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Josephine Baker & Me: Black Femme Identity in Performance

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JOSEPHINE BAKER & ME: BLACK FEMME IDENTITY IN PERFORMANCE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of The Department of Theatre and Dance

Scripps College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

by

Meghan Gwinn

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Introduction

Performance can be ‘the act of doing something,’ how well one does the activity, or the action of entertaining via disciplines such as dancing and acting (Cambridge). Performance theory suggests that individuals put on a performance in society. Whether through the clothing, conversation, or corporeality, all are a performance designed as a signal-system between individuals to indicate place within social groups (Goffman 1969: 28). Others such as Judith Butler (1993) and Jacques Derrida (1990) have drawn attention to the way performances seek to reinforce and communicate various identities in society (*1807 Commemorated*). Mae G. Henderson identifies performance as “the arena in which we are other-identified and self-imagined” (208). Performing onstage, in public ceremonies, and in everyday life are a continuum with each category leading to, and melding into, the next (Schechner, 2013). Identity is understood as a social relationship rather than an intrinsic quality of humanity (Glaser, 2016). In this thesis, I aim to contribute to literature on the complicated intersection between Black womanhood and performance by considering Josephine Baker as a site to engage the concept of “performing identity.”

I discuss both the development of burlesque and the history of Josephine Baker to provide a foundation for my investigation of her early-career movement and visual practices. I then explore these hallmarks through Sherril Dodds’ “critical components of neo-burlesque striptease” writ into her book, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*. Although I find Dodds to be a useful lens, her narrow research pool prohibits her from developing a complex understanding of how Black femmes relate

to burlesquing. The components include “an erotic play, the presence of humour, a solicited audience interaction, and the desire to tease” (106). For the purpose of my exploration, I interpret ‘play’ as 1) “[a] work for the stage or to be broadcast,” or a performance, and 2) fun, or a jest (Merriam-Webster). Thus, my first section discusses Baker’s erotic ‘performance’. Next, I explore the “presence of humour” in Baker’s erotic ‘jest’. Finally, I conclude my inquiry in a discussion about Josephine Baker’s “desire” and relationship to her audience. Josephine Baker’s relationship to burlesque is important to discuss as a prime example of the complicated relationship between performance and marginalized identity in an environment predominantly shaped by white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, her iconography has endured decades and still remains relevant in Black performance today.

Development of Burlesque

“Burlesque” derives from the Italian word *burla* and later *burlesco*, which means to joke, make fun, or a mockery (etymonline.com). Correspondingly, a burlesque may occur either in literature or drama and involves ridiculing a subject for the sake of humor. Goals of a burlesque, however, aren’t limited to comedy for comedy’s sake: humor has the opportunity to provide sharp commentary. Thus, because they are both poignant and entertaining, burlesque works are popular for social critiques (*Literary Terms*). For the objective of this paper, I am less interested in burlesque literature, such as Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, and am more concerned with burlesque drama. Neo-burlesque, which is considered contemporary burlesque performance, is the progeny

of burlesque performance originating in 17th-century England. However, it was not until Lydia Thompson, and her troupe the British Blondes, debuted in New York in 1868 that burlesque became particularly related to the image of the feminine spectacle in the United States (Dodds 109). Although the popularity of this performance style began to decline in the United Kingdom toward the end of the 19th century, it flourished in the United States, adding elements of minstrel shows. In the 20th century, striptease in burlesque became more prevalent. When other forms of amusement such as radio and film began to threaten the allure of Vaudevillian entertainment in the 1920s, striptease burlesque ramped up to continue meeting the demands of their audience (Howard, 2018; Doherty, 2016). The 1930s might be considered the golden age of burlesque where the practice evolved into high art and propelled names such as Sally Rand and Gypsy Rose Lee into Hollywood stardom (Doherty, 2016). By the 1940s, the form began to decline in the United States due to censorship and shutdowns in New York, and the classic burlesque showgirl became obsolete by the 1960s due to the rise of strip clubs. However, in the 1990s burlesque was reborn and continues to flourish today. Celebratory creations such as the Miss Exotic World Pageant and the Burlesque Hall of Fame began to acknowledge burlesque culture, past and present, and ultimately served as platforms to recreate performance hierarchies. New burlesque stars, such as Dita Von Teese, rose to international fame for their homage to classic 30s and 40s showgirl burlesque aesthetics (Howard, 2018). The practice was no longer necessarily always intended for employment, however, but instead became a hobby for a more sexually liberated feminist landscape. Consequently, new burlesque, or Neo-Burlesque, has evolved into a performance art and

has come to encompass a wide variety of acts, such as striptease, sure, but is widely used as means for female empowerment, or more purely as body reclamation and celebration for any persons interested in the practice (Tutino, 2013).

