

**ECHOES THROUGH THE EMBERS:
EVOKING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH HIP HOP THEATER**

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Marginalized students face disparities that impact their ability to successfully navigate higher education. Educational institutions that provide spaces for these students to express and explore their experiences can create a foundation for their academic and social development throughout their collegiate experience. Hip Hop Theater is an emerging subgenre rooted in Hip Hop culture that uses some or all of the five elements of Hip Hop to express the narratives of underrepresented identities and communities. It serves as a platform to voice the stories of those silenced across generations. Hip Hop Theater becomes a space of learning, understanding, and exchanging ideas amongst artists and audiences to incite a stronger engagement with the various topics and sociopolitical issues experienced by marginalized communities that are addressed in the productions.

Exploring professional and student-based sites of Hip Hop Theater, this work observes the genre's utility in educational spaces through a textual analysis of three prominent productions, *Manikin*, *Rose Gold*, and *Break the Cycle*, written by scholars within a Hip Hop arts program in higher education. This analysis examines Hip Hop Theater as a site for evoking critical consciousness in the authors, performers, and potentially audience members in educational spaces. It highlights the transformative and empowering aspects of the genre for the authors and performers with data collected from ethnographic interviews. This work further analyzes the dialogical engagement talk backs offer to ignite the necessary conversations that produce positive change for underrepresented students in higher education. Hip Hop Theater is analyzed as a versatile

and accessible artistic genre that can empower, transform, educate, and inspire by providing a platform for the expression and reclamation of underrepresented identities and experiences in higher education. This work establishes a format for Social Justice Theater that can be used as a method in multicultural educational spaces, highlighting Hip Hop Theater's utility as a form of Social Justice Theater. This work concludes with Hip Hop Theater's applicability in secondary education, higher education, and non-profit arts-based initiatives that serve marginalized youth. It explores Hip Hop Theater's as an alternative mode of knowledge production that values embodied knowledge and helps marginalized students evolve their own critical consciousness of their lived experiences both within and outside of academia.

DEDICATION

In Honor of

NAKILA ROBINSON

My reflection, my purpose, my everything
I will never be tired of loving you.
May every Milwaukee Daughter hear the echoes of your Queendom

When you master the cypher of the inner city that raised you,
you begin to carry the baseline that beats through your veins
against the walls this world has built to bar you from your worth.
You carry your tongue with pride into every classroom
and spit on proper English like it's every educator who told you you wasn't gon make it.
That you weren't good enough.
That's the language of my streets. I will not apologize for how I speak.
You carry the labor your family has put into giving you an out
by struggling within everything that held them back.
You carry your mother who sacrificed everything to give you something to be proud of,
your carry your father who proved to the world that genius doesn't come without a fight
against the odds stacked against you.
You carry the segregation that creates identities that challenges boxes,
That burn and build bridges where they're meant to be.
That made a multicultural Womyn out of me.
You carry the fractures to your Womynhood, the abuse, the violence, the pain,
The ugliest memories coated in the glisten of a frozen city on fire
And you become frozen and on fire and impossible
Burning in your rage to fight and defend your home
To praise it in the places that disgrace its name
To become the silenced voice of your city
To become an anomaly
An opportunity for those to follow
*You carry your city on your path to greatness,
Because you realize it made you worthy of the fight.*
We are Milwaukee Womyn, and we cannot be replicated
We a worthy, we are here, and we ain't neva gonna leave.
We carry our city with pride. We are the MCs of our stories. Masters of our Cypher.
You will not erase us.

~ Street, *The Miseducation of Mil Chett: The Cypher*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sitting in my first college class as an undergraduate, I remember thinking to myself, “I actually made it.” I was one of the few in my community back home to make it to college, with a full tuition scholarship at that. Gradually my elation diminished as the isolating experience of the university climate set in. My thoughts shifted quickly to, “I’m not supposed to be here.” I received daily reminders that my inner city education did not adequately prepare me for my coursework and that my upbringing and community were either comedic, terrifying, or both to my peers. The opportunity to be a part of First Wave’s Hip Hop and Urban Arts Learning Community gave me an outlet to merge my artistic interests with my academic studies. In the program, we produced Hip Hop Theater pieces that expressed our experiences as marginalized students and explored the prevalent inequities we observed in our own lives and within the larger campus community. Writing for and performing in three Hip Hop Theater productions as an undergraduate and observing several more peer performances illuminated the importance of Hip Hop arts to me. The spaces we made for our art were essential to our survival as they offered sites to critically analyze and address our campus experiences. Sharing our narratives at the university through Hip Hop Theater created a space of reclamation and empowerment of our identities and experiences. These spaces allowed us to bridge our lived experiences and the foreign academic terrain we spent our

undergraduate years navigating, claiming our place amongst our peers in higher education.

The Roots of Hip Hop

Hip Hop has evolved out of a rich history of cultural expression, poverty, and racial oppression in the United States. Grassroots in nature, Hip Hop is rooted in unifying and serving the community. Born out of the Bronx in the 1970s, Hip Hop emerged as a necessary outlet to combat the increased demolition of the neighborhood occurring with the Cross Bronx expressway and arson committed by landlords for insurance profits. This climate of displacement and exploitation of the community produced Hip Hop culture as a means of shifting the community away from violence and towards positive change (Chang, 7-19). As a way to cope with the surrounding devastation, “Hip Hop responded to institutionalized racism and economic corruption with a complex cultural movement that was fun, futuristic, and rebellious in its own right” (Israel, 21). Hip Hop culture, by and for the people, produced an artistic revolution that would evolve and manifest itself in many forms. From the mass rap industry founded on its sounds to the creation of inner city community centers founded on its principles, a constant push and pull between mainstream and grassroots efforts in the cultural production of Hip Hop produces conversations on the authenticity, exploitation, and utility of the genre. The mainstream commercialization of rap, along with a disjunction of the artistic elements of Hip Hop, produced an image of hyper-masculinization and heightened violence that became a stereotypical representation of the genre. The mainstream rap industry began to alter

public perceptions of the Hip Hop. Despite this popular image, many grassroots Hip Hop initiatives work to combat the mainstream rap industry's simplification of the genre and re-root the elements back into their purpose of forming community and producing knowledge (Chang, 407-435). Despite the complex applications and contestation of and within Hip Hop, it has thrived and continues to permeate spaces as a source of cultural empowerment, knowledge, and positive change.

