity of women and Black America. A discussion of war crimes and the New Gulf War would take me to far from the topic at hand.

---

23 Preluding his book *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach talks about the interdependence of performance and collective memory in the article, *Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World* as an emergence “from a project that would recast the category of literature, as a repository of texts, in relation to what…Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o calls ‘orature’, the range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals.”

24 It can also be argued that Gwen stands in for victims of war crimes. However, for this section I want to specifically focus on the subjectivity of women and Black America. A discussion of war crimes and the New Gulf War would take me to far from the topic at hand.
When Mona Lisa tells Helen why she traveled from New Orleans to attend Coretta’s memorial, she starts with a small anecdote:

*It’s not much of a story really. It’s just that the longer I lay there, like I do every night, looking out the window at where my house used to be – where my whole street used to be. Miss Mary’s, with all those sunflowers in the front yard. Pap’s place on the corner, always with that good gumbo. Those two girls upstairs from Miss Cat who were going to Dillard and wanted to learn how to speak Chinese...*

(15)

Immediately, her memory takes on an insinuation of community representation as effected by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Zora enters the scene learning that Mona Lisa is a Hurricane Katrina survivor and is quick to ask for an interview. Depicted in the stage direction, Mona Lisa looks at Zora as to suggest her aggravation. Zora responds: “*I just thought you might want to go on the record so that people know what really happened*” (17). Mona Lisa rebuttals: “*People know what really happened*” and at this point she brings in to speculation the legitimacy of historical documentation. She assumes the role of surrogate and speaks of and for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Zora and Helen urge Gwen to stand up and take action against what she’s witnessed in Iraq. Helen starts to tell Gwen of the old days of collective action for African Americans, which includes Gwen’s mother. Helen begins: “*Just like in the old days when me and your mom*” (34). However, Gwen abruptly cuts her off and similar to Keisha, reminds her that the times have certainly changed: “*This is not the old days! It’s just me, okay? It’s just me! And I don’t want to stand up! I just want out!*” (34). Gwen recaps for the audience/listener that death and mourning is ever so present. Gwen’s comment of being alone is reminiscent of the consequences of death; hence, her mother’s bout with cancer and the deaths witnessed in Iraq.

In some ways, for Gwen, being a surrogate is not easily recognized. Or rather, it is not readily accepted. Roach explains that surrogates “could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not. By defining themselves in opposition to others, they produced mutual representations….sometimes in each other’s presence” (Roach 5). This is quite true and relevant for Gwen. Observed in the moment where she shares her plans to desert the Army, Gwen’s position as surrogate produces multiple
representations. In fact, it is Helen that reminds her she is no longer representing herself, but that her presence as a Black woman in the Army signifies past, present, and futured spaces:

Helen. *Nobody forced you to raise your hand and take that oath. You stepped up and made a promise, and now you’re going to just walk away? Don’t you know how much harder that’s going to be for the next little black girl who wants to be a soldier?*
Gwen. *I would tell that little girl to run as far as she could, as fast as she could, and never look back.*
Helen. *I never thought I’d say this, Gwny, but I’m ashamed of you.*

*Black women used to stand for something. We were the backbone of the movement. Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers, Juanita Abernathy, Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta King. These women risked their lives fighting for your freedom!*
Gwen. *Well, this is what my freedom looks like.*
Helen. *Then I guess we were wasting our time.*
Gwen. *Maybe you were.* (34-35)

At the climax of the play Mona Lisa and Gwen fully ignite their positions as surrogates. Their memories become African America’s memory and historical journey. As surrogates, Mona Lisa and Gwen position memory as a cultural formality for the establishment of authentic historical documentation – thereby furthering the notions of a collective narrative as it relates to African American history. For as Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally suggest in their book *History and Memory in African American Culture*:

*Historians are storytellers after all, concerned with introducing characters and shaping their stories with some sense of the rhetoric needed to confront their audience’s expectations and to bring the past to life. The first black American historians may have been the authors of slave narratives, those whose testimonies comprised not only eyewitness accounts of remembered experience but also a set of world views with interpretations, analyses, and historical judgments. At these points, and indeed at many points around the compass, memory and history come together.* (6)
To conclude, I’d like to place emphasis on the work of Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg. In the introductory chapter of their edited anthology, *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture, and Performance*, the authors refer to Judith Butler, quoting, “We are made all the more fragile…and all the more mobile when ambivalence and loss are given a dramatic language in which to do their acting out” (6). They contextualize Butler, writing that she:

Suggests an intimate and integral link between mourning and performance, in which mourning is featured as performance and plays a central role in the performative construction of identity. In many ways, theatre itself can be seen to be a place of mourning…Theatre evokes multiple losses, restaging past events and resuscitating the voices of those who are no longer there. At the same time, it enables an ‘acting out’ of projective losses, those phantasmatic griefs that remain unspoken within performance of everyday life. (6)

The link between mourning, orature, memory, history, and performance as an assembly of cultural languages “plays a central role in the performative construction of identity”. Moreover, it illuminates what Patricia Hill Collins calls “collective identity politics” and situational knowledge. (124)

While it is seemingly easy to assume that Cleage’s commitment to “collective identity politics” is only for the concern of women, and in this case, African American women, Collins begs to differ. She eloquently composes that “Cleage came to political struggle both as [a] unique individual and as [a] member of a historically constituted, oppressed racial group,” therefore “Cleage…wishes to “work side by side” with Black men to foster the liberation of all people” (Collins 125-127). Cleage’s goal is to foster a Black community that acts as a liberated zone.

**Final Thoughts**

“Past and present, history and memory, ritual and reality all collide”, writes Harry Elam Jr. as he describes how “[August] Wilson (w)rights history through performative rites that pull the action out of time or even to ritualize time in order to change the power and potentialities of the new…[Wilson] reinterprets how history operates in relation to race and space, time and memory” (*Past as Present* 1-3). Joining her fellow colleague(s), Pearl Cleage has utilized those colliding traits, most recently within her play *A Song for Coretta*. Like Wilson, Cleage uses past
and present (circum)stances of the African American community as the center of her play. Yet, unlike Wilson, Cleage does not necessarily (w)right history. Instead, Cleage employs what scholar Trudier Harris recognizes as “shaping identity in African American drama”. Precisely, Cleage utilizes an “imaginative point of departure from an event that makes clear the intersections of history…and African American positionality” (x). For *A Song for Coretta* that “event” was the public viewing of the late Coretta Scott King and the “imaginative point of departure” began when Cleage illustrated five fictional African American women who’ve come to mourn the ancestor at her public memorial at the historic Ebenzer Baptist Church on February 26, 2006.
Works Cited


CHAPTER THREE

Black Directing and Cultural Implications: Directing *A Song for Coretta*

*I enter this process as an African American, as a scholar of Black studies, and as a director whose art and aesthetics must always reflect a consciousness of four hundred plus years. That’s why I do what I do. It’s not art for art’s sake. My work must reflect the liberation I seek, the feelings I want to express, and the culture that I am.*

–Khalid Y. Long

*Artistic Statement*

Dr. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson: *Tell me Khalid, What is your vision? What do you see?*

Khalid: *I see a church. It has to be Ebenezer. If the church design cannot replicate it to its exact, I want the church sign. We must have the same Ebenezer Baptist Church sign. I see car lights passing by while the folks wait in line. I hear horns. I hear people talking. I hear rain. I smell rain. I hear a choir singing. I see the lights coming up in the church. I hear Sweet Honey in the Rock. I hear Mahalia [Jackson] singing from inside the church. I see the stage lights rising and Helen walking up onto the stage from the audience. I hear Helen’s shoes hitting the ground as she descends from the audience.*

*Director’s Vision / Director’s Talk*

On January 30, 2006, the world stood still. The world had lost “The First Lady of the Human Rights Movement”. Broadening the dream of her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mrs. Coretta Scott King created platforms that would present the concerns of a changing society. Mrs. King’s determination for justice was not only a reflection of an historical struggle, but more importantly, her determination was a constant reminder that we – all people – must prepare the world for the coming generations. When Mrs. King made her transition, there was only one question to be asked: How does one mourn the loss of such a courageous woman?

Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta* is a play about mourning and celebration. As the characters join the line to mourn the beloved Mrs. Coretta Scott King, each character finds
herself mourning her own life. Yet, as each character tells her story and is finally able to breathe again, she celebrations the future. Pearl Cleage has not only added to the mandate of Black theatre to “testify to the truth”, she has also contributed to the canon of Black plays with a primary focus on Black women. As a Black feminist/Womanist playwright, Pearl Cleage has engaged Black Feminist Aesthetics to aid in the liberation of Black Women.

Playwright Robbie McCauley made the statement that “Black playwrights and actors need inspiration, talent, and long-term connections to black voices – literally and symbolically. Both tasks require a willingness to play with language – the meanings and the music of it, and certainly a vulnerability to the lessons of black history and politics” (583). In all of her dramas, Pearl Cleage has continuously utilized ancestral voices for inspiration and realizes the need for lessons of black history and politics. For this play, Mrs. Coretta Scott King is that “inspiration” and the stories told by the characters serve as the “lessons of black history and politics”.

The Journey Commences

I learned that I would be directing A Song for Coretta as part of the 2010-2011 production season at the close of the Fall 2009 semester. The production process officially commenced during the spring 2010 semester, beginning first with the design meetings. Complying with the department’s policies that were governed in order to provide a safe and professional atmosphere, the production manager Gion De Francesco assisted in selecting the stage manager, designers, and other managerial staff members. In addition to the introductory design meetings, De Francesco scheduled the dates for the design meetings, productions meetings, auditions, and rehearsals for the coming semesters.

The Initial Design meeting was held March 29, 2010. The purpose of this meeting was for me to provide an overview of my vision, goals, concepts, and strategic plans to achieve the overall success of staging the production. I was informed that the best way to present my ideas was to utilize visuals.²⁵ Therefore, I showed a PowerPoint presentation to the design team. Immediately after the presentation, the design team proceeded to ask questions and a general dialogue began to assist with their preliminary drafts. There were a total of three design meetings before the final design presentations and approval. The final design meeting was held March 05, 2010 and that would serve as the closing of the production process until the next semester. At

²⁵ See appendix for the PowerPoint presentation.
this meeting, the final designs were approved with an understanding that the necessary modifications would be taken into consideration.

Auditions

When the fall semester began there was one production meeting held on Tuesday, August 24, 2010. At this meeting, the primary concern was the audition process. The audition process for Miami’s Department of Theatre was quite arduous. I use the term arduous because of the specifics that *A Song for Coretta* demands. *Song* requires a cast of five African American women. Due to the fact that Miami University is a predominantly Euro-American populated University, casting an African American play posed a series of concerns. At the time, the theatre department only had three undergraduate African-American female students who exhibited early interest in the play. However, as with any audition and casting procedure, there was the chance that those three students would not fit any of the roles within the play and therefore, the concerns grew larger.

To alleviate those concerns, at least for myself, I had taken the initiative to contact both the historically Black sororities on campus and the Black World Studies department to ask if they would share the news of the auditions. The purpose of this was quite personal and professional. By this I am referring to certain comments made during the preliminary design meetings. It was asked, or rather stated that I would have trouble casting the show because it was an all-Black cast. This comment was actually made several times, including during the season selection meetings. Before the final plays were chosen for the season, it was hinted that I may have been directing August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* and a comment was made that it may be hard for me to cast an all-Black ensemble. I responded with a brazen, yet true statement: “If the department would produce productions that catered to the larger population, concerns of casting would not be necessary.” Reflecting back, my response does not intend to dismiss the multicultural productions and eagerness of faculty whose mission and interest is to be diverse within the department, theatre, and academia. However, my response to those comments was only reflections of what I observed since my coming to the department as a graduate student, artist, and scholar.

During the 2010 summer, I had begun dialoguing with my advisor and we’d discussed the prospect of non-traditional/cross-cultural casting. In addition to exploring performative
practices and audience reception, this would have offered me an opportunity to explore cross-cultural casting as it relates to theoretical research and writing. Yet, as the summer progressed and I began to receive emails from a few of the incoming students who were African American, I began to envision the show within its traditional structure as it relates to casting choices. During the auditions that vision became a reality.

Held in Studio 88 Theatre, the auditions took place Wednesday and Thursday, August 25 and 26, 2010 and lasted between the hours of 7:00 and 11:00. Since there is one set of auditions for the entire department’s season, all of the directors for the fall 2010 production season were present. As commonly required for theatre auditions, the actors were to prepare two monologues – one comedic and one dramatic. Auditioners, predominantly non-majors, who did not have monologues prepared, were allowed to audition while performing a cold read from the script.

Going into the auditions, I was looking for a broad range of African American performers; broad in the context of size, age, and appearance. And even though the variety was present, the two days of auditions had its ups and downs. While I was quite relieved as a result of the quantity of African American performers that auditioned, I was not satisfied with their individual auditions. Most of the auditioners chose monologues that did not harmonize with their ability to display range or character. I was also hoping to see and hear auditioners employ monologues that closely resembled the play or playwright. Simply put, I was hoping that the performers would audition with more culturally-toned monologues. For example: August Wilson, Lorraine Hansberry, or Lynn Nottage. Yet, I am conscious of the fact that four minutes of competitive performing does not fully allow the performer to disclose her best work. For that reason, the callback audition served as the greatest challenge for this process.

With a selection of ten finalists, the callbacks were held Friday, August 27, 2010. Due to earlier noted conflicts, two of the performers were unable to attend. One of the performers agreed to attend a private session a few hours earlier than the scheduled callback while the other actress forfeited her chances of being casted. *A Song for Coretta*, at least in my vision, requires very serious and emotional depth. So, naturally, I selected readings from the script that called for a certain depth of emotion. I also selected readings where there were most, if not all, of the characters on stage so that I could attest to the auditioners ability for ensemble work.

For the callbacks I created a schedule that consisted of the following order: (1) introductions of the director, advisor, stage manager, and auditioners; (2) two energetic warm-up
exercises; and (3) a relaxation exercise. I found it quite surprising that during the relaxation exercise, which consisted of light movement and breathing techniques while listening to Sweet Honey in the Rock’s “Come Unto Me”, that a few of the performers became quite emotional. However, as part of the exercise was to listen and respond truthfully to the lyrics of the song, one understands how the intensity of a callback, the relativity of the script, and the call and response that the song demands could blend and create an emotional release. After the relaxation exercise was complete, it was time to go to work.

The readings started at a slow pace and the performers simply were not delivering. Fluctuating of course, the performers were monotone and there was a sense of non-competitiveness and non-seriousness among the auditioners. For that reason, I stated a few words of encouragement that I thought would increase the intensity and seriousness of the callbacks. The words of encouragement worked. As time approached to the near end of the callbacks, one by one, the characters began to appear.

First, Helen was casted. I was quite surprised because Helen, the senior character, caused me the greatest anxiety. I’d expressed to my advisor at various occasions that I was concerned about not finding an actress to fulfill the role of Helen – who is the spine of the entire show. However, my advisor said to me on one particular occasion, “don’t worry, Helen will walk into the room and you will know it”. My advisor was correct. Helen was there from the beginning of the callbacks to the end.