The (Extremely Abridged) Life of Josephine Baker

In this analysis, I restrict my frame of reference to Josephine Baker's early life. Therefore, I run the risk of perpetuating a one dimensional narrative about Baker although she continued to dynamize her craft throughout her lifetime. Therefore, I provide a biography, extending beyond her early career, to build a fuller picture of Baker's historical presence. Josephine Baker was born on June 3, 1906, as Freda Josephine McDonald to Carrie McDonald. McDonald was an aspiring dance-hall performer who became a laundress to meet the demands of a growing household. In her official biography, Eddie Carson, a vaudeville drummer, was listed as her birth father. However, Josephine's unofficial adopted son, Jean-Claude Baker, disputes this claim arguing that instead her father was a white man for whom Carrie McDonald worked (Baker & Chase). In youth, before Josephine began her career as a performer, she lived in and worked in white households to sustain herself although often times becoming the object of abuse by her employers¹. Continuing in a traumatic vein, one could also understand how eleven-year-old Baker's first-hand experience in the East St. Louis Race Riots of 1917 further compelled her to eventually trade her American origins for an adopted France². Three years after having survived the race riots, Baker left her mother

¹ *Jazz Cleopatra* p. 12 - 13

² *Remembering Josephine* ch. 2

and moved to be with her Aunt Elvara and Grandmother McDonald. Grandmother McDonald, who left home in search of a better life, was somewhat of an inspiration to Baker's own transnational movement³. By age thirteen, she began her vaudeville career with the Jones Family Band and the Dixie Steppers⁴. In August 1922, she was recruited into the chorus for the Black Broadway show, *Shuffle Along*. Afterwards, she found more success in *The Chocolate Dandies* and *In Bamville* before landing the role in *La Revue Negre* which took her to Paris, France in 1925⁵. When she performed in *La Revue Negre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, she rose to stardom seemingly overnight. After *La Revue Negre* finished a successful tour on the continent, Baker broke her contract and decided to return to Paris where she starred in her own act at the Folies Bergere and solidified the iconography of the banana skirt. From then on, she also developed her craft in singing and film acting⁶. Although Josephine Baker is remembered as a performance icon on stage and film, her "roles" extend beyond the confines of traditional performance spaces and enter into a wider social, cultural, and political landscape. During World War II, Baker served as a Red Cross nurse during the German occupation. She also worked as a spy for the French Resistance, smuggling information written in invisible ink on her sheet music and pinning correspondence to her undergarments⁷. Starting in the 1950s, she settled in an estate, Château des Milandes, where she spent a decade adopting twelve children from different corners of the world to build an idealistic multicultural family -

³ *Jazz Cleopatra* p. 49

⁴ *New World Encyclopedia*

⁵ *Encyclopedia of World Biography*

⁶ *New World Encyclopedia*

⁷ *Biography.com*

her “Rainbow Tribe.”⁸ During this time, she also involved herself with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States through performance and public speaking. Towards the end of the 1960s, Baker came close to bankruptcy and subsequently had to give up her estate. In 1975, Baker gave her final performance in a revue celebrating her half-decade long career. On April 12, 1975, two days into the run of her show, Josephine Baker died from a stroke.