The Elements of Hip Hop

Hip Hop is an artistic genre comprised of five critical elements: DJing, MCing, Breaking, Graffiti, and Knowledge. DJing is an intricate practice using turntables and a mixer to produce a unique landscape of sounds by manipulating tracks with techniques such as mixing, cutting, looping, scratching, and fading to create the atmosphere of a party. Popular to the art form and genre of Hip Hop is the break, a segment that highlights the percussion and bass line of a track (Israel, 15-16). The importance of the DJ is underscored by Hip Hop artist Baba Israel: "The DJ is the keeper of stories in the sense that they respond and guide the gathering with tunes that stimulate memory, evoke emotion, inspire love, motivate the party, and keep the peace" (15).

MCing is the spoken delivery of masterful and poetic word play following a cadence and rhyme scheme. Evoking poetic techniques to create original works, the art form is most popularly expressed through rapping. Freestyle and flow are critical components to mastering the artistic style. Dubbed the "Master of Ceremonies," MCs

are praised for their abilities to involve an audience by “keeping the crowd hyped and engaged through call and response and lyrical routines” (Israel, 17).

Breaking is a complex vocabulary of movement that is centered on “foot work, acrobatic power moves, poses and freezes that are driven by the break beat” (Israel, 16). Styles vary by region, but all center on a common language of top rocking¹ and intense floor work. Breaking was founded as an outlet for aggression to release tension amongst gangs in marginalized communities. Crews would battle one another on the dance floor as a b-girl or b-boy entered the cypher² expressing their individual style, taking on the vocabulary of movement (Chang, 116-118).

Graffiti is a visual art form rooted in making oneself visible by creating signature tags to make one’s mark in risky spaces or engage in larger murals to “‘Get Fame’ or to honor lost ones, make political statements, or celebrate legends and heroes/sheroes” (Israel, 18). Various styles have emerged as new forms are created, replicated, and altered. Graffiti was known for its ability to expand beyond geographical territories as graffiti artists, or writers, would tag train cars to carry their names and messages beyond the confines of a neighborhood.

Bringing the four artistic elements together in order to transform and uplift communities is the purpose of the fifth element of Knowledge, added by Afrika Bambaataa “when Hip Hop lost its way” (Chang, 90). Bambaataa is a prominent founder of Hip Hop known for his recording career and formation of the Universal Zulu Nation

¹ A major part of breakdancing where the dancer is on their feet that involves coordinated footwork, rhythm, and style. Top rocking can be used to transition to floor work.

² A cypher is a gathering of typically MCs or breakers to freestyle unrehearsed raps or dance moves where each artist steps in picking up where the previous artist left off.

which was “the first hip-hop institution, an organization that tried to raise consciousness like it raised the roof” (Chang, 90). He felt knowledge was the missing link that ties the four artistic elements of Hip Hop together, noting his philosophy that people need the “right knowledge, right wisdom, right ‘overstanding’ and right sound reasoning” to ground their artistic practices in a purpose that serves the Hip Hop community (Chang, 90). The five elements of Hip Hop serve as a foundation for the culture it has created and continue to be practiced in the many manifestations Hip Hop culture has evolved to include.

Hip Hop Theater and Its Educational Application

An array of performative subgenres are rooted in the aesthetics and ideology of Hip Hop culture, with Hip Hop Theater being one of them. Hip Hop Theater is a multidisciplinary theatrical performance produced by and for individuals within the culture that uses one or more of the five elements of Hip Hop (MCing, DJing, Breaking, Graffiti, and Knowledge) to create sociopolitical commentary in regards to marginalized communities. It serves as a platform to voice the stories of those silenced across generations. Capable of articulating various topics and issues experienced by marginalized communities, Hip Hop Theater becomes a space of learning, understanding, and exchange amongst the artists and audience to incite a stronger engagement with the sociopolitical issues addressed on stage.

Marginalized college students, including those who are not white, high-income, heterosexual, christian, of traditional college age (18-22 years old), second generation

and later, or male, face disadvantages that can affect their ability to achieve academic success in a systematic structure that primarily serves identities within the majority.

Upon entering college, marginalized students who gain entrance to higher education face challenges relating to the material presented in their courses as well as the general climate of university environments. Their lived experiences and identities are not only largely ignored, but looked down upon, creating an environment where these students are targets of discrimination and prejudice and made to feel unwelcomed. Many university administrators, educators, and staff seek ways to help marginalized students succeed by connecting to their interests and backgrounds. Hip Hop Theater can be a means for marginalized students to succeed in higher education by creating a space that allows them to express their shared experiences, apply what they are learning in their courses, understand the complex history of structural inequalities through performance, and cultivate a sense of empowerment and confidence.

Theoretical Foundations

To explore Hip Hop Theater's transformative potential and ability to create sites of reclamation and empowerment, I engage with Judith Butler's theory of performativity that notes the performance of marginalized identities can change the discourse surrounding them by reconstructing those identities through performance. She argues that gender is socially constructed and that the bodily performativity of that gender upholds systematic gender norms. But generative potential of the repeated performance of a particular non-normative gendered behavior, allows for alternative ideas about

gender to exist. Though Butler cautions the use of her theory beyond gender, other scholars have used performativity to consider the construction of other identity markers. For instance, Thomas Solomon analyzes how the self-conscious performative expressions of an indigenous community in Peru actively construct and reconstruct ideas about indigenous identity. Hip Hop Theater's focus on the narratives of marginalized voices creates an empowering platform for the authors and performers to define and represent themselves in ways that disrupt normative expectations and representations of their identities and communities. Through the public performance of Hip Hop Theater, the artists can initiate dialogue on these inequities in an effort to affect change.

Hip Hop Theater's ability to critique inequities and initiate constructive dialogues that can affect change is dependent upon the conscious awakening of the self where one can critically analyze the power structures in one's own narrative and actively work to change them. I thus draw on Paulo Freire's theory of critical consciousness from *Education for Critical Consciousness*, in which he argues that critical consciousness is integral to an individual's development of a deep understanding of their environment that is necessary to reveal the political, economic, and social elements of oppression within it. He argues that critical consciousness teaches individuals to teach themselves. Hip Hop Theater can evoke critical consciousness among authors and performers, allowing them to gain a critical understanding of systematic inequalities and how they impact people from marginalized backgrounds. Hip Hop Theater performance disrupts normative identity expectations and offers alternative ideas about identity, bringing both into critical consciousness for the authors, performers, and potentially the audience.

