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## Entrapment: An Exploration of Blackness in the Theater World

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Entrapment:

An Exploration of Blackness in the Theater World

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of the Arts

Of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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**Table of Contents**

Pawns ..... 16

Introduction .....21

Inspiration and Implementation

    Dante’s *Inferno*.....23

    Mass Incarceration Panel Discussion .....26

*Funnyhouse of a Negro* .....29

Challenges ..... 32

Conclusion .....33

Acknowledgments .....34

Bibliography..... 35

## Pawns

CAIN: An older man/woman, s/he is sad, lonely, and slightly unaware of (or unbothered by) his/ her actions.

JONES: A younger man/woman, s/he is polite but easily aggravated, fully unaware of the world that surround him/her.

Cast

Cain Micah

Cain II Soraya

Jones Jaquan

Jones II Aniya.

Setting:

The stage is an all white domestic front yard. A porch, with chairs, is attached to a silhouette of a house. A lawn table and chairs sit downstage right. A chess set sits on the table.

On the opposite side of the stage two women enter fighting. They fight for a few moments then one woman bangs the others head against the ground. Then all is still on the stage. CAIN gets up the female murderer gets up. While whistling they both drag the bodies of the dead. CAIN Off stage left Woman on stage left. Blackout.

They knock over the items that were set right at the top of the scene. Finally CAIN II over powers JONES II. CAIN II is on top of JONES II as CAIN and JONES enter stage right fighting. The mirrors descend as all becomes still on the stage.

They lunge for each other in a dance like struggle. Rolling around the stage knocking over various items. Both Jones's kill both Cain's. Jones II drags Cain II off. Cain I is left in the corner of the stage, stage left, Jones I walks to the chair on the porch)

## Pawns

(Curtain. The stage is dim. We see a man, CAIN, drag another mans body from stage right to stage left. The lights come up as he crosses to Stevie Wonder's My Cherie Amour. CAIN reaches stage left leaves the man and crosses upstage right. He sits in a chair on the porch smoking. As CAIN sits and the music dims the other man, JONES, wakes up and is visibly confused. He sits for a moment, dazed, and then spots CAIN. )

JONES

Excuse me. Could you point me towards the main road?

(CAIN slowly rises making his way to the edge of the porch. JONES walks towards him. )

CAIN

What's your name?

JONES

It's Jones... nice to meet you. And your name?

CAIN

Cain.

(CAIN steps down into the yard. They meet center and shake hands. Cain begins to tend to the yard. )

JONES

(from center)

So do I make a left when I leave here or a right? And about how far away is the road?

CAIN

Where are you from?

JONES

(confused. Trying to remember)

...Uh... I'm from.... Um...

CAIN

And what brought you here?

JONES

...Um. To be honest, I'm having a little trouble remembering where I am. Where exactly-

CAIN

(Cross to chess board stage left.)

Do you play?

JONES

Sure...Yeah.

CAIN

Have a seat. Let's play.

JONES

Ok. If I play a game will you tell me how to get to the road?

CAIN

Sure...sure.

(They both sit. (Beat) They cross their legs in unison. Cain starts the game. They play for a few seconds (10-15) They make up the rules as they go moving several pieces at a time. Neither should be aware of the fact that the game is composed of pawns.)

You know my best friend taught me how to play. Lives right down the street. We've been friends for years. Where'd you learn to play?

JONES

(Slightly exasperated. Focus leaving the game.)

I don't really remember. I guess its just one of those days.

CAIN

(Without hearing him. Still playing the game)

One of my good friends, more like a sibling, actually.

(They continue the next few lines without hearing each other.)

JONES

To tell you the truth I'm not even sure how I ended up here.

CAIN

Taught me a lot.

JONES

It's so strange.

CAIN

How to play chess.

JONES

The last thing I remember is...

CAIN

(Cain is upset for a second. Then reaches in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes)  
But I always lost.

(Jones looks around the yard perplexed.)

Do you smoke?

JONES

What? Oh yeah sure...

(They both take a drag and lean back.)

it's your move.

JONES

(Cain studies the board for a while again (10-15secs). Jones breaks visibly frustrated.)

Can you please tell me how to get to the main road? I don't mean to hurry you, but I do want to get home.

Where's home?  
It's um... uh... it's...

It's your move.  
Fine. Let's just finish this game as quickly as possible.  
(They sit back and cross their legs again in unison. They continue playing (less amount of time maybe 5-10 secs. )

Right because you want me to tell you how to get out of here.  
Exactly.

Then I should probably tell you I don't know how to get out of here.  
What? That's it! I'm leaving. I'll just figure it out on my own.  
(Standing and moving from the table towards stage left. Cain rises and places a hand on Jones's shoulder. They do not break contact for several lines. It is somewhat like a dance/Waltz. )

I don't know how to get out of here but you know who will....  
This is ridiculous...  
My friend, from down the street.  
Fine. Which house is it?  
Make a left and go two doors down...or maybe it's a right and two doors down.

