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Pawns: Value Perception, Need Diversity

Soraya Jo-Anna Cain
Bard College, sc3984@bard.edu

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PAWNS:

Value Perception, Need Diversity

Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Arts

of Bard College

by

Soraya Cain

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Acknowledgments

Entering Bard College's campus freshman year through a Posse Leadership Scholarship from New Orleans was the beginning of a prosperous young adulthood. I would not have applied without my mother, Diva Mubarak, who insisted I attend college; my chosen Father by God, Shelby White, who molded me into the strong voiced young lady I currently am; and my counselor, Jay Leitz, who nominated me for the Posse Scholarship. I appreciate the support from my family and friends back at home holding New Orleans down for me. I love y'all.

As I prepare to leave Bard College I see how far I have come. The growth through the past four years would not have occurred without those who have supported me on campus during my stay. To my advisor, Chiori Miyagawa, your caring ears and words of wisdom truly kept me mentally on track even when I thought all hell would break loose. When all hell did break loose, thank you Kenji Fujita, for being so calm and realistic and supporting me through my journey of counseling sessions. Without my four years of therapy I would have never made it, so Rebecca Stacey, you deserve an applause for your level of understanding and advice. I also appreciate Jane Duffy for all of your time and effort to find solutions after the storm. You all are truly the most valuable players for me at Bard! I am graduating thanks to those mentioned prior and to friends that stuck by me for all the fun and all the pain. We did it, us!

A special thank you to Ajani Nanabukulu for scoring all of the music for our show. You are incredibly talented and will bless the world with your craft. We believe in you!

The Process

Change occurs when diversity or lack thereof meets a variety of perceptions. Bard College, in particular, has been going through various changes in the past few years. Why? Because select minorities were invited to the all-white liberal party. These selected students, including myself, have taken this opportunity as a driving force towards changing the perception of colored people through the eyes of American and international privileged peers. Sometimes our work can go unnoticed or receive backlash, in return we are pushed to dig deeper and work harder towards progression. This unprivileged lifestyle taught us how to extract gold from water, making something out of nothing.

The universe blessed our department by pairing up Imani Jones and I for senior project. How? Because for the first time Luma Theater had the privilege of staging the first all-black cast through the theater department. Bard simply never admitted enough minorities five years ago to bare the possibility of any creative minority collective. So it is no coincidence that the only two colored women in the Theater and Performance Department paired up.

Knowing that color is skin deep, we decided not to make a play about race, gender or class. We were more interested in how the presence of our diversity could progress the perception of a white audience in regards to our everyday lives as humans. Everyone is born, lives, feels, moves, grows and dies. The struggle is the same and we wanted our audience to watch us while seeing themselves pushing through life.

Frankly, the best pieces are self-reflective. If the audience cannot feel the work, then what are we doing? I believe art should be created to make a difference by leaving the artist's soul vulnerable within the medium, which in return leaves the viewer with vulnerable eyes. Feeling the sweat and tears behind the work is what spectators emotionally long for. Nowadays, art does not make people cry upon its presence because most work is created for dollars, instead of with passion.

Every time an audience member experienced a self-reflective scene is when they felt the passion from Imani and I as artists. We wanted to ask questions that held the answer within them but were too murky to see without us all working together searching for solutions. This performance was a search for humanity and its common language. After all, body language does not need words for interpretation, it only needs thought. Every action is triggered by a variety of common thoughts based off our experiences and what we learned from them. If we can see ourselves in each other, then we will never struggle alone. Instead of being busy asking about problems, we would be too busy providing solutions to those we know need them because there was a time when we all wished someone would have given us the proper information to make a sound decision. Let us not make decisions followed by, "well if I would have known that," and instead follow it with, "well I'm glad you told me now instead of later!" Humanity is humans helping humans be better than yesterday and grow greater for tomorrow.

The process for this collaboration was fairly smooth. Going into the project with both creators having an idea of what they want makes life much easier. We came to agreements about set, costume, the writing, intentions and perceptions with ease because we were both on the same page about what we wanted to deliver to our audience. We were also clear about who our

audience was going to be and made necessary adjustments to the piece with them in mind. We were not concerned if the audience would be comfortable or not, instead we were more concerned if the audience would be able to ask the right questions and search for personal answers as they watched us see them.