As further framework for understanding how Hip Hop Theater evokes critical consciousness by engaging with spectators, I draw on Paulo Freire's dialogical theory from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He argues that no one individual can unveil critical consciousness for another, but "one Subject may initiate the unveiling on behalf of others [and], the others must also become Subjects of this act" (Freire, 169). In other words, individuals co-create consciousness through dialogical engagement. I apply his theory to consider how Hip Hop Theater starts the "unveiling" process by first obtaining consciousness within one's self and realizing the value of subjugated knowledge. This personal consciousness can then be articulated within the narratives and experiences explored in Hip Hop Theater performance. Through these performances, the audience is awakened to concepts that expose sociopolitical inequalities and how they impact marginalized communities. Talk backs at the end of a production allow the audience to actively explore the topics addressed in the Hip Hop Theater performance they just experienced by engaging in a productive dialogue with the author and performers. Talk backs can thus further unveil critical consciousness for the audience and initiate the necessary conversations that can lead to tangible change.

Field Sites

My fieldwork involved two sites of Hip Hop Theater performance: The DC Hip Hop Theater Festival and the Line Breaks Festival. The DC Hip Hop Theater Festival is an annual festival that features professional Hip Hop Theater artists from around the country and their productions. The Line Breaks Festival is an annual Hip Hop Theater

festival hosted by the University of Wisconsin – Madison’s First Wave program that showcases Hip Hop Theater productions from current and former students in the First Wave program in addition to a professional feature. As a First Wave Scholar, I performed at the Line Breaks Festival multiple times and thus had my own personal engagement with the process of producing a show as a student and exploring how that has shaped my development and consciousness as a scholar. I took field notes at both festivals to gather a broader understanding of Hip Hop Theater’s definition in both professional and amateur settings. Additionally, at the Line Breaks Festival I recorded the productions and conducted interviews with the authors and artists of several productions. From this data, I will conduct a textual analysis of three prominent productions in the Line Breaks Festival to articulate the ways in which critical consciousness manifests within the authors and artists, and the potential of these productions to evoke critical consciousness within the audience members.

Chapter Outline

My thesis is organized into three analytical chapters, each addressing a specific performance from the Line Breaks Festival, to explore how Hip Hop Theater acts as a site of critical consciousness, serves as a tool for empowerment, and initiates dialogues that can create change in educational settings. Each analytical chapter will explore this through the following subsections: context, evoking critical consciousness, points of transformation and reclamation, and unveiling truth. Chapter II focuses on the Hip Hop Theater production *Manikin*’s use of whiteface to explore racial violence and oppression

in the past and how it impacts the lived experiences of Black³ people in the present as well as the interpersonal relationships amongst Black women and men. I explore the author's intent to use *Manikin* to hold a mirror up to its audience in a way that exposes the complexities of racial injustice in the United States that continue to affect the lives of Black people. I consider the development of critical consciousness for the author and performers from interview data and articulate how the piece can evoke critical consciousness for the audience.

Chapter III looks at the Hip Hop Theater production *Rose Gold* and its examination of trauma, motherhood, and relationships between Black women. The production centers on the main character's journey through the trials of Black womanhood as she confronts the traumas of her past. I explore how *Rose Gold* acts as a platform for critical consciousness for the artist and audience by producing awareness about the complexities of trauma and being a source of empowerment by mapping routes towards collective cultural healing.

Chapter IV explores the Hip Hop Theater production *Break the Cycle*'s exposure of educational inequalities and how they negatively impact marginalized students' experiences as they navigate higher education. Through the use of a video game metaphor, *Break the Cycle* demonstrates the various reasons marginalized students' struggle in higher education and how those struggles impede and often prevent them from obtaining their degree. I examine how *Break the Cycle* highlights Hip Hop

³ I intentionally capitalize Black to highlight a collective sociopolitical identity and to counter the systematic privileging of white identity.

Theater's utility within higher education as a resource for marginalized students' success and to address the inequalities marginalized students face.

From my analysis of these three Hip Hop Theater productions shown at the Line Breaks Festival, I conclude that Hip Hop Theater unveils critical consciousness for marginalized students in higher education and can create the same potential for audiences who engage with the productions in classroom, community, or theater spaces. The dialogic engagement Hip Hop Theater encourages about sociopolitical issues addressed in the productions can further affect positive change. The conclusion also documents the ways in which alumni of educational Hip Hop Theater spaces have used their artistry and skills to evoke critical consciousness in others beyond the space of higher education through arts-based youth initiatives. I thus argue for the utility of Hip Hop Theater in educational spaces as a versatile and accessible genre that can empower, transform, educate, and inspire by providing a platform for the expression and reclamation of underrepresented identities and experiences.

CHAPTER II

MANIKIN

Protests were happening in the streets of Madison, Wisconsin when I flew into the city to research the Line Breaks Hip Hop Theater festival taking place that week. A young Black man had just been killed by the police two days before and the local community was demanding justice. The tension and pain felt by the community flooded into the theater each night where the very concerns of the community were being played out on stage. A particular Hip Hop Theater performance, *Manikin*, echoed the sentiments of the streets radiating chills through the audience's bones. The section that most readily struck a chord spoke to the issues at hand. Scene 3 opens with an auction's "for sale" sign projected on the screen with a whiteface character holding a rope as a Black boy stands like a mannequin. "Nature Boy" by Singers Unlimited plays in the background. The whiteface character wraps the rope around the Black boy's neck as a noose, mimes hanging him and then lifts him back up. He then drops the rope and picks up a cap, putting it on the Black boy's head sideways. He proceeds to puppeteer the Black boy to act like a rapper. Another whiteface character enters and they both dress him in a jersey making him play basketball. They then dress him in a black hoodie, shoot him, and then leave. The Black boy's body lays on the ground in the pool of light. The lights dim and lift to a spotlight illuminating the Black boy's body in a casket donned in reds and blacks with flowers laid across his chest. Off to the side his family weeps from the loss of their loved

one. A violin's eerie tune plays softly in the background as a preacher takes the podium, solemn and sincere. She speaks:

This young man, dead Black man, was killed again... while he was working to wake. The first death was in his birth or maybe in his life being called dirt. He was a grave before he was a name. And who deemed it so? Who decided that our walking and working days should be spent trying to birth ourselves? Or is the question 'who gets to end this before we are born'? A dead Black man is a manikin (sic). He is frozen and he cannot speak. His skin smells of dried blood and a white man's spit. When I make love to the man I love, I see pale hands pulling my hair. Slave master's whip inside me to assert his power. My vagina is a bare back on a nailed post. I drown under bodies and men that remind me of the Atlantic. A breathing Black man is a dead Black man. Each day a step closer to his grave. And what way is that to raise a son? When he sets before you even have the chance to see him rise. Who are we? Men who have been built too hard to cry. And women who take turns digging graves. A dead Black man is a manikin. A dead Black woman is irrelevant. We are both dead. We are both Black. Why are we fighting?

