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8th Grade

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8th Grade The Most Transformative Time In My Life

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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My research began during the first wave of the pandemic. During this time there was so much uncertainty about all aspects of how I wanted to propose my senior project. I started this process while studying abroad in Berlin. Although the city of Berlin was shut down due to Covid-19, I made it my mission to do outside field research on creatives in the city and also with artists in my courses. I found lots of motivation in creating and interactions with creators throughout the city of Berlin . One course that inspired me was a tech drift dance class where we had the opportunity to explore repetitive techno beats within rhythmic dance throughout the streets of berlin. From this course I was allowed to explore different physical attributes that soon enough inspired a portion of movement within my senior project. During my final months in berlin we had to create a dance to a song that meant a lot to us. The song I chose was “Ultralight Beam” - Kanye West “This hip-hop hymn finds Kanye West rapping about wrestling with his faith and looking to the divine power – the titular Ultralight Beam. Ye knows in God's hands, everything will be alright”. Like most songs, I have moments in my life where these songs become long term mantras where I listen to them everyday and meditate on the meaning and apply it to my life. This song in particular had a 7 minute video created by Artie Jafa an american video artist and cinematographer who made a collage of videos from original and found footage of disturbing scenes of historic and contemporary violence inflicted on black Americans by individuals and institutions among many other clips exploring african americans life and resiliency, the video essay juxtaposes recordings from the civil rights movement while incorporating in scenes of religious ecstasy athletic prowess, poetic and musical performance what Artie Jafar has called a black display a black excellence.

My very first proposal project was going to have the main focus on me creating a theatrical piece including community experiences and my own experiences through theater. Possibly including (video, interviews online) through performance of course. Portraying multiple experiences and highlighting daily limitations and struggles we as African Americans face at a PWI. While also focusing and exploring the Mental health isolation within the black community and how it is often looked over in society. While Exploring the historical context of how black Americans were often limited in education and forced to adjust as we gained rights in the mid 1940s. But, somehow we are still overlooked, overworked, compromising our blackness in education, art etc... just to be accepted and recognized. In a society that was built for the majority while (me) being a minority. This idea quickly shifted as time went on. I began to feel inauthentic to my creative style. Then also during this time it was the start of the Covid-19 pandemic so all I could think about was the uncertainty of day to day tasks that we internalized in an already toxic and capitalistic culture. So this was a very self reflective time for me to write about my life and that's what I did. This allowed me not only to think about the state of the world but it allowed me to think about my life and how I got here. So I began to write down my thoughts of how I felt the most inspired and the most grateful. After that I began to write down memories and moments where I felt the most fulfilled. I then did the total opposite and focused on the aspects of what didn't. I realized that everything that didn't fulfill me or made me feel less than. Made me strive and want better for myself. And during this time it was very hard for me to talk about the things that I didn't like or wasn't appreciative for because everyone in the world was simply just trying to stay strong because we all had no idea what was next for us. So I shifted my focus for my project from my future to my past.

Mariah Carey played a big role in the development of 8th grade. During this time in my life of finding myself, she was my stability. Her story always inspired me to be the best at anything I did in life. While reading her story of her growing up as a biracial child. And the feeling that she never belonged anywhere. Running away from abuse, whether that was mental, physical, or spiritual she always found a way to create. Somehow her story of feeling out of place resonated with young Charvez. Through her captivating lyrics and sensational sound she always told stories of hope. Her songs were the way she expressed her pain and joy. This inspiration inspired the outline of my script. Throughout 5 scenes there were songs by Mariah Carey that told a story through the story I told in the script. The first song "Looking in" I feel is somewhat always relevant in my life. No matter how old I get or what changes. This song reflects a story that so many people can relate to. The feeling of hopelessness or unworthiness. "You look at me and see the girl. Who lives inside the golden world but don't believe That's all there is to see you'll never know the real me. She smiles through a thousand tears and harbors adolescent fears. She dreams of all that she can never be. She wades in insecurity And hides herself inside of me." This song helped me cultivate "8th grade." I wasn't quite sure what story I would tell but I knew that I wanted to include this story. This song reflects exactly what it says through the lense of Mariah Carey's life. This song portrays an insecure girl who thinks the world sees her as something she's not. She talks about her struggles and how she continues to harbor her adolescent fears and insecurities feeling as if the world may never know the real her. I resonated with this song very deeply growing up as a queer black male, the odds were already stacked against me. Through the trauma and struggles of my story I knew I was never alone. Because listening to this song made me realize that we all as humans feel things about ourselves

that are simply not true. Her music liberated something within me that would ultimately change my life for the better. It's not because she's beautiful, it's not because she is one of the greatest female vocalists of all time, it's because she had a story and used that story to rise above her situation. She didn't allow her story to become her situation. She captivated me with her large range and smooth vocals and intriguing lyrics. Lyrics that were able to tell untold stories of her life. This always inspired me to tell my story in a creative way similar to hers.