I'm sure I'll find it. Thank you!  
(They break contact. Jones moves away.)

Wait!

(Cain moves back towards the table. Jones stands indignantly downstage right)  
You don't want to finish our game? You have to be careful in this neighborhood. It can be very dangerous.

JONES

What is that supposed to mean?

CAIN

Have a seat?

(Jones continues to pace upstage. Cain resets the game.)

Some of the people around here are dangerous. But not all. Some of us are peacemakers. You don't want to sit?

(Jones remains standing)

Take the men down the street, for example. Now Leroi he's dangerous but August and James are peacemakers. It's their job to make sure that everything remains right.

(With force.)

Sit down Jones!

JONES

Excuse me?

CAIN

Please?

(desperately.)

I just want some company.

(Jones crosses and sits. Cain is satisfied.)

When people like Leroi forget the rules, people like August and James remind him.

JONES

What rules?

(Cain should perform the text slightly through his body while continuing the chess game. He should begin the monologue engaged in the game.)

CAIN

The rules keep us safe. And people who break the rules are punished. One day Leroi started thinking that he could run the neighborhood. He started to talk about how he could change things, make them better. August knew that the neighborhood doesn't change. So he and James met secretly to discuss what should be done and it became clear that Leroi needed to be stopped.

(Cain's focus shifts slightly from the game to the story. He still plays but with less intent. Jones is mildly interested. But still studying the board).

They spoke to others in the surrounding houses and they plotted against Leroi. He'd called a meeting for the next day one that the whole neighborhood would attend. So they thought that would be the perfect place to put an end to his talk. The next day people from every house crowded in Leroi's yard. August and James watched as he emerged from his house with pride on his face. Leroi looked over the crowd and then he opened his mouth to speak. Before he could even get the words out a mob descended on him. It grew violent quickly.



(This brings Cain to his feet. He moves to center. He begins to pantomime the rest of the action. Jones is now interested but slowly growing concerned)  
They forced him to the ground and then they began to stab him over and over and over again. His screams rang out through the neighborhood. And when he felt a break in the onslaught he scrambled to get up. Blinded by blood he tried to escape. He pushed past the people in his yard, dashed through the gate and down the street. He was almost at the edge of the neighborhood when James caught him. James grabbed him and pulled him backwards and Leroi fell head first onto the pavement.

(Cain is not back near the table. His focus is returning to the game. Jones's is completely away from it.)

James stood over him watching his friend die. Just as Leroi began to close his eyes August arrived and he and James reached down and pinned our flower on Leroi. And then they turned and left his body where it was. They made an example of him-

JONES  
(Horrified but interested. No longer playing game)

Our flower?

CAIN  
(Now fully absorbed in the game.)

People don't run the neighborhood. It runs itself.

(With a slight laugh. Looking up from the game)

And people definitely don't leave. That is against the rules.

(Moves pawn)

Look at that. Check mate!

JONES

What do you mean our flower?

CAIN

Let's play another game.

JONES

What are you talking about? I need to get out of here!

(Jones rises frantically. He paces the stage giving attention back to Cain on his lines)

CAIN

You can't leave Jones.

JONES

Excuse me?

CAIN

Leaving is against the rules

JONES

For people who live here. I don't live here.

CAIN

Then where do you live?

JONES

Goodbye.

CAIN

I can't let you leave. I'm sorry but those are the rules.

(Cain rises running after Jones)

JONES

Who's rules? What are you talking about?

(They struggle for a bit)

CAIN

They're not mine. You just can't leave

JONES

You can't hold me here. No I'm leaving. Thank you for your time.

CAIN

You can't leave Jones. You can't leave!

(Fight choreo. Al Greens Lets stay together plays. At this CAIN lunges at JONES. They struggle for a bit. Rolling around the stage knocking over various items that CAIN set right at the top of the scene. Finally CAIN overpowers JONES. He is on top of him his hand around his neck we watch as he bangs JONES's head against the ground. The music ends. He drags Cain's body off stage right. The stage is bare for a few moments. Then a woman drags another onto the stage humming. Let's Stay Together.)

## SCENE II

(This scene should occur at a quicker pace than the last. The female murderer (CAIN II) sits on the porch smoking. The younger woman (JONES II), now alive, is inside the front yard.)

JONES II

Excuse me.

(CAIN II slowly rises making her way to the edge of the porch. JONES II walks towards her.)

CAIN II

Looking for the main road?

JONES II

Yes! Could you point me towards it?

CAIN II

Name?

JONES II

It's Jones ma'am...

Cain. CAIN II

Nice to meet you. BOTH

(CAIN II steps down into the yard. They meet center they shake hands. CAIN II begins to tend to the yard.)

JONES II (from center.)

Now which way-? Sorry I'm having a little trouble remembering where I am.

CAIN II

Where are you from?

JONES II

I'm... um... I... I'm from...