Black identity in United States has increasingly been at the forefront of sociopolitical unrest in the wake of the countless murders of Black people at the hands of police. Despite this epidemic of violence being persistent, it has only been prominently featured in the media in the last few years gaining momentum after public protest and subsequent media coverage of the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Attention on the issue has reached a wider audience as Black communities throughout the United States have reached a tipping point in their endurance of the violence being enacted upon their communities. Protests demanding justice for the victims of police brutality are calling for a serious change in the system. The urgency of this sociopolitical issue and its impact on the Black community has reached the stage through the Hip Hop Theater production *Manikin*. The construction of critically conscious scenes in *Manikin* pose a series of questions about the historical violence enacted on Black bodies and how that informs the

lives of Black people today. It strategically uses a combination of whiteface minstrelsy and powerfully charged images to resonate the immense pain and sadness Black people have endured evoking a sociopolitical commentary on the way white people have enacted countless historical injustices on the Black community. *Manikin* further explores themes of silence, violence, and internalized prejudice that plague Black people's relationships to themselves and each other. The Hip Hop Theater production *Manikin*'s use of whiteface minstrelsy works to subvert hegemonic expectations of Black identity. It evokes a critical consciousness within the performers and audience by critically exploring the layers of history's impact on Black people and how that impact shapes their lived experiences in the present. The production process further allowed for transformation in the author and performers through empowerment of their narratives in the piece.

Context

To contextualize *Manikin*'s use of whiteface it is necessary to understand how it works as a counterpoint to the historical performance of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface minstrelsy was a popular theatrical performance in the United States from the early nineteenth century into the mid twentieth century in which white people painted their faces black with burnt cork and performed skits, dances, and songs based on caricatures of Black people. These performances emerged from working-class white people mimicking and mocking the movements, speech, mannerisms, and cultural expressions of Black men and further developing caricatures out of them. This appropriation and objectification of Black identity was considered practice for blackface performance. Performers would enter Black

spaces believing they blended in with their ability to perform “blackness” or “black up,” creating what was perceived as a space of exchange (Lott, 51). Lott explores the origins of blackface being produced from either a mockery of slaves or the mixing of white and Black culture in freed communities. Debates surrounding this origin center on whether blackface was an unconscious form of “cultural borrowing” or a conscious objectification and commodification of blackness. Regardless, Lott notes that “all positions on the origins and makeup of blackface minstrelsy implicitly or explicitly rely on a theory of the racial politics of American culture” (Lott, 57). Blackface minstrelsy presented white perceptions of Black identity on stage through caricatures implementing problematic stereotypes and tropes of Black identity that still exist today. Most often white people performed in blackface, but some Black people themselves participated in the performance style as it was amongst the only performance opportunities allotted to them. The limitations enforced on Black performers inhibited their ability to explore many options outside of caricatures of themselves produced by white people. The profitable nature of blackface minstrelsy performances encouraged its reproductions alongside the complex notions of race that permeated the United States during this time period (Lott).

Whiteface minstrelsy performance has been used by marginalized groups as a means of presenting counter discourses in response to the stereotypes that have persisted from blackface minstrelsy. It creates a space where the audience can see representations of white people through the perspective of marginalized groups who have endured historical violence resulting from past and current racist ideologies. As performance scholar Helen Gilbert argues, using whiteface to highlight issues surrounding race can

critique systematic racial hierarchies and tropes of racially marginalized groups, and produce alternative representations. Though the results vary for each unique performance, the use of these tactics in whiteface performance intends to disrupt hegemonic racial narratives that have harmed the marginalized community being addressed.

One strategy of whiteface performance is role reversal, in which performers assume the identity of a white person by donning one's face in white paint or by using a white mask while performing markers of white identity. Helen Gilbert explores the potential for whiteface performance to be a strategic mode of producing alternate representations as a tactic for articulating critiques against dominant white culture in Indigenous theatre productions. She applies Susan Gubar's concept of racechange which she defines "as encompassing a number of processes that test racially defined identities and race-based presuppositions...including the deliberately transparent mode of racial impersonation comprising whiteface (and blackface) minstrelsy" (Gilbert, 680). When used by marginalized communities, racechange acts as a powerful mode of role reversal that flips the script on who is representing whom. Noting that "minstrelsy has been a vehicle for self-reflexive comment on representation, precisely because it stages the spectacle of not passing," Gilbert realizes how recognition of marginalized groups' inability to pass through the use of whiteface minstrelsy "constitutes a more complex – even more conscious– political project" (680). The conscious political project evoked through whiteface performance is central to understanding the potential sociopolitical impact these performances can create.

Whiteface can further serve as a tactic of exposing historical negations present in historically hegemonic representations of race by revising the dominant white male narrative of history to include the perspectives and lived experiences of marginalized groups. This allows critiques of the racist tropes and representations minstrelsy has historically perpetuated about Black identity. Understood facts of history are told by the dominant group, including an understanding of race and racism. Performing an alternative perspective to popular, yet incomplete, understandings of history that are told by the dominant group can offer a counter discourse to critique racial hierarchies. Whiteface performance “participates in this deconstructive project, not only because it tackles racial masquerade from a minoritarian perspective but also, and more centrally, because it makes visible forms of cultural power affecting the presentation and interpretation of race itself” (Gilbert, 681). Exposing the oppressive structures that reproduce racism is critical to challenging dominant negative perceptions of marginalized communities. The act of whiteface allows marginalized performers to portray the harsh realities of what whiteness means to those outside of it including the violence and inequalities that are endured. Exposing violent histories produced by racial disparities through whiteface performances forces audience members to confront the lived experiences of marginalized racial groups. Confronting the realities of racially marginalized communities can work to produce a more equitable representation of their identities through a richer understanding of the barriers that are present because of the racist ideologies attached to their identities. This bottom-up expression of historical race relations creates a truer account of history through whiteface performance that can challenge dominant narratives about past and present

events surrounding marginalized racial identities and offer alternative identity representations.

