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Black women as compost: An autoethnographic cantata Allison Upshaw

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Black women as compost: An autoethnographic cantata

Allison Upshaw

Abstract

This performative autoethnography is a restorying of my Black girlhood/Black womanhood journey. The format incorporates Black aesthetics through poetic and musical representations, while inviting the reader to make meaning for themselves. This autoethnographic cantata is a call to Black women everywhere to sing their own melodies and to compose their own songs from girlhood to womanhood. The lack of in-text citations is also a purposeful call for readers to connect this work within their own disciplinary contexts and knowledge bases. It is written to be spoken or sung aloud, alone or in groups.

Keywords

Arts-based research; performance as research (PaR); performative autoethnography.

Overture

Black Women As Compost: An Autoethnographic Cantata is a braiding (Upshaw, 2017) of Black musical aesthetics, Western European aural interchange, and the individual and personal contexts brought to this piece by you, the reader. This work braids those strands through the classical music form of the *cantata*. The cantata is a solo poem performed in set musical pieces. Cantatas are performed by voices, both solo and chorus, and traditionally can be accompanied by a variety of instrumentation. In this critical performative autoethnography, the solo voice is my own, the choral voices are ancestral Black girls/Black women and the instruments are my body.

Kinetic orality, as defined in the book, *The Games Black Girls Play* by Dr. Kyra Gaunt (2006) is an embodiment of relatedness created by Black girls using Black musical aesthetics. Through hand claps, stomps, cheers, chants and jump rope rhymes, we Black girls connect and create an oral and somatic her-storiography (Fenyo 2011). This work is a response to Shange's call (Shange 1997) for "somebody, anybody" to "sing a black girl's song". It is an oral her-storiography used as a 'psychological tool' of pride and an artistic expression of orature. This work serves as Black girlhood history through poem, and Black girlhood remembrance through song.



Act I

Soloist:	My name is Allison I know I'm fine You mess with me I blow your mind	Chorus	Oh yeah Oh yeah Oh yeah Oh yeah
Chorus:	Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear	Soloist	Touch the ground Turn around Jump and Kick Do a split
Duet:	Mary Mack Mack Mack All dressed in black black black With sixteen buttons buttons buttons Up and down her back back back		
Quartet:	Daughters of the Black Belt Play the hand that we've been dealt Compost does not compute Queen of hearts won't win this suite Memories flow through our veins Lava bubbles at each new pain Burning away every dream Savor our pain like whipping cream Inside outside upside down That's not a wave, I'm about to drown		

Intermezzo

While Black girl games are played in groups and prepared me for a world of Black woman comradery, the lived blues of an only child prepared me for the loneliness of a Black womanhood life that was wholly unexpected.

Act II

Soloist	How can I live, when the whole world needs me to die How can I live, when the whole world needs me to die
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It needs me to die, to avoid truth's reflection in my eyes
I've never shed, never shed joyful tears
I've never shed, never shed joyful tears
But I can show you the world, while living a Black girl's fears

Intermezzo

From Black girlhood to Black womanhood, the sound of my own voice changed. I left behind the connectedness with my peers in the becoming of an opera singer. I left behind the support of community. I left behind the Spirit of Black girlhood, and Black womanhood as a Black classical soloist emphasised the void.

Act III

Soloist Our blood a downpour
 Growing our own destruction
 Bountiful harvest

Intermezzo

Although opera grew to hold my heart, the blues of Black girlhood still owns my soul. There are times though where my heart and soul overlap ... where there is spirit too. When the sung speech of opera precedes a hymn lined in the voice of my ancestral soul and sung in chorus with the spirits of long dead Black girls and long dead Black women ... their voices one with me, through me ...

Act IV

Chorus: Blood spills from my body, mind, and pen
 Little has changed between now and then
 Pour out our blood in service to others
 Create a feeding frenzy for the blood of our mothers
 Droplets unnoticed are all that is left
 To feed our own souls without more theft.

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