CAIN II (Cain crosses to chess set.)

Do you want to play a game?

JONES II (Sits reluctantly.)

Um... Sure? I'm not sure that I know how to play.

CAIN II

Doesn't matter.

JONES II (She starts to move. Cain grabs her hand and pulls her backwards.)

I probably should be going.

CAIN II

Just one game. (They play for a few moments 5-10 seconds)

I have a friend down the street who taught me how to play. Taught me a lot.

JONES II (Jones's focus leaves the game.)

You know. I'm not even sure how I ended up here.

CAIN II

But I always lost.

JONES II

The last thing I remember is...

CAIN II (Cain reaches in her pocket for a pack of cigarettes. Before Jones can answer she places one in her mouth)

You smoke? Your move.

JONES II

I really should be leaving.

CAIN II

You don't even know where that is?

JONES II

What?

CAIN II

Home.

JONES II

Yes I do it's ... um...it's

CAIN II

It's your move.

JONES II

Ok if I finish this game will you tell me how to get to the road?

CAIN II

Sure, sure!

(They play for a few moments. Both are absorbed in the game.)

I should probably tell you that I don't know how to get out of here. But my friend does. Just down the road. Make a right and go two doors down. Or maybe it's a left and two doors down.

(Cain rambles for a few moments She seems to be making up the game as she goes along. At times she moves JONES's pieces for her. Jones has become still and dazed after a while she is suddenly reanimated and frantic.)

JONES II

Stop! I have to get out of here.

(She raises frantically)

CAIN II

You have to be careful in this neighborhood. It can be very dangerous.

(Cain points a finger at Jones. She slowly becomes a puppet master. Jones enters into a dance with herself unable to leave.)

JONES II

What is that supposed to mean?

CAIN II

Some people are dangerous and some are peacemakers.

JONES II

I want to leave.

CAIN II

Take the women down the street, for example.

JONES II

Get away from me!

Lorraine is a peacemaker. She reminds people like Adrienne not to break the rules.

JONES II

What rules?

(Jones movement ceases she moves towards the table.)

CAIN II

Sit.

(JONES sits Cain resets the board. As she tells the story. Cain should see it all happening before her.)

The rules keep us safe. Lorraine is a peacemaker and Adrienne needed to be punished. One day Adrienne got it in her mind that it was time for her to leave the neighborhood. She said she had outgrown it. She told Lorraine that she had something better waiting for her. Well everybody knows the rules, you don't leave the neighborhood. So once word got out that Adrienne thought she was something special, we knew that we had to fix that. We arranged for her to be taken. And on the day her captors walked into the neighborhood Lorraine kissed Adrienne on the cheek to signal that she was the one who needed to be punished. She served our greatest example. They killed her in the center of the street and let her body lay there so everyone knows that you don't leave the neighborhood. And then we pinned our flower on her.

(The board is set for a new game. Cain looks at it.)

Check mate.

JONES II

(Jones remains seated)

This is insane. I can't stay here.

CAIN II

Another game?

JONES II

(Jones remains seated.)

I need to get out! I need to get out I need to get out!

CAIN II

Leaving is against the rules!

JONES II

(Exasperated Jones rises and paces around the stage frantically.)

Out! I need to get out!

CAIN II

(CAIN II rushes behind JONES II grabbing her they struggle for a bit.)

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry but those are the rules.

JONES II

Who's rules?

CAIN II

Not mine.

JONES II

I'm leaving. Thank you for your time

CAIN II

You can't leave!

(Al Green's So You're Leaving begins to play. Fight choreo. Eight Counts choreo. 16 counts puppet. 8 counts love. 8 counts die center. Cain gets up and stands over Jones. She drags her body stage left. Cain I drags Cain II on stage right)

### SCENE III

(The movement in this scene should be irregular and dance like. All of the Cains do their fight choreo individually. The choreo begins slow and labored. Increases until they are all in a frenzy.)

JONES I

Hello I'm looking for the main road.

CAIN I

My friend down the street might be able to help you.

CAIN II

You have to be careful.

JONES II

I'm looking for a way out of here.

CAIN I

Down the street and to the left.

JONES II

Or maybe the right.

CAIN II

Yes the right.

JONES I

This is insane.