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All White Party

Step by step you walk up the stairs leading to the Luma Theater check in table. Ushers immediately greet you with directions to the show. Once you accept your ticket anticipation begins to rise as you enter the showing of hell circles six through nine. Finally, treachery of circle nine begins in black out with light up on the scrim while the performers and director set up the stage. Imani Jones (playwright), Micah Thomas (Cain 1), JaQuan Beachem (Jones 1), Aniya Picou (Jones 2) and I (Cain 2) carried a heavy all white porch onto upstage right, with a vase of flowers, a silver ash tray, an outdoor white table and chairs set, with a wooden chess board and it all sat on top of a plastic all white tarp. Watching the set up in silhouette has to be intriguing.

The show eases into a start with a piano playing by Ajani Nanabukulu as lights go up with Cain 1 and Jones 1 on stage. From beginning to end of the first scene Jones 1 is requesting direction towards the main road so he can return home, but he does not know where home is. Cain 1 is busy telling Jones 1 about the neighborhood that eventually leads into, "Jones cannot leave the neighborhood." This push and pull verbal fight that soon leads into physical violence can be interpreted in various ways depending on the pair of eyes you look through.

Some audience members could not help but relate the somewhat all white staging with living in a predominately white America. Someone pointed out the white picket fence as a reflection of the American Dream. The chess game itself suggested a white verses black game that is consistently played with manipulative intent. This is an interesting relation to colonization when the tactics of religion was used to check mate those enslaved in Africa. Colonizers set up a game up chess with

the world already knowing who had the best chance of winning. This is exactly how Cain forces Jones to stay in the neighborhood.

Even the costumes suggested a timeline of the past because they were inspired by *Waiting for Godot* performances. We were an all-black cast with slightly over sized off white button down long sleeves with brown slacks and bare feet. In the first two scenes the Cains and Jones wear a red rose, but for the last scene Cain 2 adds a red rose to Jones 2 after the last fight scene between Cain 1, Jones 1 and Jones 2. Pinning of the rose by those who fight to keep you stagnant was understood by some as white people not being the direct oppressors; instead our own people will kill us to stop us from leaving them. This scene is followed by all those in the neighborhood walking into the mirrors holding hands with an all-white audience reflected behind the performers with their back to the audience and the mirrors facing those watching.

Luckily someone voiced a feeling of hope from that gesture because it finally allowed the viewers to insert themselves into the story as the supporters of building up humanity. The spectator felt they were walking with us to a better world. When an audience member expressed this experience with me, I became hopefully too in humanity. I believe she witnessed unity, the US factor, as I like to call it. US factor is when someone stereotypically does not have anything in common with you but there is enough compassion, empathy, understanding or sympathy to see themselves (their struggle) within you and they strive to support you no matter the differences because everyone goes through life with some kind of struggle. Everyone has their own, "biggest problem," and we are all supposed to be here for each other through these issues because nobody has gone through something that nobody else in the world has gone through.

There is always someone that knows better and carries wisdom because they learned from their situation already and is prepared to teach life lessons to you regardless of race, class or gender.

All Black Everything

As you sit through the first blackout leading into the second scene you start to attempt piecing the story together. Suddenly lights go up on a very similar scene to the first scene that took place except it is performed by two black women as Cain 2 and Jones 2. Immediately, Cain 2 gives off a vibe of clear intention trying to convince Jones 2 to stay in the neighborhood. The level of manipulation by Cain 2 escalates to Jones 2 being played like a puppet into the trap of, "no one leaves the neighborhood." As the one, of the few, minorities in the audience you may automatically believe that Cain will not allow Jones to leave the 'hood' for the possibility of bettering herself elsewhere, probably with white America.

What is interesting to me is that most colored audience members did not try to look too deep into the way the stage was set up, even though when given some thought they concluded the same 'white world' concept on stage. However, there was a comment made on the sterile feeling the lights gave off, as if the setting was a mental institution or hospital. This perspective gives a new message to the performance, which is what we aimed for. As a result, we had a viewer watching with the anticipation of the Jones (1 & 2) escaping a psych ward. Intense! Here lies the beauty is writing a piece that strays away from anything gender, class or race specific. Imani Jones can publish this play with the possibility of someone staging the piece in a totally different setting.