Performing alternative understandings of history and whiteness through whiteface creates a platform for subversive identity performance. Judith Butler's theory of performativity recognizes the social construction of identity, specifically gender, and how repeated performances uphold systematic structures that perpetuate expectations. It follows that the performance of non-normative behaviors subverts normative expectations and can create alternative discourses about the construction of identity. Whiteface draws attention to the ways race is constructed and performed, as Gilbert suggests: "By stressing the performativity of race alongside the enormous power (still) invested in skin color as a categorizing and stratifying tool, indigenous whiteface acts directly [to] address the racial hierarchies that have undergirded the settler/invader cultures in which they are staged" (Gilbert, 680). Similarly, whiteface in *Manikin* acts as a subversive identity performance of the historically permeated stereotypes of blackness. Racially marginalized performers using the tactics of whiteface can produce a space through which a critical consciousness of their identities and the systematic structures that create racial hierarchies and inequities can be articulated to challenge the limited performative expectations of their own identities.

Manikin employs all three tactics of whiteface minstrelsy and addresses both external forms of racism and internal forms of discrimination within the Black community. As the author and director of *Manikin*, Natalie Cook's decision to don the white characters in white masks evokes the reversal of who is the recipient of racial stereotypes and tropes,

as Gilbert addresses. However, her decision to address internalized racism is approached through a contemporary analysis of language usage and social interactions played out by the performers without using white masks creating a different effect than previously explored in Gilbert's analysis. The shifts from scenes featuring white characters in whiteface to all Black characters creates a patterning that highlights historical accounts of racism towards Black people spanning from slavery to modern day incidents of police brutality and how they impact Black people's sense of self and community. *Manikin* strategically plays on parallels of race relations between Black and white people and the internalization of those dichotomies among Black people, evoking a critical commentary of the ways racism lingers externally and internally and how it perpetuates destructive ideologies that harm the Black community. The play consists of fourteen scenes performed by an all-Black cast that utilizes poetry, dance, physical distillations, video footage, pictures, music tracks, and live music to create a multimedia Hip Hop Theater performance that critically engages with discourse on Black identity. I will analyze how the tactics of whiteface performance and the content addressed in *Manikin* explores racist ideologies in attempt to create a critical consciousness within the author, performers, and potentially the audience in effort to alter discourses surrounding Black identity.

Evoking Critical Consciousness

Historical Truth-Telling

There are key tactics of evoking critical consciousness that *Manikin* effectively uses. *Manikin's* first approach is retelling critical points of racial history in the United

States from a perspective that encompasses Black people's points of view in conversation with the dominant white male narrative that is predominantly articulated in history books. Cook explained that her biggest motivation to produce *Manikin* was to "just write the truth" (Personal interview). The production as a whole carefully crafts a mosaic of prominent examples that highlight racial oppression and how it has evolved to impact Black people in the United States today. These moments divided amongst the scenes strategically work with one another to develop a cause and effect correlation between racism in the past and its very real tangibility in the present. The evolution of racial oppression is portrayed in a nonlinear fashion that creates a layering effect of white and Black relations and how intermingled and deeply ingrained racial hierarchies and inequalities have been and continue to be in the United States. Exposure of this more inclusive retelling of the United States' racial history allows the performers and audience to see the parts of history that are glossed over or completely left out. A richer understanding of the nuances that produce racial oppression in the United States can ignite critical consciousness of how these factors affect Black people's lived experiences in the United States, both past and present.

A scene in particular from *Manikin* highlights Cook's strategic employment of historical truth-telling as a tactic to expose parts of the United States' racial history that are largely ignored. Scene 3 as described in the opening anecdote of this chapter exhibits the whiteface characters' control over the Black boy's life as they puppet him from a slave to a victim of lynching, a rapper, a basketball player, and lastly a murder victim of racially motivated police violence towards the Black community. This scene creates a moment of

historical truth-telling that articulates a repetition of the enslavement of Black bodies throughout history. From a slave, to a rapper, then a basketball player, and lastly a victim of police murder, the scene suggests nothing has really changed in the ways Black men are treated by white people. Black men are positioned as objects for entertainment and/or disposable through murder. The repetition of historical violence is shown in the comparison of lynchings with racially charged police murders. The recurring exploitation of Black people is articulated through the rapper and basketball player tropes, noting how Black people are often seen as a source of profitable entertainment for white people, dating back to such exploitation during slavery. These connections of violence and exploitation insert a historical understanding of racism's impact on Black people's agency in life. From literally losing control over their lives through murder to being limited in their opportunities for social mobility and success by taking up professions in corporations known for their historical exploitation of Black people, *Manikin* draws attention to the ways in which these moments of oppression are more than isolated incidents.

Parallelism

Manikin's second approach to evoking critical consciousness is through parallelism. Correlated with historical truth-telling, the first prominent parallelism highlights negated moments of racial oppression that occur through relations between Black and white people, both past and present. Through this tactic, audience members see scenes of racial oppression enforced by white people in the past and how that informs Black and white relations in the present. Often there is a disconnect within historical

understandings of how racism exists in the present because the racial ties of present oppressions aren't paralleled with their roots in racial oppressions of the past. This disconnect can make articulations of racism in the present appear unfounded or extreme to the dominant group because collective cultural memory has ignored the complex and nuanced implications racism has had on the livelihood of Black people throughout the history of the United States. Using parallelism in the production encourages the performers and audience members to consider racial connections that otherwise might not have been made without seeing them in conversation with each other.