And how do I find him.	JONES II
Down the street.	CAIN II
And to the left.	JONES II
You have to be careful.	CAIN II
People don't leave the neighborhood	CAIN I
Jones	JONES II
Who's rules?	CAIN I
He was banished here.	CAIN II
For his foolishness	CAIN I
His arrogance.	Both CAINS
Abandon all hope.	CAIN II
People don't leave the neighborhood	CAIN I
For his sake	CAIN II
He was banished here	CAIN I
Our flower	CAIN II
And it was so unbearable	CAIN I
So insufferable	CAIN I
Stay with me.	CAIN II
Stay with me.	CAIN I
Have a seat Jones	JONES I
This is insane!	JONES II
I need to get out. I need to get out	

People don't leave me	CAIN II
Another game?	CAIN I
Who's rules who's rules?	JONES II
Sorry I'm Sorry I'm Sorry.	CAIN I
I'm Sorry .	CAIN II
I'm sorry.	Both CAINS
Not mine, They're not mine.	CAIN I
Thank you for you time	JONES II
You can't leave!	CAIN I

(Final Fight. Aint no Mountain High comes on. The 1's 2's find each other and begin the fight choreo of their respective scenes. They begin and end the same this time however, at the last second the joneses gain the upper hand and kill the Cain's. They drag their bodies to the corners of the stage. (Cain 1 and Jones 1 stage right and Cain 2 and Jones 2 stage left) The Jones's cross upstage right to porch and sit.)

Excuse me.	CAIN I
Could you point me towards the main road?	CAIN II
	(CAIN's rises and slowly make their way to the edge of the porch. JONES's walks towards them.)
What's your name?	Both JONES's
It's Jones... nice to meet you.	CAIN I
And your name?	CAIN II
Cain	Both JONES's
	Both CAIN



Could you point me towards the main road?

( Stevie Wonder's As begins to play. Mirror panels descend Cain 1 and Cain 2 meet in front of the mirror and hold hands. Jones 1 and Jones 2 meet in front of the mirror and hold hands. We fade to silhouette. Blackout.)

END

## Introduction

An overwhelming amount of my conversations, as of late, seem to morph into a discussion of race and racial politics. My peers and I will begin by discussing almost anything; classes, weekend plans, relationships. Then, consistently, and perhaps unconsciously, we find ourselves reflecting on anything from the lack of diversity in the classrooms to the difficulties of navigating Bard's hookup culture as women of color. Now, it is not my intention to imply that I am ashamed of this; the conversation is undeniably vital. My fear, however, is that without realizing it, race will slowly become the only thing that I discuss. For that reason, I was determined to separate my senior project from the subject. I was successful, initially, toying with ideas such as femininity, then familial relationships, then a host of other focuses. This continued until one day during the early stages of the group planning process. The entire senior theater class chose to collaborate using Dante's *Inferno* as a source text. Throughout the beginning of the process we held a number of meetings to discuss logistics. During one such meeting, I entered still determined not to write about race but by the end felt led to do just the opposite.

When discussing the complicated process of casting eight shows with a limited number of actors, one group came forward with a process they thought would solve our problems. They claimed that the best way to handle the potential issue of overworking our actors would be to have each group email every actor that they were interested in. Then we would limit the actors to two or three shows and allow them to pick the shows they wanted to be in. I was wary of this for a number of reasons. **First, getting responses from**

the actors might prove difficult. It was very possible that we could reach out to some actors and never hear back. Second it could potentially foster tense relationships between the seniors and the students in the rest of the department. Finally, the actors knowledge of each of our projects was incredibly limited; asking them to choose would simply be a question of which seniors they liked best, in essence a popularity contest. I voiced all of these concerns at the meeting and was immediately shutdown. I was told that the things I'd said had already been considered and that the idea that they had come up with just made the most sense. I tried to add more to my argument but I was met with the same response. After that I felt quite resigned. I did not fully agree with it but I was willing to live with it. I fell silent and allowed the next person to speak. To my surprise, this next person stated all of the same concerns that I had just voiced. I was sure that my peer would be met with the same steadfast answers that I'd received, but they were not. In fact, it was after this person's statements that slowly the room began to agree the originally proposed method, might not be the best.

Initially I tried, quite diligently, to find a reason as to why my peer's statements were received and mine were not. It is possible that the group needed to hear the sentiments from a second person. Or perhaps, my peer was more assertive than I was. I might have faltered too much in my language to be taken seriously. However, as I mentioned above, I have grown quite accustomed to rationalizing my experiences under the lens of my blackness. What I do know is this, I am black and the student repeated my same concerns and was met with acceptance, is white. For that reason, I felt that it would be foolish not to, consider the possibility that this was racially motivated. Not consciously, but subconscious racism is very real and very present. Or rather, it seems to be, then again

I can never be sure. Thus, begins the constant questioning. I find myself battling my own thoughts, simultaneously claiming and dismissing the presence of racism. My words falter when trying to describe this feeling. It is infuriating, paralyzing, consuming, and so much more. What is worse, is the realization that my peers, likely, don't even remember this incident. Yet, I have composed an entire project around it. To be black at this school, and in this country, is to silence yourself. Racism is institutionalized, and insidious. I have become accustomed to denying my own experience long before the aggressor has a chance to, and then I have the blood on my hands they do not. This is both terrifying and fascinating; that is why I pushed against my initial instinct and made the decision to talk about race in my senior project. Through reflection, however, I realized that I might never have had a choice.