The Erotic ‘Performance’

When Dodd’s wrote her entry about burlesque, although she spoke extensively about the importance of gender for burlesque, her only mention of racial politics was a cry against a low level of “diversity” in the art form while centering the “mobility” in white, upper class-identity in burlesque performers. Thus, her narratives neglect the complicated intersection between race and gender; more specifically, how Blackness and femmehood-- together-- form a unique experience. Here, I’d like to focus in on misogynoir: “anti-Blackness and misogyny [combined] to malign Black women” in the world (Moya Bailey, 2014), and the specific way in which the hypersexualization of Black womanhood has lent itself to the “erotic play” Dodd’s mentions as an essential part of a burlesque. Josephine’s “erotic play” -- that is, her erotic ‘performance’ -- has been created by and in response to French colonial primitivist ideals. Josephine flourished as the “Ebony Venus,” in part for the way she showcased her bottom in her movement. The name was bestowed unto her with reference to Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi South

⁸ Petty, AP.

African woman who was enslaved, displayed for her large *derriere* before European colonists as an ethnographic specimen and curiosity, and was named the “Ebony Hottentot.” The connection between monikers points to a similarity in the way the colonial gaze understood and classified Baker. Perhaps Baker’s most iconic performance is the infamous *Le Danse Sauvage* wherein Baker dances before a sleeping white explorer wearing nothing but a skirt of bananas, colloquially known as the “banana dance.” After her performance, dance critic Andre Levinson raved about her qualities in his review:

[T]here seemed to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movement, a gushing stream of rhythm.... In the short *pas de deux* of the savages, which came as the finale of the *Revue Negre*, there was a wild splendor and magnificent animality. Certain of Miss Baker’s poses, back arched, haunches protruding... had the compelling potency of the finest examples of Negro sculpture.

Her decidedly non-European corporeality dressed in the bareness of imagined primitivist aesthetics satisfied the French colonial desire for “Africanness,” although she was from St. Louis, Missouri. But Mae G. Henderson asserts that what made Baker so captivating was not only her erotic performance, but her dichotomous play between the erotic and parodic (190). Baker excelled at titillating and amusing audiences.

The Erotic ‘Jest’

Although Dodds does not directly consider Baker, she may agree that Baker’s jest -- that is, her humor -- is “located in the complex way in which [she] simultaneously embrace[s] and critique[s] the [racial] images that [she] employ[s]” (Dodds 127). Psychologists Caleb Warren and Peter McGraw define humor as a “psychological

response characterized by the positive emotion of amusement, the appraisal that something is funny, and the tendency to laugh” (2016). A theory on the psychology of humor that is gaining widespread acceptance, the benign violation theory, essentially states that “we find something funny when two conditions are met: it violates the way we think the world should work, and it does so in a way that’s not threatening” (Luttrell, 2016). Sherril Dodds writes “humor can be understood as a binding mechanism that facilitates expressions of social cohesion and a means to affirm human relationships” (125). Additionally, ‘comedy’ applies to a facet of drama, but can also refer to a range of styles including traditional practices such as pastoral, farce, burlesque, pantomime, satire, and the comedy of manners; or, also many modern subdivisions: cartoons, sitcom, sketch comedy, slapstick, stand-up, panel shows, game shows, impressionists, caricatures, drag acts, and silly walks (Stott, 2014). My research in Baker’s comedy techniques led me to Eric Lott’s inquiry into blackface minstrelsy, an early-19th century form of American entertainment that mocked people of African descent, in which his discussion revealed racialized and racist comedy to be underwritten with both desire and repulsion (2013). In *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*, minstrelsy is “tragicomic performance based on the hegemonic dialectic of race relations” (Jules-Rosette, 2007). Josephine Baker comedic style on the Parisian stage reflects her experience on the Vaudeville circuit, and more specifically, her integration of racialized and sexed comedy developed in a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal United States.

In Black vaudeville, she was “the comic chorus girl, the one who stood at the end of the line and pretended she couldn’t remember the steps or keep up with the others”