Scenes 8 and 9 create a parallel of how racial relations between Black and white people in the past continue to have implications for Black people today. Scene 8 is composed of strong distillations that articulate the relationships within the household of a Black family. The scene opens with Chance the Rapper's "No Better Blues" playing as a Black man and woman enter the stage. A table and two chairs are center stage. The first distillation is the Black man slouched indifferently in a chair looking at the woman as she lays on the table looking back at him calmly. "It don't get no better" is repeated in the song solemnly as a young Black girl and boy enter the stage. The second distillation is the same as the first with the two children laying under the table facing the audience with their heads in their hands. The song begins listing things the artist hates. The third distillation is the man intensely standing over the left end of the table glaring as the woman sits at the opposite end staring up at him angrily. The little girl hides behind the woman's chair as the little boy stays under the table covering his ears. The lights eventually fade as the song ends.

Scene 9 opens with Sweet Honey in the Rock's "Motherless Child" playing as two Black women and two Black men are picking cotton while a whiteface man watches them. A whiteface woman sits comfortably as the Black people pick cotton. A video projects enslaved Black people picking cotton. The whiteface man takes away one of the Black women, dragging her off stage as the others try to stop him. The whiteface man successfully drags her away and the rest move slowly in despair eventually returning to their work. The video projection switches to a clip of a Black man partially hanging from a tree on his tip toes barely alive as white women sit on the porch enjoying their summer day. A Black woman sneaks by to give him a drink of water before scurrying away. On stage, the whiteface man continues the process of dragging the enslaved Black people off stage one at a time. Each time they try to stop him, but are unsuccessful. Eventually one Black man is left picking cotton alone as the whiteface man and woman watch him.

These two scenes placed back to back creates a parallelism of the effects slavery has had on Black relationships today. The deconstruction of the Black family as depicted in Scene 9 by the whiteface slave master isolating each of the Black slaves until they no longer have a familial unit to fight for them creates an eerie connection to the dysfunctional relationship depicted in Scene 8. Scene 9 almost seems to pick up where Scene 8 left off by showing how the disinterested Black man in 8 became detached from a sense of family like the last remaining black man in Scene 9 after having them taken away through racial violence. Though the two characters are set in different times, the paralleled scenes suggest the violence of tearing Black families apart through slavery is furthered through racial violence in the present, leaving both Black men and women to fight for themselves

alone instead of together. Where support once occurred, the pressures of racial violence led to a lackluster hopelessness. Exposing the parallels of how relations between Black and white people in the past permeate oppression of Black people in the present allows the performers and audience to critically look at how one's lived experience outside of their community can affect connections people have within their own community.

Parallelism in Scenes 11 and 12 further shows how Black people's sense of self and relation to each other can be affected by the perpetuation of racial violence generated by historical racial oppression. Scene 11 opens with Gnarl's Barkley's "Who's Gonna Save My Soul" playing as three Black men and three Black women sit at a table across from one another looking at their phones. They interact with one another by taking selfies and sending messages to one another. Clips from their social media chats and picture comments are projected onto the screen for the audience to read. The topics include relationship issues between the characters, unwanted relationship advances, homophobia between friends, invalidation of queer sexuality, and preferences for light-skinned individuals. An image of a low battery screen is projected and the characters drop their phones irritated, as the lights fade out.

Scene 12 continues the conversation of Scene 11 by addressing how interactions between the Black characters are harming each other. The scene is set with a table and 6 chairs. Three Black men and women gradually enter the scene and each take seat. The entire conversation between the characters only uses the line "you're killing me." The line substitutes for the conversation, switching tone, delivery, and sentiment given the characters' interactions with each other. The tonality and delivery starts out positive and

light-hearted, moving towards a serious intensity and then climaxing into silence. The lights fade as one character continuously mumbles the line with her head in her hands.

Following the paralleled connection of historical incidents of racism to showing a set of turbulent relationships the Black characters have with one another, Scene 11 brings that connection to the present day use of social media. Portraying the dysfunction within opposite and same-sex relationships, whether friendly or romantic, keys in on how negative perceptions of Black people can feed into the interactions Black people have with one another. Addressing the issue of colorism highlights an internalized racism that the lighter your skin is, the better your looks and quality of character are. The dismissive attitude and hurtful language the characters take towards one another emphasizes a devaluing of each other. The combative interactions with one another in juxtaposition with the positive connections they share, underscored by the lyrics “who’s gonna save my soul now?” in the song, suggest a need to disconnect from the negative ideologies about Black people that are affecting their relationships with one another. The phones dying at the end of the scene solidifies a removal from these toxic narratives of blackness as a means of saving one another. This is paralleled further through Scene 12’s message by literally stating that the interactions the characters have are killing one another. The cause and effect of generations of violence against Black people accumulates towards a perpetual killing of Black people, be it literal, figurative, internal, or external. It brings together what the tactics of whiteface work to excavate from the racism that marginalized groups have been subjected to. Rather than assuming any dysfunction within Black communities are attributed to negative stereotypes, *Manikin* uses parallelism to highlight the ways in which

historical racial violence by white people has had long term ramifications on Black people's sense of self and community. The performance produces a more critical understanding of the ways in which racial oppression from the past still affects the present by offering a more inclusive historical perspective that shows cause and effect through parallelism.

Cyclical Silence and Violence

Manikin's third approach to evoking critical consciousness takes on the task of exposing cycles produced by racial oppression. Cook found that through her process, themes of cyclical silence and violence kept reoccurring: "There's violence, there's silence, and then the violence within the silence. That's a whole lot of layers that we never break down, ever. It just sticks there. It just stays in the air. It just stays because we're never trying to uncover the layers and that's definitely something I was trying to express" (Personal interview). Exploring these cyclical layers of violence and silence contributed to the development of the critical consciousness of the cast, author, and potentially the audience on how such perpetuations of racial oppression impact Black people, causing long-term harm.

Manikin has several scenes that explore the relationship between silence and violence, but one in particular does so through powerful mirroring choreography. Scene 6 opens with a short film, "Goldilocks and the Jivin' Bears," projected on the screen while the Westminster Cathedral Choir's "Ave Verum Corpus" plays in the background. A Black woman and man are center stage in a spotlight. They slowly mirror each other's

movements, starting off with slow, gentle gestures. The repeated movements gradually become increasingly physically violent while maintaining the same speed. After several mirrored self-inflicted hits and punches, with a final punch in the gut they look into each other's eyes and the lights fade.