I am haunted by the possibility that the only successful work that I will produce in my lifetime will be related to my race. This frustrates me; but frustration is always futile and inevitable when dealing with this issue. So, I must forgive myself for it, but I would be remiss if I did not also question its function. Has this frustration served or hindered me as an artist? I am fortunate because for now I am interested in the subject of my own blackness. I haven't yet lost my captivation with its temperamental nature and have remained intrigued by its consistent refusal to be fully understood. But what will happen when this is no longer the case. When I am finally ready to abandon the subject, if such a concept is even possible in the arts, is it ethical for me to do so. What's further, and perhaps most maddening; will I even be able to?

When I began to write the script for my senior project, I had come to the conclusion that it is nearly impossible to be a successful artist of color if your work does

not explore your race. I am not the first to state this. In *An Octaroon*, the character BJJ states the following “ “Black playwright.”/ I can’t even wipe my ass/without someone trying to accuse me/ of deconstructing the race problem in America. / I even tried writing a play about/ talking farm animals once-/ just to avoid talking about people-/ and this literary manger was like, “oh my God! / you’re totally deconstructing African folktales aren’t you?” ”<sup>1</sup>. Comical as it may be it bears some truth. I cannot say without a shadow of a doubt that he is right, but this has been my experience during my time at Bard. We rarely discuss the concept of whiteness when reading Checkov, or Brecht. That is not to say that we do not, at times, have polite discussion about the racial privilege and neglect present in these writings. Their work however can be widely studied and exist outside of race. Most of the works by black playwrights that I have read have received recognition because of the way in which they deal with race. When reading plays by white men, race can be an aspect but it is rarely, if ever, argued to be the whole subject. I have observed that when reading the work of black playwrights their success is often proportional to their observance of blackness. When exploring this, once again I felt frustrated. I did not want to be forced into a subject or feel that in order for my work to be well received I should talk about what it means to be a young black woman. For this reason I set out to do what I, at the time, believed to be impossible. I wanted to create a work that could be viewed and analyzed without the mention of race. The day after my experience at the meeting I wrote the following in my notebook. “We as black playwrights are interested in seeing whether or not we can use an entirely black cast to make a piece that isn’t inherently linked to race,

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobs-Jenkins, Branden. *An Octoroon*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, n.d. Print. pg 10

or gender, in the same way we believe white male theater makers can. We understand that this is difficult. In aiming not to make a play about race we inevitably create one. We don't approach this subject with the words perfection or answer in mind. Instead, we approach this project with a strong sense of exploration and curiosity." After we had chosen our initial goal, Soraya and I set to work finding inspiration. The presence of three sources are most evident in our final product; Dante's *Inferno*, a panel discussion about mass incarceration, and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of the Negro*.

### **Inspiration and Implementation: Dante**

As the senior class had chosen Dante's *Inferno* as a source text, it made the most sense to start there. When we agreed to work with the text, Soraya and I chose the subject of the ninth circle, treachery. Our minds, initially, went in a number of different directions before settling on race. Initially, we wanted our piece to engage with them as directly as possible. With time the focus shifted to the text of the piece and we wanted to explore fratricide. Our thought that familial relationships and murder were fascinating fodder for the stage. I asserted that killing your brother, or kin, was in many ways a murder of self. When we made the decision to focus on race, our idea of treachery shifted, out of necessity.

I began to truly ponder my experience, not only as a black playwright, but also as a black person in this country. My parents, worked tirelessly to instill a sense of pride in our race within my sister and me. This prompted one of my initial questions. Yes, I wanted to focus on the possibility of writing about something other than race, but I also questioned whether or not it was right to do so. As I stated earlier, would it be ethical for us to aim to abandon the subject. Does the act of trying to separate yourself from your race imply

shame? Do you spit in the face of your ancestors by attempting to move away from the subject, something that was arguably impossible during their youth. Put simply, is it treacherous to pursue this disassociation with race? This was our way into the text and how Dante became most present in our thought process. It was then that we began to incorporate this idea practically into our piece. To our surprise Soraya and I found that many of our earlier ideas would translate along with our newfound question of treachery. Both our focus on the audience and fratricide could be observed under this new lens, with the audience it was shown in the text.

As mentioned above we thought it important to implicate the audience with this piece. This is done with the absence of the mention of race in the text. This is essential to the play. It is the device that tests, most explicitly this theory that black playwrights cannot write about anything other than their blackness. There is no mention of race throughout the entirety of the play. This then makes us question whether or not the play would be perceived differently when played by actors of different races and ethnic backgrounds. It speaks of where theater is going, a place where skin color race has become a point of commentary. I think I might even have to change my own name when attaching it to the play. We seem to live in a country where even my name is strong enough to garner the audiences attention and make them all the more likely to categorize this as a play as being about the black experience. The play is purposefully not prescriptive. We watch Jones try to leave and Cain try to stop them. These people could represent anything, or anyone. In this, the reaction and reception is the most telling. This puts us in a place where the play analyzes the audience as much as, if not more than, the audience analyzes the play. It relates to our initial goal because at its base it is about how race is perceived. Removing

it's presence from the script gives us the opportunity to see the audiences instinct in analysis.