because she was considered too short, too skinny, and too dark in comparison to the other girls on stage (Rose 52). At other times, she entertained audiences with her energetic movements as the “blackface pickaninny” in minstrel comedy (Henderson 186). In these practices, she mastered the art of comedic timing and developed her satirical brand which notably includes “sinking on elastic legs, crossing her eyes, and fanning her famous *derriere*” (Henderson 190). While Dodds focuses on facial expressions in new burlesque as means for providing “critical performance commentary,” Baker instead uses her entire body to consciously reject her audience’s desire to reduce her to a hypersexual object for consumption (124). Josephine’s willingness to parody the Black body may elicit discomfort in a contemporary viewer as playing into, and emphasizing, negative stereotypes is considered harmful for reinforcing toxic narratives created by the dominant culture. At the end of Henderson’s essay, she acknowledges that “a performance vocabulary based on repetition with a difference” has the ability to “simultaneously [be] transgressive and recuperative, repressive and liberation, [and] constraining and enabling” (208). I agree with Henderson’s offerings that Baker’s methods risk endorsing dominant culture codes. However, I also believe that Baker’s performance practices provide provocative tools and insights into negotiating space and identity as a Black femme performer whose social and financial success depends on hegemonic (that is, raced, gendered, and sexed) consumerism.

Agency of Desire

Perhaps Dodds might consider Baker's early career to be a "mutually validating [relationship between] performer and spectator" as her audience was eager to see her and she was willing to provide the content for which they yearned (123). However, a more thoughtful consideration of identity beyond "performer" or "spectator" would benefit the discussion by providing a more contextualized dynamic. Not only was Josephine a performer, her identity included - among many others - a traumatizing Black American experience. Unlike Dodds' focus on predominantly white, educated women, Baker's status did not grant her the "temporary licence to perform [the] marginalized body:" Josephine Baker was a marginalized body and was therefore objectified even beyond the confines of the stage (Dodds 116). Baker's intersected identities are integral to the way one should consider her relationship to her audience. Narratives of Black women, historic and present, are often one dimensional and diluted. Black women have been described as objects of eras, people, and situations rather than self-constituting. Therefore, I aim to acknowledge Baker's own authority over herself and the content she produces, and seek to build a more dynamic interpretation of Baker's legacy by reaffirming her agency within the context of her identity as performer and a colonized body through discussing her *desire* to tease. 'To desire' is to 'strong want' or 'crave' something (*Merriam-Webster*). Thus, it is a word of subjecthood and agency. 'Desiring' is not passive. Henderson asserts that Baker's performances "re-enact the obsessive need of the colonizer to 'look' and the obsessive desire of the colonized to be 'looked at'" which parallels Dodds' reflection on Lydia Thompson who "exerted control over and evinced

pleasure at her sexual representation” (Henderson 177; Dodds 110). Although Baker was a product of the popular culture around her, she was also a cultural producer. In Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s discussion of African Art, she mentions that Baker also learned about African sculpture and used the imagery to decide poses for photographs and choreography (138). The success and iconography of *La Danse Sauvage* also enabled her to push commodities. Amongst these were anti-wrinkle banana-based moisturizers; dolls adorned in banana skirts; and *Le Bakerfix*, a pomade to slick down the hair which generated almost as much revenue as her staged appearances (Rose 87). By producing the object of white desire, she was able to exercise control over her image -- and her audience -- despite working under oppressive circumstances. Baker “recognized that however fervent her admirers were, in some way they all wanted to exploit her [and thus] it seemed only fair that she should be able to exploit them in return” (Rose 87).

Conclusion

Dodds offers useful ideas on what makes burlesque performance captivating and a viable practice, although her discussion of identity is oversimplified as she focuses on the dominant, privileged burlesque narrative. However, by cross-examining other writings on Josephine Baker, one is able to inspect a non-dominant story that may resonate more with Black performers who must constantly negotiate themselves to fulfill the demands of a performer-audience relationship that does not exist independently of inequity. In the early stages of my research on Josephine Baker’s experience, I found very little autobiographical information on her own thoughts and feelings regarding her

positionality. Instead, existing resources were full of other people’s musings and projections. Josephine Baker’s carefully crafted public image is devoid of an emotional vulnerability that I relate to the effects of practicing the “strong black woman” archetype. “The Strong Black Woman archetype is a culturally salient ideal prescribing that black women render a guise of self-reliance, selflessness, and psychological, emotional and physical strength” (Baker, et al., 2015, p. 51). With this in mind, I developed my show considering how might I personally attempt to deviate from Baker’s public conventions. In creating my thesis performance, CATHARSIS, I grappled with how much of my own vulnerability I wanted to share with audiences. With this project, I explore vulnerability as a tool for healing although I am unsure if I want to pursue “healing” in a performative space.