Although I had to have some sort of a linear structure while writing my script. I always want to stay true to my creative style and have that freedom of expression. So what I did was whenever I had moments in my day where I felt like I could include it in my writing process. Whether it was things I saw online, on youtube or even in my day to day life. The process in which I write can sometimes be all over the place. In terms of how I want things to be explained or shared to others. But, I think that's what makes my creative writing style unique. Throughout 8th grade I also wanted to keep the dialect of which I grew up with. I wanted to include moments of realness and truth. Throughout the play I wanted the audience to get a sense of what I went through, through speech and sound. The language that was being used was called ebonics. "Ebonics is a term that was originally intended to refer to the language of all people descended from black African slaves, particularly in West Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The term Ebonics was created in 1973 by a group of black scholars who disapproved of the negative terms being used to describe this type of language. Since the 1996 controversy over its use by the Oakland School Board, the term Ebonics has primarily been used to refer to the sociolect African American English, a dialect distinctively different from Standard American English. These

distinctive Ebonics pronunciations are all systematic, the result of regular rules and restrictions; they are not random ‘errors’—and this is equally true of Ebonics grammar. For instance, Ebonics speakers regularly produce sentences without present tense *is* and *are*, as in “*John trippin*” or “*They allright*”. But they don’t omit present tense *am*. Instead of the ungrammatical * “*Ah walkin*”, Ebonics speakers would say * “*Ahm walkin.*” Likewise, they do not omit *is* and *are* if they come at the end of a sentence—“*That’s what he/they*” is ungrammatical. In my writing I definitely wanted to keep this language of my ancestors alive. Simply because in a way this is all I know.

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Ebonics.pdf>.

Throughout the process of advising check-ins, I gained a lot of knowledge and advice in preparing for the writing of 8th grade. These process check-ins allowed a different perspective that encouraged the finished product. We began with process journals. Created an outline of dates with goals of what I needed to have accomplished. These weekly check-ins really motivated me to stay on top of things. Throughout my sessions my advisor talked about perception a lot. And how my art would be perceived from different audiences. Most of the time when it comes to creating, perception is the last thing I worry about. Because at the end of the day I do believe that art I create represents the way in which I feel at that moment or period of time. But, I can say that this way of thinking did open my horizons within my creative process when I came to writing for other characters in my script. There were moments where I would write from my perspective of the character instead of their own and that’s something that I wanted to stay very aware of because it can be perceived in a way that I may not agree with. But,

either way I wanted to stay true to who I was and the characters included. Lastly, on the day right before the show my advisor held a three hour rehearsal with my cast to go over last minute arrangements. Learning how to be more intentional with the time that was given. Specifying words through movement and tone within sound and physicality. This session really allowed me to see the show in a different light. Lastly, I want to thank my advisor for keeping me motivated during one of the most stressful times of my life. My advisor always kept things on a professional level. Without my advisor's presence in my life I don't think I would have been able to successfully complete my undergraduate experience the way I did. She was the first person on this campus who heard me, who believed in my talents. Who never gave up on me even when I wanted to give up on myself.

During this process of writing and creating "8th grade," I wanted to stay true to who I was in that time period. I knew that if I would have written this play from one perspective that it would have been counterproductive. Especially since this wasn't a solo piece. So what I did was gather 10 to 15 individuals that experienced moments in this time period with me. I then begin to ask common questions that a friend would ask you. Such as "What are your favorite memories with me?", "What was my personality like?", What moments in this time period did you notice the most shift in my life?. This process was used throughout the entire process. It helped me cultivate ideas of how I wanted to outline the story. Even though the real story wasn't exactly aligned with the script I wrote. You sort of get an idea of what I wanted to get across. This process also opened up a safe and vulnerable space to communicate and bring up conversations that I had never really opened up about. It gave me a lot of clarity and mended a lot of