Out of tradition from my own experiences in theatre – as a performer, stage manager, and director – I saved what is considered to be high emotional scenes for the end of the callbacks. As the performers were selectively called to read for different characters, the emotions and severity of the script, vulnerability of the performers along with the vulnerability of the characters began to display. For example, one performer read for the character Mona Lisa and as this performer began to efface her real-person and develop into a three dimensional character, she became overwhelmed with sentiment and erupted into tears. At that moment, I knew that she was Mona Lisa; albeit that a primary goal for rehearsals would be to help her control her emotions. After Helen was casted, the remaining characters were casted, respectively, Keisha, Mona Lisa, and Zora. The character Gwen had been casted earlier that evening. The role had been given to the performer who opted to do an individual callback.
After the callbacks ended, it was time to present the cast to the production manager who takes the necessary steps to contact the performers. Even though the audition process was arduous, it was fulfilling. It was fulfilling because I had selected a cast of five African American performers and I was then convinced that I would be able to create a show for Miami University that was not only diverse, but I would be able it in its “truest” form.

**Collaboration with Designers**

I firmly believe that a director has to allow for the creative energies and visions of a designer to come to fruition and never downright guide their work. Simply put, let the designers ‘do their thing’. And that is what I did. The designers, two of whom were undergraduate students (costume and set), not only contributed to the overall success of the production, but their imaginations and creativity added a special layer of aesthetic truth and beauty.

Creating a collaborative relationship with the designers forced me to be aware of the fact that even though *Song* is essentially a Black play, the production process, nonetheless, would be multicultural. As a result, the creative relationship formed with the designers did not go without its unwarranted obstacles. I do not want to be misunderstood here. The obstacles were not a lack of commitment or anything of the sort. Simply, there was a cultural difference. During a few of the meetings I would find myself becoming frustrated because some of the designers did not understand the complete cultural ramifications that had to be considered when designing for *Song*.

**Costume Design**

I asked the costume designer to stay true to the text. Pearl Cleage’s characterizations included the clothing, which reflected their geographical culture, age, and social situation. I wanted to stay true to what she wrote. I met with the costume designer outside of the regular design meetings more than I did with the others. The designs were strong; however, there were small details that caused major problems. One issue was the designer’s choice for the color of Keisha’s hair. The designer wanted to dye Keisha’s hair pink. I was honest and clear with her, “No Black girl in the heart of Atlanta has pink hair in that manner.” Of course there are always exceptions to the rule. But for this case, pink just wouldn’t do. What I did notice, however, was the designer’s passion and creativity for costume designing; but without cultural awareness.
There was even a phase of the design process when the designer sketched the characters without providing pigmentation to their skin. I, an amalgamation of scholar and artist, refused to accept the absent presence of cultural context. Another example was with the issue of Helen’s hat. It was obvious that the designer did the necessary research; however, the preliminary design was not correct. I found myself giving a lecture on the importance of “a Black woman’s hat”. The same can also be said regarding Helen’s costume. Again, I explained in a clear and direct way, “Helen is a sixty-five year old woman who knew Coretta, was a part of the Civil Rights movement, and is also very religious. She would not only wear her best Sunday dress, but it could be assumed that she went out and bought something to wear. Helen is wearing a sharp Sunday suit.” Similar to the discussion of Helen’s hat, suit/dress and Keisha’s hair, my directorial comments were met with resistance. After talking with the designer about some of her choices and their cultural relevance, she explained – in very subtle ways – her belief that we live in a post-racial society and therefore race and culture was not a prime target within her designs. I felt as though it was not my responsibility to influence her otherwise; however, we had to work done.

I shared my concerns with my advisor and he suggested asking the designer about the sources used. The root of the problem was located. I went home, pulled out my Ebony magazines, and ordered the book Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church and showed her what was needed. I continued to meet with her and also kept in contact during the summer and as a result, the final designs were strongly suited to the text and the performance.

Scene Design

The scene designer was informed during the initial design meeting that I wanted Ebenezer Baptist Church on the stage. What I did not want was a set that would distract the audience’s attention from the performers. It was my interpretation that Cleage’s intention for the scenic design was to not upstage the performers. Clearly, this was not a spectacle show. The characters and their stories were to be the center of attention.

There were a few areas of the design that had to be modified to fit not only the theatre space, but to allow for theatrical spectacle. The steps of the original Ebenezer in Atlanta go downward, as if walking into a basement. For obvious reasons, the designer designed the steps to go upward into the church. We continued to talk via email and telephone. I was enamored with
all that he wanted to do; however, I had only one critical request: The Ebenezer Church sign must be replicated exactly. Regardless of the choices for the interior and exterior of the church, the sign had to be exact.

I was unaware that the scenic designer was responsible for the configuration of the audience space in the Black Box theatre in which the play would be performed. From this newly discovered understanding, a larger conversation emerged. Unanimously, the designer and I both agreed that the audience space should reflect that of a church. We even discussed the possibility of blending the concept of church audience and Greek-like theatre. When I was informed of the completion of the set, I walked into the theatre and was amazed. The set was huge. But it made such a statement.

**Lighting and Sound Design**

For *Song*, the faculty resident designer served as both, the lighting and sound designer. The lights and sound were minimal in terms of extravagant use. There were no special effects necessary, with the exception of the final scene between Mona Lisa and Gwen. Other than that, the usual fades and crosses were used. However, that certainly did not alleviate the designer’s importance. The designer and I discussed early on the expected use of sounds and lighting. Those included: car horns, car lights, rain, the echo of people chatting, and etc.

Sound design was the area the designer and I communicated about the most. Music is such a large part of the social fabric of the African American experience and it is my directorial belief that a Black play cannot go without music. Early on I began to listen to musical artists such as the Caravans, Mahalia Jackson, Sweet Honey in the Rock, and the Staple Singers. It was understood that I did not want the audience to hear anything that was all too familiar and therefore proceeded to search for artist and songs that were not known within the popular public spectrum. After talking with the sound designer, I was introduced to a spiritual/folk group, Marlena Smalls and the Hallelujah Singers. The music was just what I was looking for and he and I worked together to incorporate the music into the play.

His years of experience and professionalism made it very easy to discuss my ideas and he was supportive throughout the entire process. Being an experienced, yet still novice director, he did not make me feel as though I was a beginner. He listened to my ideas and suggestions and never overrode my request. Working with Russell Blain was an amazing opportunity.
The Rehearsal Process

*Being a cast member of *A Song for Coretta* was one of the greatest learning experiences of my life. I had a great time and grew so much as a person and as a woman of color*

–Student Performer

*My experience with Coretta was amazing. I feel like it empowered me even more as a young African American woman & gave me more realization as to how special I really am being a minority and how important it is for me to understand my cultural background.*

–Student Performer

The rehearsals commenced September 27, 2010, first with an all-company meeting. This meeting was predominantly for the cast members, as this was their first time coming into the production process since being casted. During this meeting, with stage manager as the host, all persons attending introduced themselves and the designers shared the approved designs. I spoke for a brief moment about my vision and the importance of the play to me and my research. I also shared with them the dramaturgical research that was done months prior to the start of the rehearsals. My advisor, Dr. Jackson, shared a few words and the meeting concluded.

The first rehearsal began with a discussion of Coretta Scott King and I also shared a video of her funeral. I wanted the performers to hear the eulogies and statements made about her life and her importance to African America. The first rehearsal ended with a read through of the script. The rest of the first week of rehearsal was used for table work, focusing mainly on script and character analysis. My goal was for the cast to fully understand the importance of the script as it related to them individually as African American women. We finally entered the theatre towards the end of the week and began the process of blocking.

As expected, the first week was filled with excitement. However, the second week of the production was spent blocking and continuing to find the characters and this is where the production process began to rear its ugly head. In my opinion, the importance of the production had not been recognized by the cast yet. As a warm-up exercise, I would have the performers take different positions on the stage and complete the following phrase: “As a Black woman, I enter this production…” A few of the performers either could not, or would not complete the
phrase. And when they did complete the phrase, it was lacking context. This posed a serious concern. After some initial questions to those performers about their hesitations for completing the phrase, it was made known – by their own comments – that they “just wanted to act”.

A few of the performers shared with me stories of their past productions, mostly high school, and the roles that they played. They talked about how they were casted as princesses, evil witches, and even had lead roles in Euro-American musicals. There seemed to be a divide among the performers. For the one group of performers, it was revealed that there was a consensus with the ideology that race and gender were not prime factors when participating in theatre. No. It was thought, in the circumstance of performing, that theatre was about pretending to be someone who in reality you are not.

For the other group of performers in this divide, issues of race and gender were a prime factor and even a hindrance for some of the performers. One cast member also shared with me her struggles as a performer prior to coming to Miami. She alluded to the fact that because of her race, she was never given a lead role, nor was she given a role that suggested cross-racial casting, or an interracial relationship. Another cast member shared with me in a private setting her reasons for not auditioning for productions at Miami University. In a general recap, she confessed that she does not audition because there are never roles for her as an African American woman.

Initiating in the first week, yet scaling during the second week of rehearsals, I began to receive a great amount of resistance from several of the performers. One performer even went as far as to question my directorial choices, “Do you want me to play her as ghetto?” she asked. “Because she seems ghetto, but I don’t want my character to be a stereotype. I don’t think you want me to play her right.” While her antagonistic comment possibly could have and most likely did stem from her own stage inhibitions, I responded with what I thought was clear of any judgment or biases for her as performer and the character she was portraying. I answer, “Regardless of what the audience initially thinks, I don’t want them to leave the theatre thinking that she is ghetto, or ignorant, or arrogant. In fact, I want the audience to have initial judgments on the verge of being negative. But what is important, is for them to leave saying, I know her. I know a lot of people like her. I see girls like her every day. She is lost in this world of chaos.”

At this point, the theatre scholar and educator in me began to supersede the director in me. It was also at this point where I began to fully embrace Robbie McCauley’s argument that
“actors, stage manager and tech people must be as involved as possible in the making of the work” (584).

First, I had to give the cast the lesson of the difference between high school plays and University, academic theatre. More importantly, I explained to them the seriousness of *A Song for Coretta* being produced at Miami. This created a larger discussion and the remainder of the week was spent discussing the importance of African American theatre and drama. It was important that the performers understood that African American playwrights, directors, performers, designers, managers, and other key players in the process of creating theatre did not “just do” theatre. It was vital for them to know that theatre and performance for African Americans, historically speaking, have always been one of the primary mediums to which we claimed and continue to claim our liberation. And this liberation was not just circulated around issues of race. It included issues of gender, sexuality, religion, and other areas where the result was oppression and marginalization.

In addition to the journal entries I asked the performers to complete, I came up with a reading for the cast. I copied a chapter out of Woodie King Jr.’s book, *Black Theatre Present Condition* for the cast to read and discuss. The chapter, *On Being a Black Actor in White America*, discusses that fact that while in training institutions (college, conservatory programs, etc.), Black actors may be casted in Classical and leading roles generally given to their white counterparts, but the wounding truth is that they will seldom be casted in those roles outside of the institution. King Jr. explains that “If the Negro actor can impose his own values upon the American stage, namely, his past, present, and possible future, he can join with white America in controlling it” (6). My goal was for the cast to embody not only their characters but the significance of their own personal struggles as being African Americans in a predominantly white theatre department. To continue the dialogue outside of the rehearsal space, I encouraged the cast to spend time together as a collective in order to create a communal relationship.

The remaining two weeks of the rehearsal were spent in double time. There was a lot to do and time was going fast. The first two weeks I assumed the role as scholar teacher, but when the third week arrived, I was strictly the director. The cast were beginning to make important discoveries about their characters and the play and I wanted to continue on this path. Throughout the entire process, I encouraged the performers to ask questions in addition to taking risks. If they were unsure of something, it was my job to guide their discoveries and creativity.
When and Where I Enter into Coretta’s Song: A Pre-show Panel Discussion

On the day of the opening, October 27, 2010, I organized a pre-show panel discussion entitled “When and Where I Enter into Coretta Scott King’s Song” to aid in introducing the complex subject matters that the play presents. Along with myself, the panelists featured eight professor scholars whose research areas all intersect within Africa American studies: Dr. Paul Jackson (Theatre, Black World Studies) Dr. Cheryl Johnson (English, Black World Studies, Women Studies), Dr. Nishani Frazier (History), Dr. Tammy Kernodle (Music), Dr. Jhan Doughty-Berry (Psychology, Educational Psychology), Dr. Denise Baszile (Educational Leadership, Black World Studies), and Jonnetta Woodard (Ph.D. student in English). During the panel, Dr. Tammy Kernodle remarked about the historic nature of the panel: a large gathering of African American Miami faculty focusing in an interdisciplinary manner on the work of an African American artist and perhaps for the first time at Miami.

It was required for the cast members to attend the discussion. I wanted them to hear directly those who’ve studied, lived, and continue to be involved in the African American experience. As a result, I further learned that the African American experience is a broad and complex occurrence – especially within the academy. As the professors answered questions and spoke of their own personal experiences, one began to understand the almost mandatory need to enter your discipline, regardless of what it is, from the angle of cultural studies. For me personally, it further confirmed that what I was doing was necessary.

The questions asked of the panel were:

1. (This question was addressed to Khalid)
   What is A Song for Coretta about, and why did you decide to direct it?

2. While the play is in memoriam and celebration of Mrs. Coretta Scott King, within the play there is also the mentioning of other Civil/Human Rights pioneers, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Juanita Abernathy, Myrlie Evers. More importantly, it discusses women activist who are rarely acknowledge for the contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Please elaborate upon the role of women within the Civil Rights Movement?
3. Pearl Cleage, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Adrienne Kennedy, Lorraine Hansberry, and so many more African American Women writers have contributed to the canon of African American literature, be it poems, dramas, or novels, in order to discuss, illuminate and “testify to the truth” of the African American community. Please elaborate upon the role those Black women writers have taken in order to provide a literary and dramatic voice to African American and American culture?

4. (This question was addressed to Dr. Tammy Kernodle)
One of the central focuses in A Song for Coretta is freedom songs, such as We Shall Overcome, and Negro spirituals, such as This Little Light of Mine. Can you discuss the importance of Negro spirituals, freedom songs, and their importance to the African American community generally, and the Civil Rights Movement specifically.

5. Reflecting on the Civil Rights Era, and other important movements and leaders, and then comparing them with today’s generation and contemporary issues, is there a need for a new presence of courageous leaders such as Mrs. Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr. If so, why?

6. Today’s generation is labeled as the Hip-Hop generation. The older generation generally look at contemporary hip-hop and pop music, clothing/style of dress, style of language, and etc. as markers of a troubled if not lost generation. The counter-argument from the today’s youth generation is that the motive of hip-hop is a form of expression, liberation, and an allowing of people to have a free voice without rules and policy. Can you discuss your views of the hip-hop generation?

7. (This question was addressed to Dr. Paul Jackson)
Pearl Cleage has stated in various ways that her passion, style, and the subjects of her plays stem from this notion of expression of and for the African American community. African American theatre pioneers, including W.E.B. Dubois, Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, and most recently, Suzan Lori Parks, have in their way, sort of created manifestoes for Black theatre. In those manifestoes, they have described who, where, how, and why to create Black theatre - ultimately because of the influence of theatre. Can
you discuss that influence and the relevance of Black theatre to not only the African American community, but the American community?

**Reflections**

The set was built, the costumes were complete, the programs were printed and the performers were well rehearsed. It was show time. *A Song for Coretta* opened on October 27, 2011 at 8:00 pm. The house was packed. I walked into the actor waiting area and said a few words to the cast. I wanted to them to know how important they were to me and that this show was for them. The stage manager called two minutes to places, I took my seat, and the lights faded to black only to be met with the echo of Helen’s footsteps as she walked to Ebenezer Baptist Church.

Directing *Song* was both a productive and challenging experience. Plays that I’ve directed or assistant-directed in the past were very different from this experience. Directing *Song* proved to be concurrently a teaching experience and a learning moment. Entering into this production, I was not aware that I would be educating about cultural differences, in addition to being educated myself about what could seem to be the lack thereof. Of course this is not to suggest that anyone involved in the production was ill-informed or oblivious to representations of differences. It does imply, however, that there exists a multitude of perspectives and reasons for doing theatre or perceiving identity. Furthermore, I learned that there is a range of attitudes about blackness—and not an essential approach to Blackness.