Outside of my own artistic musings, Baker remains relevant to other Black performers today. From Baker-inspired neo-burlesque choreography by Australia's premier burlesque artist Zelia Rose⁹ to Beyonce’s banana skirt in her 2006 Fashion Rocks performance¹⁰, Black artists from around the world continue to pay homage to Baker’s brilliance. The Irresistible O, a Black burlesque and pin-up historian and educator, wrote in the *21st Century Burlesque Magazine* that “Josephine gave me specifically the acknowledgement that I am a beautiful black woman – both in mind and in body. That my mind and body are actually perfect for pinup, burlesque, and any other genre, and no one can stifle me” (*21st Century Burlesque Magazine*). Josephine Baker’s cultural contributions extend beyond iconography. Baker’s commitment to finding personal

⁹ “Zelia Rose Performs Bananas! A Josephine Baker Tribute Burlesque Act” on *Youtube*

¹⁰ Jerkins, Morgan. *Vogue*.

empowerment amidst inequity inspires contemporary Black femme performers to continue proudly, boldly, and unapologetically.

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CATHARSIS

Written & Performed

By

Meghan Gwinn

LIGHTS UP

PART 1: Meghan

SOUND CUE: *A loop of the first 13 seconds of “Motherless Child”.*

MEGH begins painting on the drywall with her hands, but does not make more than maybe a few marks.

SOUND CUE: V.O. When I draw myself, I can only commit to broad lines; a generic character. Understand, eyes closed, wide open, in the mirror, or in a picture, I do not see myself. My own perception of self is distorted by the bold markings penned by others. Society - peers - friends - enemies - depression - imagination - and family; blurred even further by adoption.

MEGH develops a violent version of the “Mom” cyclical movement sequence that gains in intensity as she attempts to paint. She eventually stops trying to paint altogether and fully embraces the choreography. This happens because Megh is developing a frustration with herself.

V.O. Moreover, I hardly ever feel myself. I occupy a space that profits when I am fragmented and absent. My personhood was dismembered as soon as my mother became a Black woman in America; centuries of hooded figures with cleavers splitting my fingertips, religiously lodging hot crosses into my aorta, // flooding my fragile capillaries with salty water.

SOUND CUE @//: *Water Dripping begins*

SOUND CUE: *Cut Motherless Child loop*

MEGH winds down in speed until she’s still.

V.O.: Somewhere along the way the flow slowed to a dribble. I assume it’s because I cannot be both dead *and* profitable.

SOUND CUE: *Cut Water Dripping*

PART 2: Cathy

*MEGH: (singing, a capella) Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*

A long way from home, a long way from home

SOUND CUE: *Grover Washington Jr's "Just The Two of Us" plays. It is dreamy, as if it enters from a far off place, until it centers and becomes present.*

YOUNG MEGH plays with joyful abandon in Paula's closet. SHE tries a dress on in one corner then crosses to another corner to put on Paula's jewelry. SHE crosses down right to another point, where SHE plays with a scarf. SHE moves to the floor where she unboxes and plays with a stethoscope. She grabs the Adoption Box, and reads her files where she becomes disturbed.

SOUND CUE *"Just the Two of Us" becomes convoluted. The song skips (?) until it is abruptly turned off after the "Mom" sequence.*

MEGH returns the files and backs away to play in the closet again, but is fixated on the Adoption Box. Her playful movements are distracted, corrupted.

MEGH repeats the violent "Mom" movement sequence.

SOUND CUE: *"Just the Two of Us" fades out.*

MEGH: Cathy Patterson. She was 19. The reality feels different seeing her name on paper. Siblings! Two! Me, the youngest. Given away. An insecurity, but a question: why me? I ask myself year after year, and suddenly I'm twenty-two. It is six days after my birthday, for which she does not wish me a happy one. She tells me on April 4th, 2019 (*MEGH removes the LETTER from her pocket.*)

CATHY: CONGRATULATIONS! On your achievements. I wish I was half the woman as you are today. Everything I've dreamed of doing you have been there and done that one hundred times. I think I still have a chance at accomplishing my goals but I need lots of help. Enough about my pity. I truly am honored to still have you in my heart and in my life. And I know that someday we will cross paths to start a new beginning together as one. I do love you so much, that I don't regret what I've done. But I do regret what had happened to me to even put you in this situation. So with that I really couldn't come to terms on aborting you.