relationships. Not only did I learn a lot about myself through their perspective, I also learned a lot about them. Because somewhat of everything that impacted me during that time impacted my relationships with everyone. I stayed in touch with my friends from middle school and let them know that I wanted to include them in this work and would love it if they supported me. So what I did was allocate time where I could meet all of them whether it was in person or on a zoom call to just catch up or reflect on old times. And within that I would create an outline and have takeaways from them and also me and just create. Even when there were moments where I couldn't remember anything about the situation, I created a situation around each of their personalities and wrote about it. These stories made me realize that even in the most difficult times in my life the lord was always there on my side. Through music, mentors, teachers, family and friends. The importance of music was very important to me to include. Music is what makes us who we are as people of the world, it is one of the things we go to when we are put in some of the darkest times of our life. As the great Barbra Streisand once said, "art does not exist only to entertain, but also to challenge one to think, to provoke, even to disturb, in a constant search for the truth." by Barbara Streisand With the utilization of visual and performing arts, students enhance their personal growth not only as an artist but as a person, student, child and so on. The strength of music is very great. It is varied in so many aspects of life. Music helps us develop the strength of mind allowing us to create new connections within our field of work. Music allows each generation to have its voice as it is constantly changing and always evolving. Music can teach us things about ourselves, others, other cultures, and other periods of history. Music contains, within itself infinite possibilities. So it is like an always expanding universe with mystical-like qualities. Music inspires us. It changes our state of mind and can transform us and

those around us. Music contains, within itself infinite possibilities. So it's an always expanding universe with mystical-like qualities. Music inspires us. It changes our state of mind and can transform us and those around us. Music is one of the most unifying forms of expression as it has the power to bring us together. It helps us to forget ourselves, our problems, the clamor of the mind and relinquish ourselves to a greater collective whole. Music is one of the greatest ways to express the human condition in all areas of life. As I began to outline "8th grade." I thought about the most transformative moments in my life. These moments were moments that had a huge impact on who I am today. While I started to create my outline for my play. I wanted to think about the moments of my life where I had the biggest transformation and all I could think about was my eighth grade year. It was the most transformative time of my life, the moments where I felt the most joy but also felt the most pain. The moments where you thought of creating a new life for yourself. Even now I have moments in my life where I think about what took place during that time. And how it truly changed my life for the better. Without eighth grade I don't think I would be the person you know today. These moments in my life were so meaningful to the shaping of what I know childhood experiences to be. Two of the biggest moments during this time had to be the death of my grandmother and my childhood best friend. My grandmother was someone who was dedicated to making individuals feel loved and accepted. She was a very outgoing spirit who loved singing for the lord. She would do anything for you. That fulfilled her. My best friend on the other hand was also someone you could count on. A lady's man I would say, who loved his family deeply. Someone who had ambition on becoming one of the greatest hall of fame football players ever to play for the Los Angeles Rams. And most of all my mom, or as me and my siblings would say "God's Best Friend." A woman who thrives off of giving back

to the world. Someone who lives her life selflessly within being a servant for the lord. These individuals played a huge role in my life. Although most are not with me today they are always with me in spirit leading and guiding me through this thing we call life and I am forever grateful to have their impact on my life.

It was also important for me to recognize and honor the moments that I felt overwhelmed within this process. There were moments where I had a plan and thought that everything was set to go and then there were moments where I wanted to erase the entire script and start from scratch. Although writing, directing and producing this play was absolutely a once in a lifetime experience. It had its ups and downs. From the management of creating something that could work for me to other peoples scheduling to the high expectations of execution within myself and also production. Most of these factors came from the beginning of the process where I was still writing the script but I had a solid cast of very talented artists, to literally more than half of the cast dropping the show due to personal reasons. What I have taken from this experience is that it is alright to have expectations in how you want things to play out but, when things don't go your way. Which is bound to happen most of the time, don't allow that to affect your process in still creating something that you'd be proud of. Another overwhelming factor was including my mom in the story. After weeks of trying to find a mom to play her in my show, I then realized that if I didn't find a mom character for the show that it could change the show's dynamic. So I made the decision to have this character be on an audio. In the beginning I was very hesitant to do this because this part truly carried the show. I will say that even after the show I still wasn't satisfied with the outcome of not having a role for my mom in the physical but believe it or not this was

most of the viewers favorite part, this is the portion that people recall the most when they think of 8th grade. In this sense I am satisfied in a way. Even if all elements of my creative styles were shifted. Things still worked out for me and people enjoyed it.