The strategic mirrored staging suggests that any harm done to one's self is done to another. This scene creates a conversation about internalized self-hate that produces violence towards others in one's community. The use of two genders furthers this application to relationships between Black women and men. The scene's complete silence is chilling in that without a word, one character's actions allowed the other to suffer their same fate. The violence produced by a silent enabling of harmful behaviors destroys them both. In the same breath, however, the character's self-love and kindness can be reproduced as well. It is moments like these in the play that show the participants a literal mirror of cause and effect and its implications beyond the personal. This initiation of self-reflection through the metaphor of a mirror ignites deeper critical thought on how interpersonal relationships are affected by larger systematic racial oppressions. Bringing these realizations to life on stage demonstrated the narrative's applicability to the lived realities of the cast, Cook, and potentially the audience.

Subversive Identity Performance

Manikin's fourth way of evoking critical consciousness occurs through subversive identity performance. The production as a whole creates an interwoven historical truth of race relations in the United States that demonstrates how past oppression continues to

affect the present, however, there are also moments that remind those experiencing the show that there are alternatives available to Black people. Performing alternate representations of self in conjunction with the exposure of racial inequities whiteface seeks to portray creates an educational opportunity for the show's participants to recognize that racial oppression is not self-produced by the Black community. These moments of agency within the bounds of racial limitations articulate a critical awareness of a Black identity that exists without whiteness that is reclaimed as a culture and way of life. Such realizations offer a critical awareness of reclamation and self-produced representations as a possibility for Black people.

Two scenes in particular enact the agency of Black people in *Manikin*. Scene 7 opens with Leroy Van Dyke's "Auctioneer Song" playing while two Black men and one Black woman stand on auction blocks, ropes around their wrists. The music is cut and a whiteface male begins bidding off the Black characters to the audience. The Black woman is auctioned off last and as she is sold, the whiteface man freezes as Paul Robeson's "No More Auction Block" begins to play. The Black woman dances the whiteface man off stage and evokes body language that fluctuates between broad strokes of liberating movements and compressed moments of pain. This scene embodies an act of subversive identity through which the Black woman resists her fate as an enslaved individual and fights for her agency. The dance movements combine with the song to create a sorrowful fight to free herself from the oppression of slavery and convey the exhaustion that is exerted in doing so.

Scene 14 wraps up the production with a video clip of James Baldwin's speech "Who's the N-----" projected onto the screen. He questions the invention of the word, stating that white people invented it to represent a deep-seated fear they hold within themselves. Baldwin rejects the attachment of the term to Black people, the idea that Black people invented the term, and the perception of Black people that it implies. He places the responsibility on white people to figure out what fear the term embodies within themselves, saying white people are the real "n-----," not him. This scene makes a powerful reclamation of identity by subverting the stereotypes and tropes of Black people that are compounded into that word by not only rejecting it but affiliating it with white people. Baldwin successfully subverts identity expectations for Black people and offers a counter narrative of who Black people are. This scene charges the audience to look at themselves to address racial prejudices and fears they may hold, suggesting that accountability lies with them. These two scenes, occurring halfway through and at the finale of *Manikin*, serve as critical reminders to the performers and audience that Black people continue to fight to reclaim their history, representations, and agency. Lacing subversive identity performances that challenge racist perceptions with the exposure of a truthful historical account of racial oppression and its parallelisms creates a production where the participants, no matter their own racial identity and experience, are prompted to critically consider the ways in which they may perpetuate and/or experience racial oppression.

Cook notes the purpose of *Manikin* was "So I can hold up a mirror to me, and then I hold up a mirror to the cast, and the cast holds up a mirror to themselves, and they hold

up a mirror to each other, and then they get on stage and hold up a mirror to the audience. It's all about accountability and learning what they don't want us to know" (Personal interview). The production evokes critical consciousness by providing an opportunity to reflect on historical racial oppression and its effects on race relations in the present. This desire to create accountability where not only the learning process is crucial, but the active implementation of what's learned into one's own understanding of their experience allows for a deeper critical consciousness of racism and its history and how that history informs one's lived experiences. Cook stated, "I feel like people need to learn in order to heal" and her production offers an opportunity to do so through a critical engagement with racial oppression that brings the historical to the personal creating a critical awakening that can start that healing process (Personal interview).

Points of Transformation and Reclamation

The Hip Hop Theater production *Manikin* did more than bring critical consciousness through insight into racial oppression, it incited transformation within its cast and author/director. The opportunity to explore historical content and make it personally relevant initiated a critical engagement among the cast that related their lived experiences to the play's content. Cook discussed how the process of rehearsing with the cast played a pivotal role in understanding the layers of racial content *Manikin* explores: "Even if it would take up most of the rehearsal, it would be the first time that people were talking about these things and it's like, that to me is the most rewarding thing. I'd rather you get something out of the process" (Personal interview). This creation of a space to

break the silence surrounding racial oppression and how it plays out in the lived experiences of the cast and author powerfully allowed them to understand their own histories through performance, as Cook reflects: "...Allowing themselves to go there, to such a place that we can't fathom, that we never think about. We never actually think about slavery, it's just like slavery happened. It's a thought that's glazed over. No one ever actually attacks it and goes inside it. And I think the fact that they were able to do that is the most empowering thing" (Personal interview). Performing one's own history and taking back the power to tell that narrative helps reclaim a sense of agency over one's own history and truth.

Performing the roles in *Manikin* as an all-Black cast had a profound resonance. Cook discusses how embodying a slave master or slave challenged cast members to take on historical roles that opened wounds of the collective's memory. Having lived lives as Black people in the United States, the effects of past racism on their present lived experiences created a collective re-remembering of catastrophic historical suffering and loss. The emotive response to embodying those narratives of the past and their connections to the present took on its own power of reclamation by empowering the cast to take on the role of teaching the truth of their history. Cook articulates an emotional moment in performing Scene 9: "I would hear some of the actors being like, 'I was crying behind the mask' and then a lot of the actors who portrayed the slave, they didn't have a mask to hide their tears, but they still had to keep working and keep seeing their family members being taken" (Personal interview). Putting themselves in these historical roles tapped into a collective memory of loss and violence induced by racial oppression. Exploring the

narrative through their bodies manifested through moments of improvisational movement when Cook played tracks from the play while offering little direction. She wanted the cast to trust their instincts in feeling the narrative in those unscripted moments. Cook describes how finding the truth of the narrative in this way was critical to the show “because they couldn’t know it without me knowing it too. Even though I wrote it, I didn’t know what I wrote until I would move with them too” (Personal interview). This collective exploration through the body in the production process produced a new narrative by re-remembering a historical past through their lived realities in the present. The act of performing allowed the cast and Cook to reclaim their voices and empower themselves by taking charge of historical truth-telling.