Reflected in my artistic statement, theatre must present ideas, themes, and messages that coincides with a consciousness of identity; an identity being an entity within the larger space of Black existence. In the words of Glenda Dickerson, “Black theatre must play a role in helping bring about Black liberation” (qtd. in *Ebony*).
Works Cited


EPILOGUE:

Dear Coretta:

As I sit here with my Starbucks coffee in hand, listening to Mahalia Jackson’s version of *We Shall Overcome*, I began to reflect on when this process first initiated. I realized it had been two years since I began this journey and now I have reached the conclusion. I further recognize that you, Mrs. Coretta Scott King, were at the center of this project for us all: Pearl Cleage, the performers, the designers, my advisor, the theatre department, the panelists, the audience, and myself. I therefore thought it only necessary to address my conclusion to you.

When I first started to envision, research, and layout plans for both the written portion and directorial praxis of the thesis, I found myself repeatedly watching your funeral service. For me, as a scholar and practitioner in the crossing fields of theatre, performance, and African American studies, your funeral, needless to say, was exemplary of African American Theatre and performance. Watching the performance of the funeral, the eulogies, the moments of mourning, celebration, and pledging, further illuminated for me the social, historical, and cultural associations that African American theatre and performance demands. Watching United States presidents, Civil Rights dignitaries, other politicians, Maya Angelou, and your daughter Bernice King, was the origin for the central idea of this thesis: locating and examining the intersection of theory and practice. Or, as my title suggest, cultural performativity as historiographical documentation.

This exploration was conducted through the examination of several areas of the theatre process: (1) A dramaturgical analysis of playwright Pearl Cleage, (2) A theoretical examination of cultural performativity within the play, *A Song for Coretta*, and (3) a directorial praxis. Reflecting back, this process was a struggle. Conflicts, complications, and concerns arose only to be met with additional problems. There were times when I felt as though I was in the midst of my own Civil Rights Movement and wanted to sing, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen”. Similar to other past and present theatre scholars and practitioners (African Americans in particular?), this struggle was, nonetheless, a part of the reason for doing theatre in the first place. Historically, trials and tribulations have always been at the core of African American theatre and performance!

Friday, 06 May 2011

Oxford, Ohio
A SONG FOR CORETTA

A Drama by
Pearl Cleage

Khalid Y. Long
Theatre Studies
Creative Thesis

Advisor: Paul Jackson, Ph.D.
A Song for Coretta

- The date is February 6, 2006. The time is 11:30 pm. In the cold rain, Zora, Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen hurry down to Ebenezer Baptist Church to join the dwindling line of mourners to say their farewells to the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King, whose body lays in state. Through personal narratives, quarrels and while reflecting openly on Mrs. King's influence, these women come to realize that they are closer in more ways to the beloved woman, now ancestor, than they've ever imagined.

  Khalid Long, Director
Characters

- Helen Richards, 56 (Coretta’s Surrogate)
- Mona Lisa, 40s (New Orleans)
- Zora Evans, 22 (Spelman Journalist)
- Gwen Johnson, 24 (2nd Gulf War)
- Keisha Cameron, 17 (Teen pregnancy)

Setting:
- In Front of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA
Themes, Messages, & Questions

- “What do we do in order to fulfill [a] legacy; to fulfill the obligations and the debt that we owe to those who allowed us to be here today?” President Barack Obama

- Confronted with all the wrong of today, what would Coretta do?

- It’s not about the resolution, it is about the song of hope.

- “When you wait in line for several hours you find out a lot about people. In A Song for Coretta, the multi-generational characters discover that although their struggles are not the same, they all have come in hope that somehow the spirit of Coretta King will inspire them.”

- This play is about building up, not tearing down
Essayist, Novelist, Playwright, Lecturer


"The purpose of my writing, often, is to express the point where racism and sexism meet."

“Pearl Cleage probes issues of race, sex, and love in a growing body of literary work while she reveals poignant truths about brave black women.”

“Was inspired to write the play after watching news footage of people who waited outside Ebenezer Baptist Church to bid farewell to Mrs. King after her death January 30, 2006.”

Pearl Cleage was also a classmate of Dr. Cheryl Johnsons.
“I was very moved by their patience as they stood in all that cold rain and wanted to create some imaginary characters and place them in that line. I think I was trying to show what an impact she made on a wide range of people who did not even know each other. I want the audience to think about the life of Mrs. King and the example of that life. She was a person dedicated to truth, peace and freedom. I hope that when people see the play, they will think about how those issues manifest in their own lives.”

Pearl Cleage
Coretta Scott King

- April 27, 1927- born Coretta Scott
- 1941- While in high school, hears “non-violent peace” speech by Bayard Rustin
- Active in social and political action and peace organizations (NAACP, Race Relations Committee, Civil Liberties Committee)
- 1951- Receives A.B. in Elementary Education & Music from Antioch College
- 1953- Marries Martin Luther King Jr.
- 1961- Serves as delegate for Women’s Strike for Peace at 17-nation disarmament conference in Geneva, Switzerland

Helped to found dozens of organizations, including the Black Leadership Forum, the National Black Coalition for Voter Participation, and the Black Leadership Roundtable.

Mrs. King dialogued with heads of state, including prime ministers and presidents and she put in time on picket lines with welfare rights mothers. She met with many great spiritual leaders, including Pope John Paul, the Dalai Lama, Dorothy Day, and Bishop Desmond Tutu. She witnessed the historic handshake between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Chairman Yassir Arafat at the signing of the Middle East Peace Accords. She stood with Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg when he became South Africa's first democratically-elected president.

A life-long advocate of interracial coalitions, in 1974 Mrs. King formed a broad coalition of over 100 religious, labor, business, civil and women's rights organizations dedicated to a national policy of full employment and equal economic opportunity, as Co-Chair of both the National Committee for Full Employment and the Full Employment Action Council. In 1983, she brought together more than 800 human rights organizations to form the Coalition of Conscience, sponsors of the 20th Anniversary March on Washington, until then the largest demonstration ever held in our nation’s capital. In 1987, she helped lead a national Mobilization Against Fear and Intimidation in Forsyth County, Georgia. In 1988, she re-convened the Coalition of Conscience for the 25th anniversary of the March on Washington. In preparation for the Reagan-Gorbachev talks, in 1988 she served as head of the U.S. delegation of Women for a Meaningful Summit in Athens, Greece; and in 1990, as the USSR was redefining itself, Mrs. King was co-convener of the Soviet-American Women's Summit in Washington, DC.

Transitions on January 30, 2006
Hurricane Katrina

They Wait!!!
Hurricane Katrina

No Response!!!
Hurricane Katrina
The Iraq War / Second Gulf War
The Iraq War / Second Gulf War
The Iraq War / Second Gulf War
Ebenezer Baptist Church
Research & Production Vision

- Postcolonialism
- Yoruba Cosmology
- Ancestral Worship
- Mourning
- Hybridity
- African Retention
- Cross-Cultural Cast
- Interview with
  - Pearl Cleage
  - Prof. Edythe Scott Bagley
How to Achieve Vision

- Realism & Intimacy
  - Frozen moment
- Thrust-Scenium
- Costume- Script
- Set/Scenery-Script
- Video- Script
- Visual- Street lights, fire hydrant, chair-bench,
- Auditory- Cars, by passers, music, helicopters
Music

- Sweet Honey in the Rock- “I remember, I believe”
- Sweet Honey in the Rock- “Ain’t gonna let nobody…”
- Sweet Honey in the Rock- “In the upper room”
- Regina Belle- “G-d is Good”
- Jeveeta Steele- “This little light of mine”
- Michael Jackson- “Will you be there”
- Mahalia Jackson- “These are they”
- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”
References

References

A Song For Coretta

Directed by Khalid Long

October 27-31, 2010
Studio 88 Theatre
Center for Performing Arts
Miami University
A SONG FOR CORETTA

The stage is dark. We are on the sidewalk outside of Ebenezer Baptist Church. There is a low red brick wall separating the sidewalk from the church property. During the course of the play, the actors will sit on this wall, put their belongings on it, etc. We can also see the cross-shaped neon sign that identifies the church. Lights come up on Zora Evans talking into a tape recorder. Helen Richards is watching her with a critical eye.

ZORA. (Speaking with the slightly exaggerated diction of a TV newscaster.) It's a cold and rainy night outside of historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, but that doesn't seem to matter to the hundreds of people from all walks of life who have left the warmth of their homes and come here to say goodbye to Coretta Scott King, widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., a woman they have never met. For those born after the civil rights era who never experienced the sit-ins and freedom rides and marches, it is difficult to understand what motivates these patiently waiting people to stand hour after hour for the briefest glimpse of a stranger. When queried by this reporter, some said simply that she was a great lady. Others, that she was the heart of the civil rights movement. Some said they just wanted to be a part of history. Witnesses to the end of an era. Whatever their reasons, they have all been deeply touched by something they cannot define. (Helen's annoyance is increasing, but Zora, caught up in her narrative, is oblivious.) So as the line dwindles to a final few, the meaning of the life she lived can perhaps best be measured in the faces of these patient strangers, each alone with their memories of a woman they never knew. This is Zora Evans, Atlanta, Georgia, February 6, 2006. (Pleased with her work, Zora turns off the tape recorder and begins putting it away in the bag she has slung over her shoulder.)

HELEN. You're not much of a journalist, are you?
ZORA. I beg your pardon?
HELEN. What do you call yourself doing anyway?
ZORA. I’m doing a piece on Mrs. King.
HELEN. What kind of piece on Mrs. King?
ZORA. Her life, her work, what it was about her that would make people come out here on a night like this to say goodbye to someone they’ve never met.
HELEN. You keep saying that like it’s a fact, but you never asked me.
ZORA. Asked you what?
HELEN. Whether or not I ever met her.
ZORA. Did you?
HELEN. Yes, I did. Twice.
ZORA. Do you remember anything about it?
HELEN. I remember everything about it.
ZORA. (Rapidly unpacking her tape recorder, searching in her bag for a fresh tape, etc.) That’s just the kind of stuff I’m looking for! (She pops in the tape and sticks the recorder in Helen’s face without asking permission.) When did you meet her? (Helen’s look freezes Zora and she withdraws the mic quickly.) I’m sorry. May I tape you?
HELEN. Who did you say you’re working for?
ZORA. I’m not really a journalist yet. I’m a senior at Spelman, but I’m hoping to get this piece on National Public Radio. I’m doing it on spec.
HELEN. What does that mean?
ZORA. If they like it, they’ll use it. If they don’t, they won’t.
HELEN. What makes you think they’re going to be interested in anything you have to say?
ZORA. Well, when I saw the pictures of all the people waiting in line down here, the reporter was standing there talking about them, but she never talked to them. I just thought somebody should ask people what they’re doing out here in the middle of the night … in the rain. (Throw it away)
ZORA. In the rain.
HELEN. And you think you’re that somebody?
ZORA. I guess I am. Look, I was born after the civil rights movement, but I always wished I had been there. Most people my age have never experienced that kind of commitment to an idea. We’ve never had to face dogs and fire hoses and lynchings. We’ve never really been tested. I just want to understand what that felt like.
HELEN. What’s your name?
HELEN. Okay, Miss Zora Evans. Turn on your tape and I’ll tell you what I know.

ZORA. Great! Let me do a quick introduction and then I’ll ask you the question.

HELEN. Fine.

ZORA. We’re here in front of Ebenezer Baptist Church, talking with — (Extends the mic to Helen.)

HELEN. Mrs. Helen Richards.

ZORA. With Mrs. Helen Richards about her memories of the late Coretta Scott King. Thank you for talking with us, Mrs. Richards.

HELEN. My pleasure.

ZORA. So you actually met Mrs. King?

HELEN. Yes, I did. I met her twice. Once at the beginning of the bus boycott in 1955 and once again on the day it ended.

ZORA. The Montgomery Bus Boycott?

HELEN. That’s the one.

ZORA. (Awestruck.) You were there?

HELEN. You ever see Eyes on the Prize?

ZORA. A long time ago in my American History class.

HELEN. You remember the part when they were showing the mass meetings where Dr. King would speak and everybody would sing freedom songs and build their spirit up for the next week of walking?

ZORA. I think so …

HELEN. Well, if you ever see it again, I’m the little girl in the second row wearing a white dress sitting beside the woman in the blue hat. That was my mother.

ZORA. Did she participate in the boycott?

HELEN. Of course she did! We all did! Me, my mama, my daddy. Everybody we knew was walking, or trying to catch a ride with somebody.

ZORA. How old were you?

HELEN. I was five when it started and I turned six the day the bus company finally gave in.

ZORA. So how did you meet Mrs. King?

HELEN. I met her the first time after one of those meetings. My mother was on the Maids Committee …
ZORA. What's the Maids Committee?
HELEN. A lot of the women who were walking worked as maids like my mother, and the white folks' houses were way on the other side of town, so my father and some of the other men who had cars, would pick them up in the morning and take them out to work and then pick them up at night and carry them home.

The committee made sure everybody got where they needed to go. Sometimes when they got where they were going, and everybody got out, it looked like one of those clown acts at the circus where you can't believe how they all got in there. After awhile, some of the white women started driving their maids themselves to be sure they got there on time. They told their husbands they needed to be sure somebody was there to cook and clean and take care of those kids, but in private, they knew it was wrong, making people sit in the back just for being Negroes. (She smiles at the old-fashioned word.) That's my mom talking out of my mouth. Everybody said Negro back then. If you called somebody black you had to fight.

ZORA. Did the white women's husbands try to stop them?
HELEN. Some did, but even with the ones who wouldn't stop, they weren't carrying everybody, so on this particular night, my mother and some of the other women were meeting at the back of the church after the rally, making sure everybody was covered for the next week. Mrs. King came over to let them know three more volunteer drivers had just signed up, which was really great because that meant nobody had to wait around and maybe be late for work.

So they started thanking Mrs. King and she said she hadn't done anything but bring the message and they should thank themselves for being willing to stand up for their freedom. I was right there between her and my mother and Mrs. King reached out and put her arm around my shoulder and said, You should thank yourselves for standing up for our children. And they all started nodding and saying That's right, amen, and stuff like that. Then Mrs. King leaned down and asked me my name and when I told her, she said, Welcome to the movement, little Miss Helen Brown — I was still Brown then — and she hugged me and went back to sit beside her husband.

ZORA. What do you remember the most about meeting her?
HELEN. I remember how pretty she was and how good she smelled. Like a birthday cake.

ZORA. What about the second time?
HELEN. The second time it actually was my birthday and we had
won. After walking for a whole year, the bus company had to take down those “colored” and “white” signs and we could sit wherever we wanted to. Daddy said he had a very special birthday present for me and that me and Mama should put on our Sunday dresses and come downstairs as quick as we could. Daddy had his Sunday suit on, too, and he took my hand and Mama took the other one and we walked the three blocks to the bus stop. We didn’t have to wait long and when those doors opened to let us on, we sat down as close to the front as we could. We would have sat right behind the driver, but Mr. and Mrs. Turner from down the street had already claimed that place of honor. By the time we got to downtown, every single seat on that bus, front and back, had a Negro sitting in it. Everybody was dressed up and smiling and saying Good mornin’, and How’s your family? Like we’d been doing this every single day of our lives. We rode that bus all the way to the end of the line. Then we all got off, paid another fare, and rode back the way we’d just come. I don’t think I had ever seen Mama and Daddy look so happy. It was like they couldn’t have stopped smiling even if they wanted to, which they didn’t.