When we wanted to explore fratricide we thought to use mirrors. This, to me, was one of the most exciting elements to reflect on. It shows the growth of the piece and our ability to grow as playwrights. This idea, though preliminary, remained throughout the process. We were excited about the mirrors largely for their aesthetic quality, but were able to include them effectively. Which is to say, they became meaningful in the context of our overarching goal. The mirrors came to represent two things in. The first is our earnestness as black playwrights to, as said above, have the audience be analyzed by the piece. However, they also became an exploration of the duality we feel as playwrights. They represented an obligation to our ancestry versus our artistic obligation to continually explore multiple subjects. Again, the question of whether or not disassociation is treacherous. Soraya and I's inspiration continued past Dante. With our agreement on the use of simplicity and the mirrors, we'd begun to think about the aesthetics of the piece.

### **Inspiration and Implementation: Panel Discussion**

We attended a panel, at the beginning of the rehearsal process that discussed mass incarceration among our community. This was, quite possibly our greatest inspiration for the piece. The speakers, all scholars and one a former Black Panther, spoke on a number of things. They gave a detailed explanation about their thoughts on the cyclical nature of the prison system. There was an overwhelming sentiment that staying out was nearly impossible. I remember hearing claims such as the prisons purpose is to re-enslave black people, and that the prisons manufacture the very violence that they claim to eradicate). They spoke about the importance of touch and how dehumanizing it's lack of presence



can be. All of these things sent our minds reeling, and seemingly in the same direction. Not long after we agreed that the play was to be set in a prison of sorts.

This seemed to be perfectly aligned with our initial assertion and became essential in determining who our characters were. We, as black playwrights felt trapped. We felt limited by how we believed our work would inevitably be perceived. Our characters were an amalgamation of our own thoughts and feelings. The world, this prison, masquerading as a simple front yard was our feeling of limitedness. This was the turning point in our piece. Only now do I realize that at some point, seemingly after this panel, we stopped asking whether or not it was possible to separate ourselves from our skin tone. We began, instead, to try to explain the feeling it substantiates. Our prison, a white void representative of both the possibility to explore anything and the improbability of it's acceptance as anything other than a backdrop to highlight color. Our selves, caught in a cycle of trying to escape and needlessly being pulled back in by something we could not quite understand. Our soundtrack, a grouping of songs that proclaim undying union with a slightly concerning insistence. I cannot say that we thought of all of this at one time. It came slowly and in many ways subconsciously. Much of it did however, spur from this panel discussion. The panel's mentions of control and the politics of touch in the prison system were both incredibly inspirational and manifested themselves practically within the piece.

The piece in essence is a meditation on control. We watch both Cain's subtly rule both Joneses. It is when we explore the nature of this control that we begin to derive it's meaning. In the first scene the audience watches as Cain's desire to keep Jones with him grows quickly from eager to aggressive. He manifests his control physically. Then we

look to Cain II and Jones II. Theirs is shown in just the opposite way with no physical contact. In the final scene we see all actors moving separately and in a trance like state as if governance is now outside of their hands and in that of an unseen force. This then begs the question why is control important in the world of the play. It is because the playwright is constantly fighting to gain agency both from the audience and the self. There is a duality necessary when pursuing a career as a playwright, and even more so as a black playwright. I feel a pressure to write my truth but in a way that the audience can understand. I must make it palatable. I can be daring but only so much so before it becomes inappropriate, pointed but only so much so or else satire becomes bigotry. Writing then becomes less an expression and more a game to avoid baselessly harsh criticism. Having my work defined by something that is so out of my control is often times paralyzing. The black playwright begins to feel trapped in an environment he or she does not truly understand, much like Jones.

The panel's exploration of the importance of touch was captivating as well. They connoted it's presence with a sense of sanity, saying that it's absence begins to blur the line between humanity and barbarism. For this reason we explored control without physical contact in the show. Cain II begins to control Jones II without the presence of touch. Cain II becomes a puppeteer, forcing Jones' movement, and eventually killing her without the presence of touch. When compared to the first scene it connotes some type of progression. As Jones I and Jones II exist in the same world but experience different things we assert that Jones II has been there longer. It became this idea that Jones II was able to be controlled without touch because she had been living in this world, our makeshift prison, for a long time. She's become so accustomed to the presence of this

control that it no longer needed to be aggressive. It had, in essence, become so insidious that she could be controlled with the flick of a hand. This once again aims to communicate Soraya and I's feelings. This idea that our work will be predicated upon our blackness is so ingrained that is perhaps the reason neither of us had considered the subject before this project. This is undoubtedly something that was so present; we did not even notice it. It was shaping our world in ways that we did not realize or understand. After our experience with the panel we continued to find inspiration. One of the most influential became Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