SOUND CUE: *Humming of "Motherless Child"*

MEGH: (*Processing, comprehension, and deconstruction. A process.*) I wish CONGRATULATIONS on the woman I've dreamed of one hundred times. I really

couldn't come to terms on the woman you are today. I think I still have a chance at accomplishing a new beginning. And I know that someday I need lots of help. On your achievements, I truly am honored to still have you. But I do regret what had happened to me to even pity you. Enough about my aborting you. I don't regret you.

MEGH repeats the most hard-hitting pieces of text to herself. Only a few words. She simultaneously begins to rip up the LETTER and lets the pieces fall to the ground.

MEGH: *(picks up the hammer)* Running around these thoughts with “words” I’m supposed to know but can’t really feel. The disconnect between me and you, me and myself, me and the essence of an existence given to me by the labor, love, and pain of the Me’s before me now. And so when I beat, brood, or bruise, see it as my desperation to feel something other than dissociation. To wanting to feel real but knowing I might never Be.

During the following soundscape, MEGH chips away at the drywall with hard object.

SOUND CUE: V.O. *(a remix, convoluted, skipping barely intelligible)* When I draw myself, I can only commit to broad lines; a generic character. Understand, eyes closed, wide open, in the mirror, or in a picture, I do not see myself. My own perception of self is distorted by the bold markings penned by others. Society - peers - friends - enemies - depression - imagination - and family; blurred even further by adoption.

MEGH stops chipping at the drywall and backs away with hammer in hand.

Moreover, I hardly ever feel myself. I occupy a space that profits when I am fragmented and absent. My personhood was dismembered as soon as my mother became a Black woman in America; centuries of hooded figures with cleavers splitting my fingertips, religiously lodging hot crosses into my aorta, flooding my fragile capillaries with salty water. Somewhere along the way the flow slowed to a dribble. I assume it’s because I cannot be both dead *and* profitable.

MEGH backs away from the drywall and crumbles onto the floor.

PART 3: Paula

SOUND CUE: *Minnie Ripperton's “Loving You”. It is dreamy, as if it enters from a far off place. MEGH is snapped out of her dissociation by this sound. MEGH locamotes about the [head]space, until she transforms into PAULA.*

LIGHT CUE: *Light shift, melting into something more pleasant, less intense*

PAULA hums momentarily as she begins interacting with Toddler Meghan on the floor. Tasks include braiding Toddler Meghan's hair, placing hands on Toddler Meghan's shoulders and looking at her (in the mirror?), and cuddling her. PAULA watches Toddler Meghan grow up into Teen Meghan. PAULA interacts with Teen Meghan. Tasks include straightening Teen Meghan's hair, brushing it, placing hands on Teen Meghan's shoulders and looking at her in the mirror, then turning her around for a hug.

SOUND CUE: *"Loving You" fades*

PAULA'S hug melts/transitions into MEGH hugging herself while being wrapped up in a memory.

MEGH: *(simplified, first three movements from the "Mom" sequence during)*
Transmitted from mothers and grandmothers... from father to son. I can attest to the ways in which music and movement are lovingly passed from generation to generation.

SOUND CUE: *Humming V.O. begins.*

MEGH performs 30 second version of "Mom" choreography. A dramatic expansion of the monologue movements, beautiful.

MEGH: *(layered with the "Mom" movements, simplified)* I remember feeling my head trembling in the crook of my mom's neck. She always held me when we stayed too late at my uncle's house because they, without fail, talked and laughed for hours. I remember smelling her permed, burnt hair. Rubbing her smooth fingernails. Hearing her muffled voice through her chest. The butter and salt still in my mouth from dinner. That sharp cross necklace around her neck. My head continued to *reverberate* as I listened to her muffled words. Sometimes the chatter died down and she was quiet. Instead, she'd hum to herself. (beat) And she'd hum to me, too. Often her refrains were remnants of memories lost in time; or, she reveled in ditties she composed on the spot. *(Stop cyclical movements)* But when she found the right one, the rest of her body sang, too. Foot tapping, Back patting, body swaying. She was the metronome and the orchestra. And me, an audience quietly inspired.