When we got off at our stop, Daddy brought me and Mama each a chocolate ice cream cone, even though we were going to have birthday cake later.

ZORA. So when did you see Mrs. King that day? On the bus?

HELEN. Right after we left the soda shop. We were walking home past Dexter Avenue Baptist Church — we lived right around the corner — and Mrs. King was standing on the front steps beside her husband, talking and laughing with some other people who had been on the bus with us. Mama and Daddy stopped to say hello to everybody and Mrs. King smiled and said, Well, Miss Brown, how do you like your freedom? And I said, If freedom feels this good, I want to be free every day! All the grown-ups laughed, but I think they felt it, too.

ZORA. Thank you, Mrs. Helen Richards, for that memory of Mrs. King.

HELEN. You’re welcome, Miss Zora Evans. The pleasure was all mine. (Zora turns off the tape recorder.)

ZORA. That was just perfect. I guess I never expected anybody who actually met her to be standing out here.

HELEN. In the rain. (They share a smile.)

ZORA. In the rain.

HELEN. I haven’t told that story in a long time. Saying it out loud.
HELEN. Sometimes when I think about what we used to be as a community of people, and then I realize what we've become, it gets me down.

ZORA. When you say we, you mean we under thirty, don't you?

HELEN. I guess I do. I don't understand young people anymore. The music, the clothes, the way you talk, what you talk about. (She's getting wound up.) People weren't fighting and dying for somebody's right to sell crack and hang their pants off their behind.

ZORA. All of us aren't like that.

HELEN. I didn't mean to start fussing. The older I get, the crankier I get. Sorry.

ZORA. That's okay. I'm going across the street and get some coffee before it starts raining again. Do you want me to bring you some?

HELEN. That would be great. Put a couple of sugars in mine. Maybe I can sweeten up my disposition. (She reaches for her purse.)

ZORA. It's on me.

HELEN. Thanks.

ZORA exits. It begins to rain and Helen calmly opens her very large black umbrella. Mona Lisa enters. She is wearing a long, wine-colored skirt and an oversized navy pea jacket that has seen better days. An old fedora is jammed on her head and the wisps of hair peeking out from under it look messy and unkempt. On her feet are a pair of badly scuffed Doc Martens, which, like her jacket, seem to be just a little bit too large. She is carrying a huge backpack that is stuffed to the point of bursting and seems much too heavy for her to be carrying around. She takes her place next to Helen and squints up into the rain as if in the hope that it might be slowing down. It isn't. With a resigned sigh, Mona Lisa pulls her collar up a little higher and adjusts the weight of the giant backpack. Helen watches her from under the huge umbrella. I've got plenty of room under here if you want to get out of that rain.

MONA LISA. That's okay. You been out here long?

HELEN. Two hours, give or take. Just a little while.

MONA LISA. Many people in front of you?

HELEN. Thirty or forty. They're taking them in groups of five.

MONA LISA. How long do they stay in there?

HELEN. Depends.

MONA LISA. On what?

HELEN. How would I know? I'm out here with you. Well, not
I'm dry as a bone and you don't seem to have enough sense to come in out of the rain. (Mona Lisa looks at her sharply, but Helen's good-natured smile disarms her.) No offense.

MONA LISA. None taken. (Mona Lisa moves over under the big umbrella gratefully. There is plenty of room for both of them, even with Mona Lisa's backpack.)

HELEN. I'm Helen Richards.

MONA LISA. Mona Lisa Martin.

HELEN. Is that your real name?

MONA LISA. My father was a big Nat King Cole fan.

HELEN. My husband was, too. I think he had every record Nat ever made.

MONA LISA. I hate rain.

HELEN. How you gonna hate rain? Rain just is. You'd be better off hating something you can do something about.

MONA LISA. That's a pretty short list.

HELEN. I'm glad I brought this big old umbrella. I started not to, but I thought it might come in handy. The undertaker gave it to me at my husband's funeral. (Mona Lisa steps back out from under the umbrella immediately.) What's wrong?

MONA LISA. I think it's stopping.

HELEN. I didn't mean to spook you. I know some people don't like to talk about death, but to me it's all part of life, you know?

MONA LISA. Talking about it ain't the hard part.

HELEN. You got that right!

MONA LISA. How long were you married?

HELEN. Thirty-four years and never had a cross word between us.

MONA LISA. That's a lot of years.

HELEN. I could have used a few more, but nobody asked me, so what are you gonna do? (She holds her hand out from under the umbrella.) I think you're right. It is stopping. (Helen closes the umbrella and shakes it out carefully. Mona Lisa puts her huge bag down on the wall and begins to rummage around in it, looking for something. Helen watches her, fascinated by how much stuff she has managed to squeeze into the bag.) Do you live on this side of town?

MONA LISA. (Still rummaging around with a sense of purpose.) I live in New Orleans. I just came up to pay my respects. I'd been here earlier but I ran out of gas and had to hitch the last part of the way.

HELEN. You hitchhiked up here from New Orleans?

MONA LISA. Not the whole way. I made it almost to Birmingham.
HELEN. That's three hours away!
MONA LISA. More like two hours the way this guy was driving. (She finds what she was looking for, a small silver flask. She stuffs the other things back in the bag carelessly.)
HELEN. That's a really dangerous way to travel.
MONA LISA. Well, the whole trip was a spur of the moment kind of thing. As you can see, I didn't really have much time to pull myself together. (She pours the flask cap full, drinks it in one fast motion, then looks at Helen.) Why do I get the feeling you're not the sort of person who drinks cheap bourbon in public at a moment like this?
HELEN. No, thanks. (She watches Mona Lisa drink another quick shot.) In the sixties, when we'd be marching, or sitting in or something, my husband would always say, Behave yourself, Helen. These pictures are going to be in the history books.
MONA LISA. Well, just holler if you change your mind.
HELEN. I know what you mean about coming here on the spur of the moment. I was home watching it on CNN, I only live two blocks from here, and all of a sudden, I felt like I had to come as I don't know, be a witness to the kind of life she lived. The kind of person she was. (A beat.) When you been in the presence of goodness, it's important to acknowledge it.
MONA LISA. What about evil?
HELEN. (A beat.) Evil can take care of itself.
MONA LISA. (She takes one more drink and puts the flask in her jacket pocket.) I saw it on TV, too. I was sitting in this bar where I work sometimes, having a drink with a man I didn't care about, who sure didn't care about me, and I'm thinking to myself, if I was dead, I'd never have to listen to another lie come out of another man's mouth since even men don't have enough nerve to lie in heaven.
HELEN. Or the ones who do, don't get in.
MONA LISA. Well, this wasn't heaven by a long shot, so I was watching the TV over his shoulder to distract myself, and they were talking about her.
HELEN. About Mrs. King?
MONA LISA. Yeah. About how two days after they shot her husband, she believed so much in the movement that she went down to Memphis herself and lead the march in his place.
HELEN. I remember that. When we saw it on the news, all the marchers were carrying signs that said I am a man.
Mona Lisa. Even the women?
Helen. I don't remember any women being there except her.
Mona Lisa. Anyway, I made the guy shut up so I could hear the whole story and of course he got mad and left without even paying for my drink, so I had to use some of my gas money, even though I didn't know it was going to be gas money yet. Then I drove home — well, I drove to where my house used to be — and curled up in my car to see if I could get some sleep, but …
Helen. You sleep in your car?
Mona Lisa. Better than sleeping on the street.
Helen. Can't you get a trailer?
Mona Lisa. (Snaps at her suddenly.) Can you?
Helen. (Snaps right back.) Don't get mad at me! We collected clothes at my job and I sent money down there twice.
Mona Lisa. Twice? Oh, well, forgive me then! That makes it all better. (Mona Lisa takes out the flask, but doesn't pour a drink yet. She simply holds the flask in her hand like a good luck charm or a loaded weapon.)
Helen. Finish the story.
Mona Lisa. What story?
Helen. About why you came.
Mona Lisa. It's not much of a story, really. It's just that the longer I laid there, like I do every night, looking out the window at where my house used to be — where my whole street used to be.
Miss Mary's, with all those sunflowers in the front yard. Pap's place on the corner, always with the good gumbo. Those two girls upstairs from Miss Cat who were going to Dillard and wanted to learn how to speak Chinese … The more I thought about all that, the more I started wondering what would have happened if Coretta had done what I was doing. If she had never gone to Memphis. If she had just sat in her house and cried for her husband. Nobody could have blamed her, but she didn't. She did what she had to do. So I closed my eyes and I asked myself one question: If she was right here, right now, What would Coretta do?
Helen. What would she do?
Mona Lisa. She'd get on with it. (She takes another drink.)
Helen. Can I change my mind about that drink?
Mona Lisa. Sure. (She pours another and passes it to Helen.)
Helen. And you're right. About the money. I should have sent more.
MONA LISA. It's the thought that counts. Drink up. (Helen drinks, grimaces, coughs. Grinning.) Now we're even.
HELEN. So what do you do?
MONA LISA. You mean when I'm not sleeping in my car?
HELEN. You said you worked in a bar. I just wondered what you do.
MONA LISA. (A beat.) I'm an artist.
HELEN. (Surprised and interested.) What kind of artist?
MONA LISA. A painter.
HELEN. Really? What do you paint?
MONA LISA. Portraits mostly. An occasional still life.
HELEN. Can you make a living doing that?
MONA LISA. I used to. Right now I'm working freelance.
HELEN. A freelance portrait painter?
MONA LISA. (Shrugs.) It's a living. I go to festivals, clubs, birthday parties and sketch people's pictures for two dollars a pop.
HELEN. Are you any good?
MONA LISA. I have my moments, but it's not a very discerning audience. Most of the people I sketch are drunk.
HELEN. I'm not drunk, but I've got a nice little buzz. Why don't you do me?
MONA LISA. Really?
HELEN. You're an artist. Make some art.
MONA LISA. Okay. (Rummaging in her bag for her art supplies.) It's five dollars.
HELEN. You just said two a minute ago!
MONA LISA. Those were hurricane prices. They only apply in New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and some parts of Alabama.
HELEN. (Hands over five dollars.) If it doesn't look like me, can I get a refund?
MONA LISA. It'll look like you. Trust me. Just stand still so I can get a good look at you. (Zora enters with two coffees. She sees Mona Lisa studying Helen's face from all angles and making a few lines on her sketch pad. Zora comes closer to watch.)
HELEN. (Slightly embarrassed.) I'm having a portrait done.
ZORA. I'll put your coffee over here.
MONA LISA. I'll take it. Thanks. (She does. Helen can't believe she takes a long sip without even asking for permission.)
ZORA. I'm Zora.
MONA LISA. Mona Lisa Martin. Thanks for the coffee!
ZORA. Are you from New Orleans?
MONA LISA. Born and bred.
ZORA. I had a friend named Mona Lisa. She said people in New Orleans are the only ones who would name somebody that.
MONA LISA. She's probably right. (To Helen.) Turn your face a little bit more toward me.
ZORA. Are you really an artist?
MONA LISA. We'll know in a minute. (To Helen.) A little bit more. Right there!
ZORA. When's the last time you were in New Orleans?
MONA LISA. This morning.
ZORA. Were you there for Katrina?
MONA LISA. Every single minute.
ZORA. Can I interview you about your experiences?
MONA LISA. (Stops sketching and looks at Zora. A beat.) What do you think?
ZORA. I just thought you might want to go on the record so that people know what really happened.
MONA LISA. People know what really happened. (An awkward silence. Mona Lisa resumes her sketching.)
HELEN. She's doing a radio show on why we all came down here. Why don't you talk about that?
MONA LISA. I can't draw and talk at the same time. It's bad luck.
(Keisha enters, pushing a baby in a stroller. She looks to be about seventeen, thin and pretty, in spite of wearing too much makeup, and jeans so tight breathing would seem to be a challenge. A receiving blanket is draped over the stroller to protect the child from the weather.)
HELEN. You're talking now.
MONA LISA. And you see how my luck is running. —
KEISHA. Is this where they lettin' people in to see Mrs. King?
ZORA. Yes, but I'm not in line. Go ahead.
KEISHA. Thanks. (She walks over to stand near Mona Lisa and Helen. Mona Lisa continues sketching while Keisha watches her, then looks at Helen as if to compare the likeness.)
HELEN. Does it look like me?
MONA LISA. Don't tell her! It's a surprise.
KEISHA. It's gonna be a surprise all right.
HELEN. What's that supposed to mean?
KEISHA. Nothing. (Mona Lisa moves slightly so that Keisha can't see the drawing.) I sure am glad it stopped raining. They weren't gonna
let me sit in that restaurant too much longer without buying something besides a bag of chips. (She reaches into the baby bag hanging from the back of the stroller, takes out an open bag of chips and starts nibbling them delicately.)

HELEN. You shouldn't have that baby out here in this weather.

(Keisha continues eating her chips without acknowledging Helen's comment. A little louder.) You're asking for pneumonia.

KEISHA. You talkin' to me?

HELEN. You're the only one out here with a baby!

KEISHA. This ain't no real baby. (She pulls back the cover, revealing a smiling brown baby doll.) See?

HELEN. Aren't you a little old to be playing with dolls?

KEISHA. (Shrugs.) It's for school. I have to take it everywhere I go for a week.

HELEN. What's the point of that?

KEISHA. You got me. One minute they tellin' us not to have any kids. The next minute they sayin' But if y'all do, here's how to rais 'em. I wish they'd make up their damn mind.

ZORA. I remember this from high school. (Picks up the doll and looks at it with some recognition and amusement.) It's supposed to show you what a big responsibility it is to have a child. They even put a little computer in it so they can make it cry whenever they want to. You're supposed to change it or pick it up or feed it or whatever to stop the crying, then they give you a grade on how good a mother you were.

HELEN. Did they say anything about taking it out in the rain?

KEISHA. It ain't rainin' no more. Besides, my girl Deshawn ripped all that stuff out so it don't cry no more no matter what you do, which is fine with me. (Zora turns the doll over. There is a big hole in the doll's back.)

ZORA. That's probably not going to do much for your grade.

KEISHA. (Laughs.) You got that right! But it was my fault, I guess. Everybody know Deshawn don't like no kids.

MONA LISA. (Without looking up.) Everybody knows that ...

(Keisha shoots her a look, but Mona Lisa never looks up from her sketching.)

HELEN. Where do you go to school?

KEISHA. Booker T. Washington. I'm a sophomore. I should be a junior, but I got left back twice.