### **Inspiration and Implementation: *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

Kennedy's *Funnyhouse* was ripe with points of inspiration. With this work, we found elements that were both aesthetically and thematically interesting and tried to incorporate them into our own piece. Kennedy deals heavily with themes of repetition, color, and chaotic movement in her story that follows Sarah the Negro. Repetition takes the place throughout and seems to allude to Sarah's insanity. The repetition manifests itself in the similar language throughout the shows many monologues. We see Sarah the Negro, and a host of other characters, described as her selves, reciting similar monologues. Both the idea of repetition and the selves of one person being present onstage were concepts that we tried to communicate through Cain and Jones. Our desire was for the characters to become symbolic of the inner dialogue of the black playwright and its potential to lead to confusion and frustration. The audience watches as Cain and Jones repeat the same actions they appear stuck in a place neither can fully define. Our set used color as an accent similarly to its use in Kennedy's piece. The set of Kennedy's show is described as black and white and contains red accents. Though the color scheme is simple

its presence onstage is far from it. The playwright uses the color red sparingly and typically to highlight an act of violence. *Pawns*, uses it in much the same way. In our show the color red, the only other present outside of white or brown, symbolizes deviation from order and a subsequent murder. This deviation from order is meant to represent the black playwrights continued attempts, and inevitable failure to escape race. Finally, we tried to tackle the subject of chaos but handled it differently than Kennedy. While *Funnyhouse* is a whirlwind of action and changing characters, we worked against that. Our goal was to see if we could incite a feeling of chaos but with controlled movement. This took place most explicitly in the final fight scenes, the choreographed numbers that end in the death of Jones and then Cain. This idealizes our feelings of the continued effort to remove ourselves for the subject of race. It becomes repetitive we memorize the steps but are still unable to escape.

All these thoughts were present in our creation of the piece. However, I have learned that distance can aid in explanation. It wasn't until after the closing of the final performance that I felt that I could accurately explain the ways in which Cain and Jones were iterations of our feelings as black playwrights. My reading and analysis of Kennedy's work helped me do so. Within *Funnyhouse* Kennedy highlights the culture of black students at institutions who try desperately to fit in and simply cannot or will not ever be allowed to. Not because of any fault of their own, it is systemic, insidious, and persistent. *Funnyhouse* gets at the crux of the problem that we are dealing with. To be black, but educated under the premise of European ideals, is to feel afflicted while simultaneously being taught a culture of dismissal. It is a feeling of injustice but because of the system a hesitance to question it.

This is what Soraya and I hoped came across in the show. We as, young black thinkers, felt split. We felt our psyches tripping over the same problems again and again never quite finding the answer; the repetition. We feel discouraged, relentlessly, to escape what we know is limiting. Soon it is no longer necessary for someone else to pull us back, we do it of our own volition at the first sign of deviation from the approved narrative; the lack of control. Finally, the fight we have with ourselves is so ingrained; we know how it will end. It is chaotic but planned, never deviating from the same steps. We are trapped; the dance. When examined, it explores, not the unfairness of the system but instead the self loathing that it produces. It is unending, we are stuck in a hellish eternity. We achieve success by sticking to the black narrative. But when that success begins to feel futile, when we try to separate from it and denounce it as Sarah does, we might find that it leads to some type of literary death. A hanging like Sarah's, our efforts; the noose.

In exploring these elements I felt that I learned the most about myself as a theater maker. The process did not occur nearly as smoothly as above outlined. This was done for the purposes of this paper but in reality it was a storm of varying inspiration collating at varying times. It was difficult for me to find words for this piece until long after the final performances. In fact, it was not until we analyzed, Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of the Negro* in my black playwrights class that I felt I could adequately explain what we'd put on stage. This is not to say that we did not create consciously. We did. We were not however, prescriptive in the creation process. Allowing some meaning to come after an element is implemented is beneficial, in my opinion. I think if we'd tried to approach it the other way, thinking of an element the trying to translate it to the piece, it would have felt

contrived. So we began with these aesthetics and eventually found meaning. Again, the words to describe it came later. We read *Funnyhouse* in my Black Playwrights class and our analysis of it was incredibly beneficial in ultimately analyzing *Pawns*.

### **Challenges**

We created a piece that explores how difficult it is to write as a black playwright, so I feel that I would be remiss if I did not discuss some of the very real struggles I experienced in creating the piece. I spoke earlier about the importance of not forcing elements to work. I did however fall victim to doing just that. I experienced this during the creation of the text. I was, perhaps too determined to use the stories of the sinners present in Dante's ninth circle. The circle depicts the three greatest examples of treachery; Cassius, Brutus, and Judas. They all hang in the mouth of Satan. I thought it might be interesting to incorporate their stories into our play. The way we chose to do this was through the text, and specifically through the stories told by Cain I and Cain II. The first monologue, that discusses Leroi, James, and August was meant to mirror that of Cassius, Brutus, and Caesar. August and James plot secretly and eventually murder Leroi in a public fashion, much like Cassius and Brutus do to Caesar. The second monologue mirrors that of Jesus and Judas in our play, Adrienne and Lorraine. Lorraine kisses Adrienne on the cheek in an act of betrayal as Judas did Jesus. In the final story, perhaps the most abstract, our nameless characters are meant to explore the story of the arch-angel, Lucifer, and God. One betrays the other and is "banished here", to hell (12). Throughout it I found myself trying to force these stories to work. Despite the fact that they did not add much to our overall point of exploration, I tried to fit them in. I think the problem was my desire to have an explicit connection to Dante's text within the ninth circle. It was effective only in