SOUND CUE: *Humming fades*

MEGH: She touches me and feeds to me a stew of love

whose flavor I recognize but cannot describe.
My lips, fissured and flaking,
find communion in her broth
as she pours into me her tender blessings, potent and devotedly, to soothe my shackled
jaw and nurse an unacquainted tongue.

*MEGH internally sits with these words and decides to pick up the ripped pieces of the
LETTER.*

MEGH: I love you. I love you.
(MEGH moves upstage to place the pieces of the LETTER in her painting)
I love you. I love you. I love you.

PART 4: Us

MEGH begins painting once more on the now-chipped drywall.

SOUND CUE: *The beginning of Nina Simone’s Feeling Good begins to play.*

MEGH: “Here I reclaim myself, rename myself if need be, and remember that I am
always becoming, undefined by what has happened to me or hasn’t happened for me”¹¹.
With bruises and oozing wounds, I find comfort in my histories and strength for my
future. “I am both the container for my experience and the witness of how it pours forth.
Like water overflowing, I allow my imagination to play with the possibilities of what it
looks like to live into, through, and beyond the stories of my life”¹².

LIGHTS FADE OUT

THE END

¹¹ Nicholas, Chani. “Horoscopes for the New Moon in Pisces – March 2019.” *Chani Nicholas*, Mar. 2019, chaninicholas.com/new-moon-pisces-march-2019/.

¹² “”

SELF-EVALUATION

CATHARSIS is a solo show created to process one's personal journey towards self-recognition amidst the (de)stabilizing effects of adoption. The show broadly explores the dynamic relationship between visibility, movement, and healing as Megh negotiates what it means to take space and be vulnerable in an environment that seeks to minimize black femme expression. Movement is a highly personalized conversation between body and space. Visibility is relational; and describes the ability to be witnessed and recognized either by the self or others. As an individual is both a product of their own perceptions and the perceptions of those around them, movement and visibility are useful lenses through which one may be defined. It is through this dual lens that one has the potential to become a more critical interrogator of western colonial ideas relating to body and space. Thus, healing is experienced through unlearning harmful movement habits, (re)discovering nurturing ones, and benefiting from internal and external validation throughout the process.

My intention was to make CATHARSIS a very visceral piece. In its developmental stages, curating a thoughtful sound design was important to me. The show

is supposed to take place in my mind and therefore also thought building a sonic world would help weave audiences into my headspace. Furthermore, using movements that stemmed from the same origins, such as the “violent mom” sequence and the “loving mom” sequence, enhanced the performance because it allowed audiences to track the evolution of my movement vocabulary. Lastly, integrating the recent message from Cathy, my birth mother, helped raise the emotional stake for me because it forced me to avoid historicizing my narrative. The message felt present, real, and reminded me that my relationship with my birth mother is still an unresolved part of my life.

Building CATHARSIS was a challenging process because I had to navigate my own insecurities about my artistic capacity and emotional vulnerability. Throughout the semester, I struggled with writing content because I didn’t feel a willingness to share my vulnerability with the Claremont community. By the end, most of the written content that I included in the script was from an essay I wrote for a class during my sophomore year and poetry I had written over the past couple of years. Although the composition was old and included topics I have been negotiating my entire life, such as adoption and depression, the stress from the process spilled over into my daily life. I found myself discussing my relationship with Cathy more often with the people around me. I also cried every day for two weeks leading up to the performances because of how intensely and consistently the show made me come face-to-face with my insecurities around unconditional love and abandonment.

Moving forward, I’d like to continue building onto CATHARSIS but ultimately cease participating in theatre for awhile. Originally I decided to build my own thesis

show with the intention of submitting it to international theatre festivals, but I'd like to take a break from the Arts after graduation and instead explore other interests of mine, such as physical therapy or business. However, I am taking CATHARSIS to the Hollywood Fringe Festival in June. I think performing my show outside of an academic context will help me validate myself as an artist and may feel healing. I feel the need to refine moments in CATHARSIS, with a special focus on the ending, before the Fringe Festival. I acknowledge, however, that I am also exhausted from the thesis process and want to step away from thinking about the show for a couple of weeks.