HELEN. Do they still have that statue out front?
KEISHA. The guy pulling the blanket off the slave? Yeah. We still got it.
HELEN. He's an ex-slave and that's Booker T. Washington lifting the veil of ignorance off his face.
KEISHA. Well that makes sense. They always trying to teach us not to be so ignorant.
MONA LISA. How's that going, do you think?
KEISHA. About like that picture you drawin'. (She crumples up the potato chip bag and drops it to the ground.)
HELEN. Don't do that.
KEISHA. Do what?
HELEN. Drop that bag on the ground.
KEISHA. They got somebody whose job it is to pick stuff up around here. They'll get it later.
HELEN. Yeah, but we're standing here now. (Keisha considers her options. Mona Lisa pauses in her sketching to watch. Keisha pouts, but picked it up and stuff it back in the baby bag.)
KEISHA. (Pouts for a minute, but can't keep quiet.) You know some people say the ain't really dead. 
ZORA. That's just crazy. What would be the point in pretending?
KEISHA. I'm not sayin' it's a fact, but everybody they say dead ain't really dead. Look at Tupac.
ZORA. Tupac's dead, too.
KEISHA. All due respect, that's where you wrong. A friend of Deshawn's baby cousin saw him at the club last New Year's Eve. A lotta people saw him.
MONA LISA. Maybe it was his ghost.
KEISHA. What'chu mean?
MONA LISA. Tupac's ghost.
KEISHA. Ain't no such thing as a ghost in real life.
MONA LISA. Yes there are. All the time. A lot of them come back on New Year's Eve. Same with Halloween.
KEISHA. (Skeptical, but a little nervous.) Come back how?
MONA LISA. Just like me and you. They walk around, talk to people, handle any business they left unfinished and then they go back.
KEISHA. You teasing me?
MONA LISA. That's why you're supposed to walk out of the cemetery backward after you bury somebody so the ghost doesn't rise up out of that ground and follow you home.
KEISHA. I never did that after no funeral!
MONA LISA. Probably nobody did it after Tupac's either and you see what happened to him.
KEISHA. Is she serious?
ZORA. She's from New Orleans. They all believe in spirits.
KEISHA. Well you should know that up here, we don't believe in no ghosts.
MONA LISA. Fine with me. And just to show there's no hard feelings, I'll do you next. I won't even charge you extra for the doll baby.
KEISHA. What do I want with a cartoon of a broke-up doll?
MONA LISA. Think about it this way. That cartoon might help your grade if you take it to school, and explain that you had to remove the works to be sure it wouldn't cry because you didn't want it to go off while you were in the sanctuary, since that would have been disrespectful to the memory of Mrs. King. My one of a kind drawing will be exactly what you need to prove that you are not simply a good mother, you are a great one who made your baby a part of history by bringing it down here in the pouring rain to say goodbye to one of the most courageous women who ever lived. (All the women are impressed with the completeness of this line of reasoning.)
KEISHA. Damn! Deshawn can lie pretty good, but you got ! beat by a mile.
HELEN. (Annoyed.) Why would you help her fool her teacher?
MONA LISA. It's true. You want to go inside, right?
KEISHA. Right …
MONA LISA. Would you want that doll to start screaming just as you step up to see Mrs. King?
KEISHA. You got a point. How much?
MONA LISA. Two dollars. (Helen looks at her.) Student rates. (Keisha digs into her pocket and hands it to her.)
HELEN. If you're not serious about being here, you shouldn't be here at all.
KEISHA. I don't remember asking you a damn thing about where I should or shouldn't be.
HELEN. (To Zora.) See? That's what I'm talking about. They have no respect for anything or anybody.
KEISHA. You the one disrespectin' me. I don't even know you and you think you can talk to me any kind of way just because you're old. (Helen turns toward her to respond, but Mona Lisa speaks up quickly to head off the conflict.)
MONA LISA. (To Zora.) That's who you need to interview. Get a
young's person's point of view.
HELEN. You've got to be kidding.
MONA LISA. What's your name?
KEISHA. Keisha. Keisha Cameron, but most people call me Li'l Bit.
MONA LISA. Well, Li'l Bit, Zora here is doing a radio program
about why we're all standing in this line to see Mrs. King.
KEISHA. What station?
ZORA. NPR.
KEISHA. What’s that?
ZORA. National Public Radio. (There is no flash of recognition.)
They play a lot of classical music. Mozart, Beethoven, Puccini.
KEISHA. Classical music? Don't no black people listen to no clas­sical music.
HELEN. I'm a black person and I listen to classical music.
KEISHA. Real black people listen to hip-hop.
ZORA. I listen to classical and hip-hop, so what does that make me?
KEISHA. (A beat.) Confused.
ZORA. If you don't want to do it, don't do it.
KEISHA. Don't get all crazy. I'll do it. Contrary to some people's
opinion, I got a lot of stuff to say. But first I gotta pee! Where's the
bathrooms around here?
ZORA. They're letting people use the one in the store across the
street, but you have to buy something.
KEISHA. They sell potato chips?
ZORA. I think so.
KEISHA. (To Mona Lisa, pushing the Umbroller closer.) Watch her
for me, will you?
MONA LISA. Like a hawk. (Keisha exits. Zora begins cueing up her
tape recorder.)
HELEN. Have you lost your mind?
ZORA. What?
MONA LISA. I'm pretty sure that's a rhetorical question.
HELEN. You think NPR is going to care what Li'l Bit has to say
about Coretta King?
ZORA. I can always edit the piece if she says anything ... inap­propriate. (Mona Lisa laughs.)
HELEN. You think everything is a joke.
MONA LISA. Laughing to keep from crying.
ZORA. I do want to show a cross-section of the community and
I don't have any young people yet.
HELEN. Lord help us if that's the face we're going to show to the world.
MONA LISA. I've seen a lot worse.
HELEN. If you're going to tape her, then erase me. I don't want to be on the same show with a fool.
MONA LISA. Don't worry. I think people will be able to tell the difference.
HELEN. I'm serious.
ZORA. But you're the only one who ever knew her. Your story pulls the whole piece together.
HELEN. It's your choice. Her story or mine. Not both. I'm going to see how much longer they think we'll be waiting. *(She exits.)*
ZORA. She's got a point. I don't know if NPR is really ready for Keisha.
MONA LISA. *(A beat.)* You know something? What you're doing isn't that different from what I'm doing.
ZORA. How's that?
MONA LISA. Well, we both wait around for somebody to stare still long enough to show us who they are. Everybody won't do. Too busy, too scared, but when somebody's willing, our job is to hold up the mirror with love and let them take a good long look at what we see. If you can't do that, you might want to find a new line of work while you're still young enough to get good at it. *(Keisha returns, eating another bag of potato chips.)*
KEISHA. *(Looks around for Helen.)* Please tell me she left.
ZORA. She'll be back.
KEISHA. Damn! You ready?
ZORA. You can't eat while we do it. The microphone picks up everything.
KEISHA. No problem. *(She crumples the bag, starts to toss it down, but rolls her eyes and puts it in the baby bag instead.)* I don't want to hear her mouth. Okay, I'm ready.
ZORA. We're here in front of the Ebenezer Baptist Church with Miss Keisha Cameron. Miss Cameron, can you tell us why you came down here to pay your respects to Mrs. King?
KEISHA. Yes, I can, but first I gotta go back a little ways and talk about something everybody don't know about me or the other part won't make no sense. Is that okay?
ZORA. Do you want me to turn off the tape?
KEISHA. *(Annoyed.)* If I wanted you to turn off the tape, I wouldn't
be talkin' to you at all, would I?
ZORA. I just meant the whole point of these interviews is to get some perspectives on Mrs. King.
KEISHA. Do you want to hear this or not?
ZORA. I'm sorry. Go ahead.
KEISHA. Thank you. *(She has a little attitude, but it is largely bravado to cover her vulnerability.)* Okay. This is what started it. Two years ago, I had a baby, a real baby, a girl. She was born two days after my fifteenth birthday, but I was too young to raise her, so I gave her up for adoption. I only got to see her for a few minutes right after she was born and then they took her, but I couldn't get her face out of my mind. That's the part that drove me crazy. Every baby girl I'd see, I'd be tryin' to look at her face and see was she mine. Deshawn told me that was negative thinking and to stop it so I tried to, but every time I closed my eyes, I'd see her face. *(A beat.)* So when I got pregnant again a couple of months ago, Deshawn said she wasn't goin' through all that with me again, so she gave me a number and I called it. *(Helen reenters. She doesn't speak to the others, but she is clearly listening to the interview. Keisha gives her a hostile look.)*
ZORA. *(Very aware of Helen listening, trying to get back on track.)* Can you talk about Mrs. King?
KEISHA. I'm gettin' there, okay? Stop rushin' me?
ZORA. I'm sorry. Go on.
KEISHA. So I called the place and made an appointment. I had to make Tyrone give me the money, even though I knew he made it sellin' them drugs, but how else was I gonna come up with three hundred dollars that fast? Deshawn be turnin' tricks sometime when she need money, but I'm not down wit' that. You gotta have some respect for yourself as a woman or nobody else will either, right?
MONA LISA. Amen to that, Li'l Bit.
KEISHA. So I went to the clinic this morning and it was a whole lot of people waitin', so I took a chair way in the back next to this white girl who was lookin' at the paper with all those pictures of Mrs. King in it and she was cryin'. She wasn't makin' no noise or nothin', but there was tears runnin' all down her face. So I asked her if she was okay and she said she was waitin' for her friend who was already in the back, you know ... havin' it done ... and she felt bad because she had just realized that the baby her friend wasn't going to have might just be the next Coretta King and nobody
would ever know it. So I started thinkin' maybe my baby could be Coretta King, too. Maybe I'm not supposed to even be doin' this, no matter what Deshawn say. *(Helen is listening closely.)*

ZORA. Go on ...

KEISHA. The longer I sat there, the more I knew I didn't want to do it. So when they called my name, I told them I had changed my mind and they told me that's what choice was all about, gave me back my money, a bunch of stuff about havin' a healthy baby, and wished me luck.

ZORA. Is that when you came down here? *(Keisha rolls her eyes at Zora for rushing her.)*

MONA LISA. *Take your time, let 'er tell the story.*

KEISHA. *Tears up.* First, I went to Deshawn's house 'cause I been stayin' with her since my mama put me out again, and as soon as I walked in the door, she said that was quick, and I told her I didn't do it. I wanted to lie, but she was gonna find out anyway, so what was the point? She said why not? When I told her it was because I thought maybe my baby girl could grow up to be the new Coretta King, she went off and threw the doll at me. That's when it started cryin' and we couldn't make it stop. Then I started cryin' 'cause if I can't take care of a fake baby no better than that, what the hell am I gonna do with a real one? Then Deshawn got the scissors and cut the back of it open. After that it stopped and Deshawn told me to get out. *That's when I came over here.*

ZORA. Can you tell us why?

KEISHA. Two reasons. The way I figure it, Mrs. King saved my baby's life and I wanted to say thank you, and big respect, and ask her permission to name my daughter Coretta. I know she dead and can't really say yes or no, but I think I would feel it if she didn't want me to, and I would respect her wishes.

ZORA. Then what would you name her?

KEISHA. *(A beat.)* Deshawn. She still my girl. She just don't like no kids.

MONA LISA. Everybody knows that.

ZORA. Well, thank you for ...

KEISHA. That's one reason why I'm here. The other reason is while I was talkin' to that cryin' girl at the clinic, she asked me did I know that Mrs. King wanted to be a singer before she got married, and I said no. What did she sing? And the cryin' girl said, she sang everything, but after she got married, she only sang freedom
songs because her husband was leadin' a whole movement. I had never heard of no freedom songs, but the cryin' girl said those songs really helped give people courage when they had to stand up to the Klan and stuff like that. So that's the other reason I'm here. I know it ain't no Klan no more, not around here anyway, but I wouldn't mind being able to sing something that will help me stay strong while I figure out what me and lil Coretta need to do next. I thought somebody down here might know one of those songs and could teach it to me. (Listening to Keisha's story, Helen's face moves from disgust to compassion.)

ZORA. Thank you, Miss Cameron.

KEISHA. You're welcome.

MONA LISA. Okay, Lil Bit, your turn. Grab that baby and strike a pose.

HELEN. Did you finish mine?

MONA LISA. Almost. I have to let it sit for a minute before I make the final adjustments.

HELEN. If they call us inside before you're finished, do I get it for half price?

MONA LISA. No refunds. No returns. Think of it as reparations. (Looking at the naked doll in Keisha's arms, Helen frowns.)

HELEN. Don't you have any clothes for that doll?

KEISHA. You just don't know how to mind your own business, do you?

HELEN. All I'm saying is when your teacher looks at the picture that's going to prove to her what a good mother you are, do you want this doll's naked behind staring her in the face?

KEISHA. I guess not.

HELEN. Let me see that bag. (Keisha hands Helen the bag, Helen reaches in and the first thing she pulls out are the crumpled potato chip bags.)

KEISHA. Those wouldn't be in there if you had let me toss 'em down. (Helen tucks the bags in a side pocket of the baby bag and then pulls out a few pieces of little pink doll clothes, including a small diaper, a one-piece pajama, a small hat of the kind hospitals provide to newborn babies and a thin pink receiving blanket.)

HELEN. Why don't you put these on her? (Keisha hesitates.)

MONA LISA. It would look a lot better. For the picture, I mean.

KEISHA. Okay, okay! Give 'em to me. (She starts dressing the baby roughly.)
MONA LISA. Take your time, Li'l Bit. I'll just put the finishing touches on this masterpiece while I'm waiting.

HELEN. Are you going to let me see it?

MONA LISA. Any minute now.

KEISHA. (The doll is fully dressed.) Satisfied?

HELEN. Much better. (Keisha poses with the baby, but even fully dressed, the doll lends a strange, surreal quality that Mona Lisa doesn't like.)

MONA LISA. I think you should do it without the doll.

KEISHA. How's that gonna help my grade?

MONA LISA. Well, the thing is, you're going to be a real mother pretty soon, with a real baby, and when she grows up and sees this picture, she'll want to know what happened to that baby you were holding.

KEISHA. I'll tell her it was her.

MONA LISA. But she'll know it wasn't her because it's before her first birthday.

KEISHA. How she gonna know that?

MONA LISA. Because this moment is going to be in the history books. Do you want to go down in history holding a fake baby?

KEISHA. Okay. (Puts the baby back in the stroller.) Then let's do it without the doll. I don't want to confuse Li'l Coretta.

MONA LISA. Good thinking. (Mona Lisa begins sketching Keisha. The others watch.)

KEISHA. So what about my freedom song? Y'all know any of 'em?

MONA LISA. I can't sing and draw at the same time.

KEISHA. (To Zora.) You been to college, right? Didn't they teach you any freedom songs?

ZORA. You mean like "We Shall Overcome"?

KEISHA. Was that one of them?

HELEN. That was the most famous one. I bet even you have heard it.

KEISHA. Where would I hear it?

ZORA. It's always in the movies and stuff.

KEISHA. Mostly I like scary movies. They don't have no freedom songs in 'em though. Just music that makes you know something bad getting ready to happen.

HELEN. You ever see Eyes on the Prize?

KEISHA. I don't think so. Who's in it?