one way. The set itself is non-descript, and purposefully so. It requires that the text do the work in placing us in space. The goal of these monologues was to place us in hell. Now, however, I believe that this could have been communicated in alternative ways. The scenes, for example, might have felt more interesting if I had simply come up with stories of my own. These moments, as they are in the script now, are not fully connected to our overall message. This is one instance where I should have abandoned the initial idea

I also struggled with communicating the characters with our actors. It was important to Soraya and I that the actors understand the piece intellectually. We had many conversations about the nature of the piece and it's meaning to us. It was only so helpful however, as the play continued to grow and evolve throughout the process we were constantly redefining the characters. This was confusing to our cast. I feel that it occurred this way because of the process of the work. It was cast before the play was completed, and presented to our actors before our ideas were fully developed. That is the one thing that I would change about the process. The entirety of the senior project felt rushed. I produced something that I am proud of but the piece did not feel fully observed at the end of the closing show. Much of my thought and reasoning came well after. I wish that I could have processed this piece as thoroughly before we began the rehearsal process. I believe it would have given me some strength as a director, another element that challenged me.

I have never directed a play before and this proved tough. For much of the process I felt that I was learning as I went along. When we first came back to rehearsals after winter break we focused on quality of movement. We used the words chaos, freedom, and lethargy to explore the different speeds of the play. The first part can be characterized by

the word freedom. The characters do not yet know that they are trapped so they move with more abandon. The second part is lethargy. This is the moment of calm before the storm. The scene is domestic, it is a story telling. Then it ramps quickly into chaos in the fight scene. This is where the characters push against each other. Some of our focus in rehearsal went into building the world. We attacked this by giving our actors rules in the space. For example, we played with moments where only Cain I was allowed to recite lines, then Cain II and so on. That was to help them get the idea of authority and what it felt like to push back against that authority. They found allies in each other, the Cain's joining together against the Jones's and vice versa. It was most interesting to see the moments of stillness in rehearsal. They became the most present on the stage. The idea was that the piece should move quickly to allow the moments of stillness to be highlighted. It was not always effectively executed. There were certainly some moments that lagged but overall I believe it was evident and aided in the formal creation of blocking.

Creating the blocking for the piece was challenging as well. This was where I felt most trapped. I'd never blocked a show and felt that the movement should convey what the words couldn't. I was so afraid of being too prescriptive with the language that I created ambiguous dialogue and hoped that the movement would convey our message. It did in some ways, but the process of creation was frustrating. When I got in the room, I felt generic and boring. We did a couple of exercises to get our actors moving and in their bodies, and I found that this produced the most organic forms of movement. Much of the movement born from rehearsal was present in the show.

I did however learn many beneficial things about directing throughout the process. I was told that a director always stands, in order to keep both their and the cast's energy



up. Using this completely transformed the process. There was far more dynamism in the room. I felt more clarity and was better able to process my thoughts. I've also learned what is and isn't beneficial to say to an actor. Despite my own frustration in director's vague instructions in the past, I slipped into doing the same thing, saying phrases such as give more energy, and be more generous. Through this process I have learned to avoid those phrases and speak with clarity and intention. I found that I was most effective as a director when I gave my actors specific directions but then allowed room to explore.

### **Conclusion**

So the question becomes where do we go from here. Soraya and I have completed a work that, I believe, explores a tantalizing subject. With *Pawns* we set out to ask whether or not it was possible for two black women to use four black actors to create a piece that is not predicated upon our race. We concluded the process with a depiction of what it feels like to have to ask this question. In essence we created a play that seemingly does exactly what we set out not to do. The play itself was received well. We heard wonderful and humbling praises from our peers and our audience. But still, I cannot be sure whether or not if what I believe to be the crux of the piece was truly communicated. Did our audience see that this wasn't an attempt to vilify them or white gaze in general? The mirrors were not to force them to look at something that they have created, the white backdrop was not to communicate that we feel trapped by their whiteness. It was, I now realize an honest, and earnest desire to communicate what I felt during that meeting in early November. This feeling of entrapment is one that I would like to continue to explore. I am proud of the play that we created but I would love to explore it further. I would

like to see if it is possible to communicate our idea more effectively. Reflecting on this piece has confirmed my continued interest in the subject and I am excited to see where it leads me.

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