Creative processes are always somewhat the most difficult and satisfying when creating. Because you have this overload of ideas but then have a hard time either executing them or narrowing them down. Once I realized what topic I wanted to focus on, I had many ideas of what I wanted to do. Sometimes I feel as though when I'm creating stories of my own I feel like I have to tell the whole story, which is what I struggled with a lot during this process. But, my advisor taught me that you don't have to tell the whole story to tell the story. And that stuck with me throughout this process and also within my creative process. Apart from this I do appreciate the impact that the senior colloquium has had on my piece. Whether that is from our instructor or my colleagues. From the very beginning of the class we dived right into the writing and outlining our ideas onto paper. Like most, I wasn't sure of the exact outline of the play but I had an idea. In senior colloquium we had the advantage of gaining feedback from our colleagues which was very helpful in terms of being more specific in my work and also gaining new ideas that I could have incorporated in my future works. This space was also created for that very reason. Allowing us as artists a chance to thrive off of each other's creative standpoints. Oftentimes in my personal experience of creative writing I usually distance myself from other artists to feel my full potential while creating but, this time I changed that. I realized that if I wanted to grow as an independent artist I also had to grow with other creatives. These moments of creating with my colleagues have not only got me through my courses here at Bard, but it has also helped me

cultivate other ideas of other works whether that be in school or if I applied it in my personal life. I do believe that my colleagues played one of the most important roles in my career as an undergraduate theater student.

As a performer, I am still always challenged with thoughts of fear. The anxiety of creating personal work that has never been shared with the public has always frightened me. This often prevents me from allowing my full creative self to thrive. This idea that we often have as artists of believing that our work is never good enough can be very counterproductive within any process of creating art. Don't get me wrong, I do feel like without this sense of helplessness then comes a breakthrough. And within this breakthrough, the greatest work is created. But, in the back of my mind there is always a part of me that fears the unknown. Also, the fear of not being heard. Not only as an artist but in my personal life. I do believe that most of my work is centered a lot around and my personal life as a black queer man, which can be very difficult to navigate at a predominantly white institution. Throughout my time here at Bard I have had many moments where I didn't feel heard. The work that I created was often shifted in a creative style that catered to a white audience instead of the audience that it was intended for. The fear of creating work constantly and it never being taken seriously because no one understood the meaning of the story is somehow also very frightening for me. The unknown of the audience's perception is also something that I struggle with as an artist. For most of my life I have performed and it is common for artists to get praised after they get off stage but a part of me always wonders what part of their congratulations was false. This is where my imposter syndrome tries to devalue not only my value as a performer but as a person. The pressure of

being an artist has a certain pressure of its own of being viewed as different by society and being judged always by the public eye is personally something that i have always struggled with. On top of that being a queer african american man in society. Because my skin color and sexual orientation makes it even more difficult to ever feel accepted by anyone, even ones in my own community. In “8th grade” I discuss topics of me exploring my sexual orientation. While writing I was very hesitant on whether or not that part of my life should be included in something that would be seen by not only my friends and colleagues but my family. Last summer I decided to include it. The summer of 2021 meant a lot to me. It was a summer that I will never forget. I of course spent a lot of time on my own. I reflected on my life every moment, because during this time everything was so uncertain. I no longer wanted to live a life that wasn't fulfilling. So after my semester was over in Berlin, I told my mom that I had got accepted into this summer program and that I wouldn't be able to return to Atlanta to visit her. Of course being the person that she is she wanted to know everything about the program. I came up with a story and ran with it. I let her sister know my plans of returning back home to surprise her a week before her birthday. When I arrived she couldn't stop crying in disbelief that I had just got off the phone with her in Berlin and hours later I showed up to her door step. After that I surprised her with a birthday trip to San Juan, Puerto rico. When we got there I was just so overjoyed with excitement with just being there with one of my favorite people, I was going back and forth with myself on whether or not I should tell her one of the biggest secrets of my life. I didn't know how she would take it, Nor would she accept me still. This fear came from growing up in a very religious household where I couldn't really voice my opinion as a child because they felt as if children had places and this meant I had very little exploration in exploring who I was or wanted to be in their