HELEN. (Disgusted again.) Never mind.
KEISHA. Hey, most of that stuff happened way before I was born, okay?
HELEN. Yeah, but so did World War Two and you know about that, don’t you? *A beat. Keisha clearly draws a blank.* Oh, Lord …
KEISHA. Just sing it for me. Maybe I heard it and I just don’t remember.
HELEN. I can’t sing.
KEISHA. Come on! Just a little bit so I can see if I know it or not.
MONA LISA. Will you sing to this girl so she’ll stop moving around?
KEISHA. Please? If you teach it to me, I’ll sing it to Coretta when I put her to bed at night.
HELEN. It wasn’t supposed to calm you down. It was supposed to fire you up.
KEISHA. She won’t know the difference. Kids just like it if you sing to ’em. I used to sing to my lil’ cousins before they moved to New York. I wouldn’t sing ’em no rap, though. How would that even sound? You two months old and somebody all up in your face saying “It’s hard out here for a pimp,” like in that movie.
HELEN. What movie?
KEISHA. The one where that guy with the light eyes is a pimp who wants to make a record.
ZORA. That song won an Academy Award.
HELEN. What does it mean?
KEISHA. *Explaining patiently as if Helen was a child.* It means a pimp got to work hard if he’s gonna make any money. It’s a good movie, too. At the end, he in prison, but his girlfriend had a baby and when the song come on the radio, she all up in its face singing, “Whomp that trick! Whomp that trick!”
HELEN. *A beat.* I have no idea what you’re talking about.
KEISHA. All I’m sayin’ is wouldn’t you rather have a little baby listening to “We Shall Overcome” than that mess?
HELEN. “We Shall Overcome,” and I told you, it’s not a lullaby. It’s an anthem.
KEISHA. Like the national anthem?
HELEN. It just works better if there’s a lot of people singing it.
KEISHA. How I’m a sing it if you won’t teach it to me?
MONA LISA. She’s got a point there.
HELEN. *To Zora.* You can’t tell me you never heard “We Shall Overcome.”
ZORA. I've heard it, but I never had to sing it.
HELEN. Well, now's your chance.
ZORA. Oh, I don't really ...
KEISHA. Go ahead. I'll join in as soon as I can. I promise!
HELEN. Okay. On three ... one, two, three ... (Helen begins to sing, but without much confidence or enthusiasm.)
  We shall overcome,
  we shall overcome ...
(Zora joins in weakly, clearly embarrassed.)
HELEN and ZORA.
  We shall overcome some day.
  Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
  we shall overcome some day.
(When they stop, Keisha is clearly unimpressed.)
MONA LISA. (Amused.) I'm not sure if we'd ever have gotten free singing like that.
KEISHA. Well, I guess it's better than "Whomp, that trick," but I don't see what all the fuss was about.
HELEN. (Embarrassment turning to annoyance.) You don't see what all the fuss was about? (She speaks with rising anger.) You've got a lot of nerve even coming down here. Look at you! Even worse, listen to you. Everything coming out of your mouth sounds crazy! People died for your freedom and the best thing you can think of to do with it is have a bunch of bad babies and get a drug dealer to pay your rent. Coretta King would be ashamed of you! They shouldn't even let you go inside!
KEISHA. Old people always talkin' about people died for us, like that means something. Well, people die all the time nowadays, in case you didn't notice, and it don't even matter what for. They still just as dead!
MONA LISA. (Trying to diffuse a bad situation.) Hang on, Lil Bit. You gotta hold still, okay?
KEISHA. Tell her to quit agitatin' me.
HELEN. (A beat.) You make me tired. You and your whole sorry generation.
KEISHA. (Angrily.) You don't even know me!
HELEN. Oh, yes I do. I know all about you. You think the world owes you a living, just because you're breathing, but that's not the way it works. We're tired of worrying about you, fussing about you, trying to save you. We've done enough.
KEISHA. What did you ever do for me?
HELEN. I stood up! I worked hard. I was a good wife and a good mother.
KEISHA. I'm gonna be a good mother!
HELEN. (Almost hisses at her.) You're going to be a terrible mother. You should do that baby a big favor and go back to the clinic and finish what you started.
KEISHA. (Stung, she unconsciously touches her belly protectively.) You go to hell. (She walks away and sits alone. She is crying.)
MONA LISA. (Gently, but clearly disappointed in Helen's cruelty.) The thing you gotta remember, Miss Helen, is that Coretta had a whole movement full of people, clapping and singing and feeling that freedom in the air. It must have been quite a time, but there isn't any movement anymore. There's nobody coming to put their arms around Li'l Bit and her baby any more than there was anybody coming to see about me lying in that beat-up car looking where my life used to be.
HELEN. It's not the same thing.
MONA LISA. All I know is you can fuss at Li'l Bit all day and all night and she still won't know what you're talking about.
HELEN. Whose fault is that?
MONA LISA. What? That she doesn't have a clue or that she's out here all by herself?
HELEN. You know I'm right.
MONA LISA. (To ZORA) Could I use that cup of coffee about now. You feel like walking over there with me?
ZORA. Sure.
MONA LISA. (To ZORA) Not thanks. (They exit. Keisha is holding the fake baby, fussing with its clothes a little.) You okay?
KEISHA. You don't think I'll be a bad mother, do you?
MONA LISA. I think you'll do the best you can.
KEISHA. That ain't sayin a whole hell of a lot. (She puts the fake baby down roughly.)
MONA LISA. The thing is, Li'l Bit, you need some direction. Somebody to ask when you don't know whether to go left or go right or just sit your ass down and wait a minute for the smoke to clear.
KEISHA. So who am I supposed to ask? Deshawn don't know no better than me and Tyrone the biggest fool out there.
MONA LISA. It has to be somebody you trust. Somebody you
know will always do the right thing, no matter what.

KEISHA. I don't know nobody like that. Do you?

MONA LISA. My grandmother was like that. I knew if I could just get to her, she'd know what to do. (A beat.) But then she died. That's when I thought about Coretta.

KEISHA. My Coretta?

MONA LISA. No, the real one. About how you could always count on her to stand up and do what needed to be done, and I realized, it was her! She was the one I could trust, just like I used to trust my grandmother. So now when I'm confused and scared, I just ask myself What would Coretta do?

KEISHA. What 'chu think she'd do if she was me?

MONA LISA. (Gently.) I think she'd be standing right here in this line.

KEISHA. (Grins.) Good! Go on and finish my picture then. (She strikes a pose.) Is this the way I was standing before?

MONA LISA. It doesn't matter. Just be yourself. (Enter Gwen Johnson in a green Army uniform. She takes her place at the end of the line without speaking to the two women already standing there.)

KEISHA. You in the service? (Gwen ignores her.) My cousin Ricky tried to join the Army, but just because he been in jail a couple of times, they wouldn't take him.

MONA LISA. Tell him to try again. Unless he killed somebody, they'll take him now.

KEISHA. He didn't kill nobody. He was selling that crack rock and somebody told.

MONA LISA. When you think about it, it seems like the Army would be recruiting all the killers they could. They already got experience. All they need is a uniform and an AK-47 and you can put them on a plane and ship them out.

GWEN. That's not funny.

MONA LISA. Depends on where you're standing.

KEISHA. You was in the war?

GWEN. Yeah.

KEISHA. You never killed anybody, did you?

GWEN. I'm a medic. I'm supposed to save people.

KEISHA. Anybody ever shoot at you?

GWEN. They shoot at everybody.

KEISHA. While you was savin' people?

GWEN. It doesn't matter what you're doing.
KEISHA. Well, I'm glad Ricky didn't get to go then.
MONA LISA. I wish nobody had to go. (Helen and Zora reenter. Helen is carrying a single cup of coffee. Zora has a small cardboard take-out tray with four more cups.)
ZORA. Did you hear the announcement? They're taking a big group in just ahead of us. It shouldn't be too much longer.
KEISHA. Thank goodness! I'm about to freeze to death.
ZORA. Take one of these. I got two coffees and two teas.
KEISHA. Got any sugar?
ZORA. Helen has it.
KEISHA. (Rolls her eyes in Helen's direction, hands back the coffee.)
KEISHA. (Rolls her eyes in Helen's direction, hands back the coffee.)
That's okay. Never mind then.
ZORA. (Offers coffee to Gwen.) Coffee.
Gwen. No, thanks.
HELEN. (Looks at Gwen sharply.) Gweny?
GWEN. (Turns to Helen.) Ma'am?
HELEN. Gweny Johnson? It's Helen Richards, sweetie. From church.
GWEN. Miss Helen?
HELEN. Come here and give me a big hug! (They embrace.) I thought you were still over there being a big-time soldier. When did you get back?
GWEN. I've been on leave. I'm due to go back tomorrow.
HELEN. I know your mother was beside herself to see you.
GWEN. Yes, ma'am.
HELEN. She brags about you all the time. Did you get the package we sent from the usher board last Christmas?
GWEN. Yes, ma'am.
HELEN. Well, good. My Lord, girl, it seems like just the other day we were sending you off to boot camp and now look at you. All grown up and in the thick of things.
GWEN. Yes, ma'am.
HELEN. (Something in her tone makes Helen look at her sharply. She lowers her voice and speaks confidentially.) How's it going over there, Gweny? All we see is the news they want to show us and sometimes I don't know what to believe.
GWEN. We're doing the best we can, Miss Helen.
HELEN. Well, that's all anybody can ask. Here! Take this coffee. girl! Doesn't the Army give you a coat in this weather?
GWEN. I wasn't really planning to come down here …
GWEN and MONA LISA. (Speaking together.) It was just kind of a spur of the moment thing. (Gwen looks at Mona Lisa, surprised. Mona Lisa keeps sketching.)

GWEN. I just saw it on TV and I felt like I wanted to be here.

HELEN. Well, it's lucky for me that you did. Otherwise I wouldn't have seen you until next time. I've been so bad about getting to church lately. I'm ashamed to tell you how long it's been. How's your mother?

GWEN. The chemo was hard on her, but she's doing okay.

HELEN. I need to go by and see her.

GWEN. She'd like that.

ZORA. Excuse me. I didn't mean to be eavesdropping, but I'm doing a documentary and ... KEISHA. A *radio* documentary ...

ZORA. About why people came down here tonight and I'd love it if you would let me get you on tape.

GWEN. No, thanks.

ZORA. It would mean a lot to me. I don't have anybody from the military.

GWEN. Why don't you do Miss Helen? She met Mrs. King. (Keisha is surprised to hear this and looks at Helen with new respect.)

HELEN. She already got me, sweetie. Go on and talk to her. You've got a story worth listening to.

GWEN. Do I have to give my name?

HELEN. Of course you do, sweetie. How else will anybody know it's you?

GWEN. Gwendolyn Johnson.

ZORA. (Microphone ready.) Ready? (Helen nods encouragingly.)

GWEN. All right.

ZORA. We're here with ... GWEN. Do I have to give my name?

HELEN. Of course you do, sweetie. How else will anybody know it's you?

GWEN. Gwendolyn Johnson.

ZORA. Thank you, Ms. Johnson. Can you tell us why you came down here tonight?

GWEN. I ... it's kind of personal.
ZORA. That's okay. You can say whatever you want.
GWEN. Well, this afternoon I went to see a friend of mine, she's a Mexican and we did our first tour together. She's going back tomorrow, too. They're sending all of us ... When I walked in, she had these candles burning and incense everywhere. I could hardly breathe. So I asked her what she was doing and she told me she was asking the Virgin of Guadalupe to watch over us and that if I had any sense, I would, too. I told her I wasn't praying to anything I couldn't spell and she said well I better find somebody to pray to if I wanted to get back home in one piece. (Helen is still watching her with pride, but is unsure where this story is going.) So I started thinking about that and I tried to pray to Jesus like I used to, but being over there and seeing the things I've seen ... it makes you kind of wonder where God is in the middle of all that ... (Her voice trails off. Helen frowns. A beat.) What was I talking about?
ZORA. The Virgin of Guadalupe.
GWEN. Right, well I went home and my mom was watching the news and I saw all these people down here standing in line ...
KEISHA. Did you see me on TV?
GWEN. I don't think so.
MONA LISA. You weren't here when the TV cameras came.
KEISHA. Damn! Just my luck. Never mind then.
ZORA. So that's when you decided to come down?
GWEN. I just thought I'd ask Mrs. King to look out for me like my friend was asking the Virgin of Guadalupe. (A beat.) I know she's not a real saint or anything, but sometimes I think she's as close as we get. (A beat.) I ... I don't want to talk about this anymore.
ZORA. Maybe we can finish up later.
GWEN. Maybe. (She sips her coffee.)
HELEN. Gweny, what did you mean about wondering where God was?
GWEN. Nothing. Never mind.
HELEN. You don't sound like it's nothing.
GWEN. It's just ... it's just that people are doing things over there that aren't supposed to be a part of it. (A beat.) I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to ... HELEN. Don't be sorry, sweetie. You can tell me. Maybe I can help.
GWEN. Nobody can help. It's gone too far.
HELEN. There's nothing God can't fix. You know that.

GWEN. (Suddenly angry) Then why doesn't he? What the hell is he waiting for?

HELEN. (Shocked) Gwenny!

GWEN. (Trying to make her understand; knowing she can't) It's bad, Miss Helen. Nobody's saying how bad it is. You're all over here going to church and eating dinner and watching TV and we're over there just ... just ...

HELEN. Just what, sweetie?

GWEN. (She can't hold it in anymore) Killing people! We're over there killing everything that moves, including each other and that's just what they're going to do to me if I tell you or anybody else what I saw! They've got no problem digging a hole for me right next to where they put that old man!

HELEN. Calm down, Gwenny. You're not making any sense. What old man?

GWEN. I shouldn't have said anything ... just forget it. (Gwen turns away, trying to compose herself)

ZORA. (Trying not to scare her away) Are you talking about war crimes? (Gwen looks at her) I'm just saying, if that's what you mean, I belong to a group, African-American Students Against the War, and we talk about this a lot. We've seen the pictures with the hoods on the dogs. We've heard about the rapes ... is it something like that?

GWEN. Leave me alone, can't you?

HELEN. If it's something like that, you don't have to be ashamed. I know you didn't do anything bad.

ZORA. If you stand up, we'll stand up with you.

HELEN. Just like in the old days when me and your mom ...

GWEN. This is not the old days! It's just me, okay? It's just me! And I don't want to stand up! I just want out!

HELEN. Out of what? Talk to me!

GWEN. Miss Helen, I ... I'm thinking about not going back.

HELEN. Not going back where?

GWEN. To the war.

HELEN. To the ... (Realizing what she's saying) Oh, my god ... are you talking about deserting from the Army?

GWEN. There are worse things than being a deserter, Miss Helen, trust me.

HELEN. Not for a soldier! Soldiers go to war. That's what they do. Nobody made you enlist. Nobody forced you to raise your hand
and take that oath. You stepped up and made a promise, and now you're going to just walk away? Don't you know how much harder that's going to make it for the next little black girl who wants to be a soldier? Yeah?

GWEN. I would tell that little girl to run as far as she could, as fast as she could, and never look back.

HELEN. (A beat.) I never thought I'd say this, Gweny, but I'm ashamed of you.

GWEN. Ashamed of me?

HELEN. That's right. Ashamed. Black women used to stand for something. We were the backbone of the movement. Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers, Juanita Abernathy, Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta King. Those women risked their lives fighting for your freedom!

GWEN. Well, this is what my freedom looks like.

HELEN. Then I guess we were wasting our time.

GWEN. Maybe you were.

HELEN. (A beat.) Have you told your mother?

GWEN. Not yet.

HELEN. You know if you do, it will kill her. (This takes the wind out of Gwen's sails. She is afraid it's true.)

MONA LISA. In my experience, it's not the things you say that kill you. It's the things you don't say.

GWEN. Were you ever in combat?

MONA LISA. If I say it out loud, will you say it with me?

GWEN. What makes you think it's the same story?

MONA LISA. It's always the same story.

GWEN. You go first.

MONA LISA. All right. (She puts down her sketch pad and turns to Zora.) Okay, Miss Zora. I'm ready to answer your question.

ZORA. Now? I thought you ... 

MONA LISA. I changed my mind.

KEISHA. I think all y'all goin' crazy.

ZORA. (Scrambling to get her tape recorder.) We're here with ...

MONA LISA. (Ignoring Zora; speaking to Gwen.) I'm Mona Lisa Martin and I'm here to ask forgiveness.

ZORA. Forgiveness for what?
(Ignoring Zora's question.) The first thing you need to know is that …

MONA LISA and GWEN. … I wanted to leave but I couldn't.

(Throughout this next section, Gwen and Mona Lisa overlap certain lines as indicated.)

MONA LISA. I had to take care of my grandmother. She'd lived through hurricanes all her life and she figured this was just one more storm. I kept telling her it was going to be bad, but she just laughed and said for me to go on if I was scared and she'd see me when I got back. She knew I couldn't leave her, so I got some supplies and we boarded up the house, put new batteries in the flash-lights and got ready to wait it out. The wind was up, but the rain wasn't that bad and we sort of dozed off.

MONA LISA and GWEN. There was no way we could have known what was getting ready to happen.