Interesting enough, a deeper connection our piece exposed was the set up done in silhouette verses the performance going up in bright white light. One viewer suggested the beauty in watching the set up process as a witness to those once enslaved building white America. Once

the lights went up the connection became clearer because of the black bodies in off white hand-me-down clothing. And if being barefoot does not scream extreme poverty, then I do not know what does.

Even though the chess game was not the center of attention some of those in the audience believed the game pushed the real game of the world along. One night the brown chess pieces were on Jone's side and the white pieces were on Cain's side. A lady sitting near the front claimed that the brown side always lost. It is true that Jones lost every chess game Cain set up, but we all expected that loss just like some may expect minorities to lose the white man's game in America. While expecting one to get better by playing a stronger opponent is to expect minorities to rise high enough to reach down and grab the white man's hand to walk with us.

It is difficult for us to see ourselves within each other. But, if colored people took a step back to consider why the oppressor oppresses, is because they once felt oppressed. A black male Bard student mentioned that the performance made him sympathize with Cain, the oppressor, because he/she did not want to be alone. It is super valuable for a minority to consider the opposing view. Why? The world needs at least one person to understand a person's struggle by leading a hand. We did not want our audience to leave the theater feeling negatively about race, class and gender. Instead, we strived for those like this young man to leave with hope from a solution or a way to bring us together.

My favorite part is the black out to close the show. To me it suggests a world of unknown possibilities for our human race to enter. Every night I watched the white audience watch us

through the mirror I felt immense hope for our generation. I truly believed everyone received a valuable message to carry with them as they look out at the world with an added perspective.

The Performance Speaks: Diversity Can Change Perceptions

Repetition after repetition and more repetition this piece repeated a similar story line within each scene. Striving to create a gender-less, class-less and race-less performance was designed to allow the reader or viewer to find a common thread that will unite all classes, races and genders. The repetition represents a deathly cycle of negativity, have it be poverty, oppression, chaos, hate or loneliness. The common thread is what will help us break the cycle. So far, within America we live within this negative cycle that can turn positive with the understanding of togetherness.

Walking into the mirrors hand-in-hand with the audience reflected behind us as if side-by-side is our way of tying a bow on top that is not so pretty. Working towards togetherness will not be a pretty struggle and none of us will look appealing after the struggle, which is when we will look at each other in the eyes and witness all the ugly the world has made us to be and we will finally rise to decide working towards a prosperous future for our generation and generations to come is the best solution to revolutionizing humanity.

Yes, we should stop the violence. But, wars are not won without death. And we are at war with ourselves and selfishness. We need to fight ourselves that hold on to aged mentalities and ancient ways of life. We have surpassed enslaving one another. We have passed killing our jungle fever for each other. We have come to a halt. That halt you feel when both armies stare each other in the face and think, "Is this the only way to the promise land," and we fear, "do I have to kill my brother to get there?" How far are we willing to go for power, fun and prosperity? How far are

we willing to go for ourselves, our children and those not like ourselves? How far are we willing to go for the growth of mankind?

This performance speaks for itself because we did not create it to deliver our personal narratives. The narrative is brought in by the individual watching and digesting the piece. This performance speaks for everyone that has ever felt stuck, closed minded, cornered, or lost. *Pawns* is a voice for anyone that has ever been manipulated, ganged up on, told no or thrown into the unknown. This play is not about me nor you, black nor white. Except it is more about us giving into those uncomfortable growth urges of, "I need to get out, I need to get out, I need to get out!" Fact is, we do need to be released and given support to grow past our expectations. We need to allow each other to play a fair game that results in us all being stronger.

Diversity can change perceptions. This was proven to me every night after every show followed by every hope filled words that came out of our audience. Some felt the heat of an all-white audience watching an all-black cast and some felt the cold of being the only (or one of the few) colored persons in Luma theater. Regardless, everyone felt something which means everything to me as a performer. Hopefully, those feelings do not go pushed to the side or stored in an old memory file. We wish for those who had the privilege to experience the gift of education to share their knowledge anywhere one may lack awareness. We hope our audience shares their experience with their loved ones, friends and co-workers because it is the message that should tour the world when the production is not. Word of mouth is our friend. We need to value the perspectives of each other and include more diversity at all costs. We cannot afford to leave any one race, class or gender behind. We have to stick together if we want a brighter future for all of

us. Forget me, we (excluding other), they and them; and hop on the 'us' train to a humanity conscious generation.

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