presence. So the day came, on the morning of July 1, 2021 on her 62nd birthday. I took her to this queer friendly brunch restaurant. The entire restaurant was painted in rainbow color inside and out. As, we got closer we saw that they had queer art pieces hanging up on every wall of the restaurant, i could sense her body language of being uncomfortable. And might I mention that it was gay pride that weekend in puerto rico. So every street was illuminated with color and freedom. I thought to myself this is the perfect place and time for me to express how I feel. I then asked her how she liked her food and preceded to tell her “happy gay pride” and show her a picture of me holding pride flags. She then paused and gathered herself and asked me “Is this your way of coming out to me?” I smiled in fear from ear to ear as I waited for her to accept me in any form. I then responded “yes”. And in this moment I knew my life would change forever. I waited so long for her to tell me that she always knew that I was different and that she never wanted me to feel like she treated me differently because she always knew. She simply wanted me to feel comfortable with being ready to tell her when I wanted to. Growing up my mother never treated me differently than any of her other kids and I am forever grateful that my family hasn't treated me any differently either. We then left the restaurant and walked along the Old San Juan waterfront to discuss things that I have never spoken aloud before. At this moment I have never felt more liberated before. I was the happiest I had ever been, and of course I called all of my friends and family and let them know what was going on. This moment not only liberated me as an individual but it liberated me creatively. I felt as if I could express myself in ways never imagined before. It's almost been a full year now since I came into the world as my full and authentic self and I'm here to tell you that it has been one of the greatest decisions of my life. And within this I wanted to explore the topic of sexuality and expression within my work, simply

because I know that there are many people with similar stories of feeling unwanted and out of place. Having the courage to get up on a stage and present my story has also been very life changing for me. Although I have personal critiques of my work I wouldn't have changed anything regarding in which I told my story and how it is perceived by anyone because I will always know the real story behind it all.

This Overall process was quite stressful. After writing the piece I had a specific look I was going for. At first, I wanted an all-African American cast, to really resonate with my story and experience. But, due to a lack of African American actors I had to work with what was available. There were moments during the process when I didn't believe that the show would happen due to conflicting schedules or simply cast members dropping the entire show within days before opening. With this being said I do believe that I learned a lot within this process. One, would be knowing that everything may not work out the way you want it but in the end, everything works out the way it should. As the show approached closer it seemed like nothing was going as planned and lots of changes were made. These were the moments where my anxiety was at an all time peak. One of my actors had contracted covid-19 during tech week and so it was a very difficult adjustment for me as the producer but also a big scare within the group as a whole cast. This moment felt unreal. My actors only knew their parts and their parts alone. So the fact that my advisor managed to help my cast learn new lines within 24 hours was a very proud moment for me. There was also a big challenge with stage presence and adapting to the stage for my actors. That was the entire cast's first time performing on stage and personally I didn't believe it. They were all naturals and I believe that this moment was very transformational

for me also. As of now i do realize that i have had a hard time putting into words what this overall experience was because when i'm in i can't process it all. Similar to past experiences of my life. As I begin to grow in this life I learn patience. Patience and faith which has brought me a long way in this life already. Learning to have moments of stillness and recognize these moments are my main focus when it comes to what's next for me.

Post-show depression blues kicked in immediately after the show. This usually happens to me after every show of mine. But this one in particular felt a little different. This was the first production of mine that was my work. The first creative piece that I directed in front of a live audience where people heard a portion of my story for the very first time. A very emotional and vulnerable piece for me and everyone that was a part of it. After the show, I tried my best to keep that same feeling as if we all were in the rehearsal room reading the script for the first time. This time I believe that it was much different than any other performance of mine. I believe this is because I came in and left with the idea of this being my last performance of mine. Which is the complete opposite, in reality, this is only the beginning. My emotions while performing tend to overpower my experiences often which doesn't help me when it's time to be celebratory or proud of myself. Then you have this moment where you are working on something you really care about for months and then all of a sudden it's over. It's a bittersweet moment that never fades away. When the show had ended I felt this way but as time went on and people came up to me personally and expressed what my work did for them and how it reminded them of moments in their life where they had explored their meanings in life, it reminded me of how easy it is to forget the good rather than the bad. Learning to acknowledge your faults yes, but also taking

time to appreciate the positive moments in your life is also necessary on your journey. I want to express the gratitude I have experienced during this entire process within this theater department here at Bard. When I first started here I had no prior acting or theater knowledge. I also want to acknowledge my personal and theatrical growth within this department, the challenges I've faced while being here made me realize my power. This place allowed me to explore the person I always knew I could be. Oh Lord, they do try hard to make me feel that I don't matter at all but I refuse to falter doing what I believe or lose faith in my dreams. Cause there's a light in me that shines brightly Yes, they can try But they can't take that away from me. - Mariah Carey