GWEN. It was a routine patrol. We had been in the same villa five or six times already and we never found anything. The people who lived there usually went inside as soon as they saw us, but we couldn't have questioned them if we wanted to. Our interpreter wasn't around much anymore and the only things we knew how to say were ‘Stop! And put your hands on your head!'

The streets were empty except for one old guy who stopped to watch us pass. We waved at him, but he just looked at us and shook his head.

GWEN and MONA LISA. It seemed like we were going to be okay.

MONA LISA. But then something woke me up. I heard this sound like a freight train running right through the house. I jumped up and opened the front door and even in the dark, I could see this wall of water coming down our street. I slammed the door and ran to get Granny.

MONA LISA and GWEN. It happened so fast.

GWEN. One minute he was there and then he was gone. They bury these bombs they make right by the side of the road and Antonio must have stepped on one. He wasn't looking. He was laughing at this kid who was so green his boots weren't even broken in good so he kept complaining about how bad his feet hurt.

Antonio was always laughing. He was that kind of guy. Everybody liked him. I think when he got blown away, right in front of us, something in the guys just snapped.

GWEN and MONA LISA. We didn't know what to do …
Water started pouring under the door and I knew we had to get upstairs fast. I grabbed Granny's hand, but she was moving too slow so I told her to get on my back and I carried her upstairs. The water was already at the landing, so we went on up to the attic. MONA LISA and GWEN. I don't know why I thought we'd be safe there.

GWEN. The old guy was still standing on the street. He saw the whole thing, just like we did. Sarge told somebody to go get him and they did. But nobody could understand what he was saying so they dragged him off the road and shoved him in this hole. He was crying and begging and trying to climb out, but they kept shoving him back down. They were hitting him harder and harder even though he didn't have a weapon.

GWEN and MONA LISA. I had never seen anything like that before.

MONA LISA. The water followed us up the stairs and didn't stop. I climbed up on a table and pulled Granny up behind me. We were crying and praying and I thought we were going to die there in the dark.

MONA LISA and GWEN. Nobody was there to help us.

GWEN. That old man was so scared he peed on himself. I told them he was just a civilian and to leave him alone, but they told me to shut the fuck up or they'd do the same thing to me and then they hit him again.

GWEN and MONA LISA. I was so scared.

MONA LISA. They finally got us out with a helicopter two days later and took us to the Superdome. We had on the same wet clothes. Granny was shivering, but there was nothing I could do. There was no food, no water, nobody in charge, except the gangsters and...

MONA LISA and GWEN. ... they were doing whatever they wanted.

GWEN. They kept hitting the old man until his face was just covered in blood. I think he realized he was going to die so he started praying and I guess that made them even madder, so Sarge gave the order and they shot him. One by one, they all shot him.

GWEN and MONA LISA. And then they looked at me.

MONA LISA. But those guys only wanted the young girls. I was too old. I saw mothers trying to hide their daughters under the seats to protect them. They wouldn't even let them go to the bath-
rooms. It was too dangerous, so they just did whatever they had to do where they were hiding. The smell was terrible.

My grandmother wouldn't even look at me. She wasn't talking anymore either. I kept telling her at least we weren't going to drown, at least we were out of that filthy water, but she didn't say anything. Then we saw them dragging a little girl from under the seats two rows ahead of us. I tried to make them stop, but she was all by herself and nobody would help me. When I ran down there and tried to grab her, this guy told me to let go unless I wanted them to take my grandmother along for the ride. (A beat.) So I let go of that little girl's hand, but I could still hear her screaming.

MONA LISA and GWEN. It was like those guys weren't even people anymore.

GWEN. Sarge told me to shoot the old man, too. I said, he's already dead. What's the point? He said the point is I'm giving you an order and if you don't obey it, I'm going to shoot you. That's when I started crying because I didn't want to do it and they all started laughing and then Sarge said, well you love this old bastard enough to shed tears, why don't you get down there with him? And he pushed me into that hole and I fell against the old man and the others were laughing and saying Shoot him! Shoot him! And every time I tried to get out, they pushed me back down, just like they had done the old man and I knew if I didn't do it, I'd never come out of that hole alive. So I emptied my clip into his chest and ...

GWEN and MONA LISA. ... everybody started clapping and hollering.

MONA LISA. Because the buses were finally there to take us away, but my grandmother was already gone. (A beat.) They told me I had to leave her for them to bury. I wanted to cry, but by then ...

MONA LISA and GWEN. ... I didn't have any tears left.

GWEN. But every time I close my eyes, I see that old man's face.

MONA LISA. Every time I close my eyes, I hear that little girl screaming. (Zora turns off the tape recorder. For a moment, no one knows what to say. Then Keisha speaks softly to Gwen.)

KEISHA. Maybe ... maybe you got it wrong before. (Gwen looks at her.) Maybe you're not here to ask for her protection at all. Maybe you're here to ask Coretta what she would do if they was tryin' to get her to go over there and kill people. Maybe she can help you figure it out.

GWEN. (Exhausted and resigned.) Maybe she can.
HELEN. I'm so sorry, baby. I didn't know.
GWEN. Nobody knows. (They turn away.)
MONA LISA. That's good advice, Li'l Bit. How'd you get to be so smart?
KEISHA. (Grinning.) Listenin' to you, I guess.
MONA LISA. (Goes back to pick up her sketch pad.) Well, I finished the picture. (She hands it to Keisha.) What do you think?
KEISHA. (Looks at it and frowns, handing it to Zora.) You put us all in the same one?
MONA LISA. We're all out here together, aren't we? (Helen takes the picture from Zora and looks at it.)
KEISHA. (Watching Helen.) Yeah, I guess we are. (Helen looks at Keisha and slowly hands her the drawing. Keisha accepts it with a small smile, folds it carefully and puts it in the baby bag.)
ZORA. Look, I think they're about to let us in.
KEISHA. So what happens now?
MONA LISA. I think it's time for me to teach you a freedom song. Is it "We Shall Overcome"?
MONA LISA. No, Li'l Bit. That was Martin's song. This one's for Coretta.
MONA LISA. (She begins to sing.)
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.
(As she sings, Keisha begins to sing along with her.)
BOTH.
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine.
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.
(Gwen and Helen begin to sing, too. Keisha looks at Helen, who smiles at her as they sing louder and with more confidence. They move offstage as if they had just been admitted to the church, but then immediately...
return to the stage without the stroller, still singing. They begin to clap
their hands as they move forward for their curtain calls, inviting the
audience to sing along. If possible, the finished drawing is projected on
a video screen above the stage. In the drawing, the women are smiling
and standing as close as old friends.)

End of Play
NEXT ON THE MAINSTAGE!

ART

A TONY AWARD WINNING COMEDY

BY YASMINA REZA TRANSLATED BY CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON
DIRECTED BY LEWIS MAGRUDER
Presented by Department of Theatre at Miami University

NOVEMBER 18 - 20, 8:00PM
DECEMBER 2 - 4, 8:00PM
DECEMBER 5, 2:00PM

GATES-ABEGGLEN THEATRE

TICKETS: $9 ADULTS, $8 SENIORS, $6 STUDENTS, $4 CURRICULAR DISCOUNT
MU Box Office in the Shriver Center, 513-529-3200
www.tickets.muohio.edu

Miami University Department of Theatre presents

A Song For Coretta

By Pearl Cleage
Directed by Khalid Long

OCTOBER 27-31 2010
Studio 88, Center for Performing Arts
2010-11 MIAMI THEATRE SEASON

OCTOBER 6-10
GAME ON
Featuring plays by Zakiyyah Alexander, Rolin Jones, Jon Spurney, Alice Tuan, Daryl Watson, Marisa Wegrzyn and Ken Weitzman
Directed by Andy Gibb
MainStage • Gates-Abegglen Theatre

OCTOBER 27-31
A SONG FOR CORETTA
By Pearl Cleage
Directed by Khalid Long
SecondStage • Studio 88 Theatre

NOVEMBER 18-20, DECEMBER 2-5
ART
By Yasmina Reza
translated by Christopher Hampton
Directed by Lewis Magruder
MainStage • Gates-Abegglen Theatre

FEBRUARY 23-27
INDEPENDENCE
By Lee Blessing
Directed by Kaleigh-Brooke Dillingham
SecondStage • Studio 88 Theatre

APRIL 7-9, 14-17
THE WIZ
Book by William F. Brown
Music and Lyrics by Charlie Smalls
Directed by Paul K. Bryant Jackson
MainStage • Gates-Abegglen Theatre

A SONG FOR CORETTA premiered at Spelman College (February 15-18, 2007) as part of the celebration of the 75th anniversary of their drama department, which is where Ms. Cleage earned her undergraduate degree in theatre.
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Describing herself as a “third-generation black nationalist and a radical feminist,” Pearl Cleage states that the “primary energy that fuels [her] work is a determination to be part of the ongoing worldwide struggle against racism, classism, and homophobia.” Playwright, poet, novelist, essayist, and journalist Pearl Michelle Cleage was born December 7, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts. Her passion for civil, political, and social justice is presumably inevitable due to the fact that her mother was a school teacher, and her father, Albert Cleage, also known as Jaramogi Abebe Azaman, was a minister, activist, and founder of both: The Black Nationalist Christian Church and the Freedom Now Party in Detroit.

Grounded with a broad focus of the African American community, Cleage’s success as a playwright developed in 1983 with her New York productions of Hospice and the avant-garde style puppet play. Due to the mixed reviews, Cleage decided to abort the avant-garde style of playwriting and use more traditional, realistic forms of dramatic structure. Cleage’s success as a playwright blossomed to an even higher peak when she collaborated with Atlanta’s Alliance Theatre and its Artistic Director, Kenny Leon. Through this artistically fruitful partnership, Cleage’s staple dramas were produced: Flyin’ West (1992), Blues for an Alabama Sky (1995), and Bourbon at the Border (1997). All the while being an activist, Pearl Cleage has developed a unique style of writing with major themes seen through the lens of a feminist/womanist perspective. A performance artist in her own right, along with her husband, Zaron Burnett Jr., Cleage is the co-founder of the Just Us Theatre Co. and Club Zebra in Atlanta, where they’ve both served as performers, directors, and playwrights-in-residence.

CAST LIST

Helen Richards, Age 65  Meka Clifford
Zora Evans, Age 22       TaShayla Harrison
Keisha Cameron, Age 17   Ashley Dunn
Mona Lisa Martin, Age 40  Joceline Harper
Gwendolyn Johnson, Age 24  Jasmine Johnson

PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager          Christi Mueller
Deck Crew              Abigail Cady
Wardrobe Supervisor    Grant Johnson
Wardrobe Crew          Jordan Carlson, Mallory Morehead
Light Board Operator   Ruohan Zhong
Sound Board Operator   James Cox

SETTING: The sidewalk outside of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta, Georgia.

Coretta Scott King

Coretta Scott was born in Heiberger, Alabama. She was exposed at an early age to the injustices of life in a segregated society. She walked five miles a day to attend the one-room Crossroad School in Marion, Alabama, while the white students rode buses to an all-white school closer by. Young Coretta excelled at her studies, particularly music, and was valedictorian of her graduating class at Lincoln High School. She graduated in 1945 and received a scholarship to Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

As an undergraduate, she took an active interest in the nascent civil rights movement; she joined the Antioch chapter of the NAACP, and the college’s Race Relations and Civil Liberties Committees. She graduated from Antioch with a B.A. in music and education and won a scholarship to study concert singing at New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.

In Boston she met a young theology student, Martin Luther King, Jr., and her life was changed forever. They were married on June 18, 1953, in a ceremony conducted by the groom’s father, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. Coretta Scott King completed her degree in voice and violin at the New England Conservatory and the young couple moved in September 1954 to Montgomery, Alabama, where Martin Luther King Jr. had accepted an appointment as Pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

They were soon caught up in the dramatic events that triggered the modern civil rights movement. When Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat on a Montgomery city bus to a white passenger, she was arrested for violating the city’s ordinances giving white passengers preferential treatment in public conveyances. The black citizens of Montgomery organized immediately in defense of Mrs. Parks, and under Martin Luther King’s leadership organized a boycott of the city’s buses. The Montgomery bus boycott drew the attention of the world to the continued injustice of segregation in the United States, and led to court decisions striking down all local ordinances separating the races in public transit.

The Kings had four children in all: Yolanda Denise; Martin Luther, III; Dexter Scott; and Bernice Albertine. Although the demands of raising a family had caused Mrs. King to retire from singing, she found another way to put her musical background to the service of the cause. She conceived and performed a series of critically acclaimed Freedom Concerts, combining poetry, narration and music to tell the story of the Civil Rights movement.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Channeling her grief, Mrs. King concentrated her energies on fulfilling her husband’s work by building The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change as a living memorial to her husband’s life and dream. Years of planning, fundraising and lobbying, lay ahead, but Mrs. King would not be deterred, nor did she neglect direct involvement in the causes her husband had championed.

Mrs. King continued to serve the cause of justice and human rights; her travels took her throughout the world on goodwill missions to Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. In 1983, she marked the 20th Anniversary of the historic March on Washington, by leading a gathering of more than 800 human rights organizations, the Coalition of Conscience, in the largest demonstration the capital city had seen up to that time.

After 27 years at the helm of The King Center, Mrs. King turned over leadership of the Center to her son, Dexter Scott King, in 1995. She remained active in the causes of racial and economic justice, and in her remaining years devoted much of her energy to AIDS education and curbing gun violence. Although she died in 2006 at the age of 78, she remains an inspirational figure to men and women around the world.
DIRECTOR'S NOTES
by Khalid Long

On January 30, 2006, the world stood still. The world had lost "The First Lady of the Human Rights Movement." Broadening the dream of her husband, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mrs. Coretta Scott King created platforms that would present the ills of society. Mrs. King's determination for justice was not only a reflection of an historical struggle, but more importantly, her determination was a constant reminder that we must prepare the world for the future generations. When Mrs. King made her transition, there was only one question to be asked: How does one mourn the loss of such a courageous woman? Pearl Cleage's A Song for Coretta is a play about mourning and celebration. As the characters join the line to mourn the beloved Mrs. Coretta Scott King, each character finds herself mourning her own life. Yet, as each character tells her story and is finally able to breathe again, she celebrates the future. Pearl Cleage has not only added to the continuum of Black theatre that "testify to the truth," she has contributed to canon of Black plays with the primary focus of Black women. As a Black feminist playwright, Pearl Cleage has engaged Black Feminist Aesthetics to aid in the liberation of Black women.

Playwright Robbie McCauley made the statement that "Black playwrights and actors need inspiration, talent, and, long-term connections to black voices — literally and symbolically. Both tasks require a willingness to play with language — the meanings and the music of it, and certainly a vulnerability to the lessons of black history and politics." For this play, Mrs. Coretta Scott King is that "inspiration" and the stories told by the characters serve as the "lessons of black history and politics." I dedicate this production to a Black woman who has continuously shared her story with me: Mrs. Deara Justice Harper, my 102 year old great-grandmother.

-Pearl Cleage: "I wanted to create five african american women characters whose differences bring the tension to the moment. Each one has a different challenge. "

Playwright McCauley: "I wanted to be the big issues of these women are facing — aging, homelessness, war, single motherhood, etc. — and distill them down until the issues aren't the point anymore because what you're experiencing is their common humanity."

Professor Edythe Scott Bagley: "They had stopped everything for me to enter the church. I knew I would not stay long. I felt compassion for those waiting. I did not feel sad, for my sister was such an exemplary — I felt her time had come and she'd gone to a better place. There were only a few of us. I look at the casket and looked at her and it was real. I was crying and didn't realize it because they were handing me tissues. I closed my eyes for a while. I decided to look again — the last glance and I said, "I'm ready to go" and no more did I cry. God did it, so I didn't feel that sad... Coretta had thirty-eight years after Martin and Pearl Cleage has come up with a great play. It's very sad. For my sister was such an exemplary — I felt her time had come and she'd gone to a better place."

Quoted interview with Khalid Y. Long, director, Summer 2010

Professor Edythe Scott Bagley: "They had stopped everything for me to enter the church. I knew I would not stay long. I felt compassion for those waiting. I did not feel sad, for my sister was such an exemplary — I felt her time had come and she'd gone to a better place. There were only a few of us. I look at the casket and looked at her and it was real. I was crying and didn't realize it because they were handing me tissues. I closed my eyes for a while. I decided to look again — the last glance and I said, "I'm ready to go" and no more did I cry. God did it, so I didn't feel that sad... Coretta had thirty-eight years after Martin and Pearl Cleage has come up with a great play. It's very tight. I've read a lot of things that had to do with Coretta and they never get it right. Pearl Cleage got it just right."

Quoted interview with Khalid Y. Long, director, Summer 2010. Edythe Scott Bagley is the elder sister of Coretta Scott King. Professor Bagley is a retired Professor of Theatre and founder of the Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts at Cheyney University of PA.

DESIGNERS NOTES

Costume Design by Kate Hawthorne

A Song for Coretta is a piece that not only deals with the historical event of Coretta Scott King's Funeral but pulls from a wide history of other events with significant impact such as the war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

In doing costumes I wanted to represent each character fully, their experiences, and what they've been through and still tie them to Coretta Scott King and this monumental moment outside Ebenezer Baptist Church.

I wanted to use layers not only to denote the time of year but to suggest that there is much more to each of these characters than meets the eye. Color is also important, it allows us to go a little farther into each of these characters hearts. The color palette was inspired by a picture of herbs and flowers that were part of my early research for this show.

It was also important to allow each character to mourn in their own way without allowing depression to linger in their outfits. They are at a funeral, but this is not a sad story. Each of the characters is able to use this moment to speak their mind and release their stories. They are cleansing themselves and allowing the rain to wash away their troubles leaving room for hope to come through.

Scenic Design by Zack Guiler

A Song for Coretta offers particular challenges scenically. The playwright asks the designer to place these five women in a very specific point in space and time. However, in a play that is itself a memorial for the late Mrs. King, it became part of my responsibility to balance the realistic and the theatrical. I quickly began exploring the linearity of a city sidewalk. This became an easy way to suggest location without overbearing the interaction between the actors. As vital as Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia is to this script, the space that truly matters is between these women. The church itself had to be distilled into its essential architecture to both instantly give the audience a sense of place, and just as quickly, recede into the periphery.

The sense of loss that these women are coping with is ostensibly what has brought them all together. But as they discover the depth of their commonality, that mourning transforms into a celebration of one woman's life and an entire community's quest for equality. I wanted to reflect that relationship in this environment. The gravity of the situation inspired muddled colors of a city block and the heaviness of the geometric architecture; the comfort and hope these women find in each other engendered the strong verticals, light emanating from the windows, and the use of warm greys and browns.

I feel more connected to this script than any other I have encountered. The progression of grief, from the shock of loss to the celebration of life, is one that I became too familiar with while designing this show. I would like to dedicate the cathartic conclusion to this design process to the memory of my father.
Russ Blain (Lighting Design Advisor) received his BA and MFA degrees from The Ohio State University. Before joining the faculty at Miami, he served as the faculty lighting and sound designer & technical director at Northern Arizona University. He was the lighting designer and operations manager for Easter at The White House (1998–2000), and production manager for the Coastal Carolina Center for the Arts (1996–1998). Russ also served as the lighting designer and production manager for Hilton Head Dance Theatre (1996 – 2000). He toured as a lighting engineer with Tom Jones, Al Jarreau, and Nickelodeon. At Miami, Russ serves as lighting designer for the production season and supervises electrics crews. He teaches classes in lighting and sound design and technology, stage management, and script analysis.

Meka Clifford (Helen) is a first year honors student here at Miami University. She is a Theatre and International Studies double major. Meka hails from Eleryia, Ohio and is very excited to take part in her first ever collegiate production. She would like to thank all of her friends and family, especially her Mom, Dad, and brothers Tim and Tyree for all of their love, support and amazing encouragement.

Gion DeFrancesco (Scenic Design Advisor) joined the faculty of Miami University in the fall of 2001 and teaches courses in scene design, design communication skills, scene painting and American musical theatre. He also designs scenery and serves as scenic charge artist for MU Theatre productions. Favorite designs at Miami include Pentecost, In Quest of Love, As Bees In Honey Drown, A View From the Bridge, and The Good Person of Setzuan. Regionally he has designed and painted at a number of theatres including Big River at the Gallery Players of Brooklyn, I Love You! You're Perfect! Now Change! at the Florida Repertory Theatre, and The Magic Flute at the Illinois Opera Theatre. His 2006 design for Ovation Theatre's production of The Little Foxes earned a Cincinnati Enquirer Acclaim Award.

Leticia Delgado (Costume Design Advisor) is pleased to join the theatre faculty at Miami University. Some of Ms. Delgado's previous design credits include The Merry Wives of Windsor, Macbeth, A Streetcar Named Desire, A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, A Flea In Her Ear, and The Laramie Project. Prior to relocating to Oxford from Santa Barbara, California, Leticia was the Theatre Production Supervisor (Costumes & Makeup) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Leticia also designed costumes for the Santa Barbara Dance Theatre's international tours of China and Ireland. Ms. Delgado has also held the post of Assistant Professor of Costume Design at Ball State University. Some of Leticia's specialties include period dress, pattern drafting, draping and costume crafts. Ms Delgado has amassed numerous Master Draper credits. Leticia received her MFA in Costume Design and Technology from the School of Theatre at Illinois State University and is a member of USITT.

Ashley Dunn (Keisha), hailing from Cincinnati, Ohio, is a Junior theatre major. A Song for Coretta is her third stage production with the MU theatre department and second time working with director Khalid Long. Ashley performed in several roles, including: Joe Turner's Come and Gone (Bertha Holly), Euripides' Medea (Chorus/Woman of Corinth), Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You (Diane), just to name a few. Ashley would like to thank her family (Mommy, Padre, Ari, Alexis, & Hannah) for always being her constant support and strength. Ashley would also like to shout out to her girls Trish & Court for making these years at MU livable [you guys are the best!!!]. Enjoy the show.

Jocene Q. Harper (Moni Lisa) is a senior theatre major from Boiling Springs, SC. She is the daughter of Alisha Burnside & Ron Harper. Miss Harper She has performed in the Miami productions of Down In Mississippi and Uninetown: The Musical. She would like to thank God for blessing her with the wonderful opportunity to be a part of this production and getting a chance to work with such magical people. A special thanks to Dr. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson and Khalid Long for believing in her with her growth process as a performer and a person. Extra special thanks to her parents, plus her friends and family. This has been an amazing experience, which she will never forget and will forever be grateful for.

TaShayla Harrison (Zora) is a first year here at Miami University. A Song for Coretta is her first production that she has worked on since being here. Past productions include Grease, Merry We Roll Along. Great Works of Shakespeare abridged, Fiddler on the Roof, Almost Maine, and Once on This Island. Besides acting TaShayla loves to sing and be around fun people that always makes her day! She would like to thank family for their wonderful support, her amazing cast and crew members for making this experience possible, and she would like to thank Khalid for casting her and giving her this opportunity! Enjoy the show everyone!

Kate Hawthorne (Costume Designer) is a senior double major in theatre and creative writing. She has acted in several past productions at Miami, but this will be her first for costume design. Kate is also currently working on her scenic design for Independence which can be seen in Studio 88 this Spring. She wants to thank everyone who gave her this opportunity and helped her along the way, and hopes that you enjoy the show.

Paul K. Bryant-Jackson (Director Advisor) is professor of theatre at Miami University. Prior to coming to Miami, he was associate professor and chair at Spelman College. His theatre and performance interests center on the African Diaspora, post colonialism and issues of race, class, gender and sexuality. His work as a director mirrors these interests. In 2002, he directed Suzan-Lori Parks' Venus. He is co-editor of Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy. He is an active member of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, the Black Theatre Network, and the Modern Language Association. He is the editor of Blackstream, a journal devoted to conference papers of the Black Theatre Association (ATHE). One of his recent productions he directed at Miami University, Bourbon at the Border was selected for regional entry for the Kennedy Center/ American College Theatre Festival. He recently directed Laramie Project: 10 Years Later as part of the national event devoted to the 10 year anniversary of the death of Matthew Shepard and to bring sharp focus to anti-gay hate legislation.

Jasmine Johnson (Gwendolyn) is a senior theatre major. This is her first Miami University production and she couldn't be happier to be apart of A Song for Coretta. She would like to thank her family for all of their support. She would also like to thank Mr. Khalid Long, Dr. Jackson and all of her acting professors for giving her the opportunity to continue to grow and develop her talent.

Khalid Yaya Long (Director) is a second year theatre graduate student at Miami University native to Philadelphia, PA. Khalid’s research focus is Theatre and Performance of the African Diaspora. As a performer, Khalid’s past productions include: August Wilson's Fences (Cory) and The Piano Lesson (Boy Willie); Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun (Karl Lindner); Shakespeare's Hamlet (Polonius); James Baldwin's The Amen Corner (Brother Boxer); Charles Fuller's A Soldier's Play (Sgt. Waters); and Sophocles' Oedipus the King (Oedipus). In addition to performing and stage managing, Khalid has served as assistant director for several productions, including: for colored girls...; Othello; Day of Absence; The Church Fight. Previous to coming to Miami University, Khalid was an education intern at The Wilma Theatre (Philadelphia, PA) and taught theatre history at Bartram High School (Philadelphia, PA). Khalid served as president of the Cheyney University Alpha Psi Omega Chapter (2008-2009). In April 2011, Khalid will be traveling to Rutgers University (New Jersey) to deliver a paper, “Hip-Hop as the Old/New Form of Drama: Amiri Baraka and the One-Man Show”, at the Northeast MLA convention. Khalid received his BA in theatre arts from Cheyney University of PA; concentrating in Black drama, education, and communication arts. Khalid thanks all who've supported his endeavors, with a special thanks to his advisor, Dr. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson.
Christi Mueller (Stage Manager) is a sophomore theatre major with a minor in arts management. She has worked set run crew for The Arabian Nights and makeup/costume run crew for Alpha Psi Omega's production of Miss Witherspoon.

Steve Pauna (Technical Director) joined the Department of Theatre at Miami University as faculty technical director in 2000 and has also served as department properties master since 2002. He has been an active presenter at United States Institute for Theatre Technology national conventions, presenting for both the technical production and education commissions. He currently serves as secretary for the regional branch, USITT Ohio-Valley. Professional credits include the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, nine seasons of technical direction and/or scene design with the Porthouse Theatre Company, which performs on the grounds of the Blossom Music Center near Cleveland, and nine years of technical direction and/or scene design for the Paul Bunyan Playhouse in northern Minnesota.

Zack Guiler (Scenic Designer) would like to thank you for supporting Miami Theatre. He is a senior theatre major, minorin Art History. Past roles include designer for Alpha Psi Omega's production of Miss Witherspoon, intern on the set of Robert Randolph and the Family Band's If I Had My Way, and set dresser of the feature film Where the Party At. He also serves as the president of Alpha Psi Omega, and vice president of the Walking Theatre Project. Special thanks go out to his family and friends for being so supportive through this process, and a very special thanks to his mentor, Gion DeFrancesco.

The Kennedy Center
THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival™
XLIII

The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education; Dr. Gerald and Paula McNichols Foundation; The Honorable Stuart Bernstein and Wilma E. Bernstein; the Kennedy Center Corporate Fund; and the National Committee for the Performing Arts.

This production is entered in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF). The aims of this national theater education program are to identify and promote quality in college-level theater production. To this end, each production entered is eligible for a response by a regional KCACTF representative, and selected students and faculty are invited to participate in KCACTF programs involving scholarships, internships, grants and awards for actors, directors, dramaturgs, playwrights, designers, stage managers and critics at both the regional and national levels.

Productions entered on the Participating level are eligible for inclusion at the KCACTF regional festival and can also be considered for invitation to the KCACTF national festival at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC in the spring of 2011.

Last year more than 1,300 productions were entered in the KCACTF involving more than 200,000 students nationwide. By entering this production, our theater department is sharing in the KCACTF goals to recognize, reward, and celebrate the exemplary work produced in college and university theaters across the nation.

FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE

Artistic Director/Producer
Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix

Gion DeFrancesco

Steven Pauna

Tom Featherstone

Brittany Balfour, Amara Checchio, Joceline Harper, Kate Hawthorne, Cara Janney, Alex Krusinski, Kristen LaViscount, Megan Oherdoerter, Michael Patton, Kristen Whiteley, Brett Barrett, Amber Bryant, Collin Campana, Taylor Davis, Ashley Dunn, Jakob Fudge, Christine Graffy, Stephen Jackson, Krithieka Kalalith, Kylie Kochert, Kendra Leondard, Adam Pusateri, Changhan Ryu, Lindsey Shepard, Chelsea Skalski

Russ Blain

Kristen LaViscount, Alyssa Olson, Robert J. Wehinger

Keith Aracri, Brittany Balfour, Megan Blackwell, Brian Cagnon, Collin Compana, Rae Dick, Karen Gaske, Alex Hickey, Sujan Khanal, Ryan Knapper, Jon Kovach, Joceline Harper, Kristen LaViscount, Daniel Lees, Kendra Leonard, Hannah Mills, Garrett Pepich, Aaron Pittenger, Robert Stimmel, Alyssa Sutter, Annie Wilkins

Steve Pauna

Brittany Balfour, Samuel Coffey, Adam Kezele, Alex Krusinski

Gion DeFrancesco

Brittany Balfour, Heather Weaver, Jess Winters

Amara Checchio, Emily Conklin, Sarah Haynes, Joe Palomaki, Maxim Sobchenko

Meggan Peters

Amelia Bergman, Heather Boddy, Christina Casano, Grace Czerwinski, Caroline Kwatkeng, Emily Lane, Kate McCarthy, Michele McVicker, Carrie Joy Miller, Julia Munro, Mari Taylor

Austin Bonifas, Meghan Gallatin, Assurne Johnson, Ellen Kenrich, Ally Leisure, Erin Mizer, Stephanie Niro, Allie Pickerill, Emily Van Treese, Megan Weaver, Kiyah White, Jenna Yates

Kristen LaViscount

Rachel Bain, Tyler Buechler, Allie Larrabee, Mei Han Lee, Katelyn Mahood, Mason Maxwell, Changhan Ryu, Lara Wolford, Amber Yaw

Audience Development Crew

Mattea Benz, Heather Boddy, Brianne Davidson, Emily Durbin, Katherine O'Donnell, Hannah Pemps, Chelsea Spencer, Dale Sullivan, Britney Woodruff, Jenna Yates, Britanni Yawn

Jeanne Harmeyer

Karen Smith

Cheryl Chafin

Kaleigh-Brooke Dillingham

Stefanie Wagner

Julia Guichard

*denotes member of Alpha Psi Omega, the National Theatre Honor Society
Production Photos

Publicity Photo
The Set
Zora and Helen
Mona Lisa and Helen
Mona Lisa, Keisha, Helen, and Zora
Gwen
Mona Lisa and Gwen
Zora, Mona Lisa, Keisha, Helen, and Gwen
They Finally Enter the Church