Another critical transformation for the cast and Cook involved moments of self-reflection. Discussion amongst the cast and author about the content of the production forced them to acknowledge “when things make you uncomfortable, you have to ask yourself, why?” (Personal interview). Cook noted points of conversation around the production’s content as pivotal in challenging discomfort. Enforcing a system of accountability, Cook told her cast, “When y’all are doing this play remember in this order who you’re supposed to be holding accountable. And I would put one: self; two: each other; three: the audience. And I was like now the audience is important, but notice that it’s last. The audience is not your first priority. You can’t write for the audience or just perform for the audience. You have to think about yourself first” (Personal interview). In thinking about themselves first and foremost, she encouraged self-reflection from the cast to question the reasoning behind their own discomforts and hesitations with the content of

the piece. Bringing those moments to light helped the cast work through their own challenging moments the show. Cook shared such a moment: “We were addressing issues of homophobia within the Black community in the play and some people were getting uncomfortable and I’m like, ‘ask yourself why?’” (Personal interview). Digging into these layers came with the charge of accountability and self-love: “It all has to be through love. As stern and serious as it is, it has to be done through love” (Personal interview). This approach of accountability encouraged a critical engagement with each other about what the piece brought out of them. These moments of individual and group reflection were critical to unpacking the sociopolitical issues in *Manikin* and evoking a critical consciousness that empowered Cook and her cast as Black artists to give voice to narratives that are historically glossed over and claim agency over their own.

These discussions implemented self and community reflection on the process and content within the piece to realize how Cook and the cast members were personally affected while also challenging each other to grow. When asked if the production process allowed for growth, Cook responded, “Yes, the whole play was a growing process because literally it changed with every rehearsal and that’s how I wanted it be” (Personal interview). She further notes, “That was just a really big growing moment for me to see that wow, it is possible for me to create pieces that change people’s lives. Not just the audience, but my own and the people who participated in it, so yea. I’ve grown so much and I believe they have too” (Personal interview). Cook’s reflection on her production spoke volumes to the transformative potential of *Manikin* and its ability to empower her cast and evoke a critical consciousness within them.

Unveiling Truth

Manikin provided an opportunity for dialogue beyond the cast by unveiling the critical insights of the production for the audience. Cook noted one of the most powerful things about *Manikin* is that it's convicting: "I think that's how *Manikin* contributes to Hip Hop Theater, because it wasn't created to make anyone feel good. It wasn't created to be necessarily solely this educational piece. It was created so that everybody could hold up a mirror to themselves" (Personal interview). The unveiling of these powerful insights has the potential to ignite critical consciousness for the audience. Beyond just watching the production and sharing how it personally impacted audience members, creating spaces for dialogue following the show were critical in taking *Manikin*'s powerful content to the next level. Such spaces were produced through talkbacks. During the first run of *Manikin* outside of Line Breaks, Cook discussed how a panel of professors with expertise on content covered in the show were present for a talkback with the audience. This triad of creating a panel with the cast, Cook, and knowledgeable professors created a dynamic discussion with the audience that engaged the inspiration and research Cook brought in writing and directing the piece, the cast's experience of performing the content of the piece, and the educational background of the professors to analyze the profound messages in the piece. The audience was allowed to engage in a critical conversation surrounding *Manikin* that further unveiled its content, offering a greater potential for the audience to gain critical consciousness. Further, insight and responses from the audience allowed Cook and the cast to better understand how *Manikin* impacted those who experienced it as audience members. Cook expressed how the talk back panel is an ideal way of bringing

Hip Hop Theater to educational spaces in that it is central to the educational experience that day and critically engages with the content of the piece. Talkbacks are essential in continuing the unveiling process to create the conversations that could lead to change surrounding the sociopolitical issues address in *Manikin*.

Manikin's critical engagement with racial oppressions through the use of whiteface to employ tactics of historical truth telling, parallelism, exposing cycles, and subversive identity performance allowed for the development of critical consciousness within Cook and the cast through the performance process. The act of embodying the narratives and critically discussing the content of the show created a platform for reclamation of their voices and taking agency over their history and lived experiences. Taking on the role of educator allowed Cook and the cast the opportunity to empower themselves by teaching others in an educational space. The talk back enriched the experience further by allowing the audience to delve deeper into the content of *Manikin* and how it impacted them as individuals. *Manikin* is a profoundly powerful production that combines historical understandings of the past and present to explore how the lived realities of the participants are shaped by the historical perpetuation of racial oppression, providing members of the cast and audience with the opportunity to "hold up a mirror" to themselves and the world around them.

CHAPTER III

ROSE GOLD

Narratives that touch on complex social issues often find their way to the stage through Hip Hop Theater where they are articulated as a way of processing them. The stage can provide a space where the unheard stories of marginalized people can be shared simultaneously, breaking the silence around social issues and endured traumas while creating a space to work through their impact. A particular performance embraced the art of storytelling through Hip Hop Theater to highlight the effects of trauma on Black women. Based on the personalities of the women who have shaped her, Zhalarina Sanders' production *Rose Gold* uses the relationships between her fictional characters to explore real-life social issues surrounding Black women, Black motherhood, and trauma. Centering on the main character Bobbie, *Rose Gold* explores the continued effects of unaddressed past and present traumas of abuse and loss in Bobbie's life and how they inform her experiences with successful and unsuccessful abortions. The final scenes in Sanders' production accentuate the complexities of Bobbie's trauma in the telling of her attempted abortion, which the baby, Elise, survives. The monologue shows Bobbie's struggle to reason with her traumatic experiences with her past abortions before Elise and becoming a mother despite attempting to abort Elise. Standing in a spotlight, Bobbie speaks to a judge about her abortions and her desire to gain custody over Elise, who is currently in foster care:

Look Judge, I know you want me to learn my lesson and everything, but (pauses) you ever seen a dead thing mister? Way it say "momma" witcho

water still in its lungs? (Laughs, pauses). I tried to kill her. You know? I told her black women are disposable. Shadows of a good thing. I know what I did, but it honestly IS over. I'm leaving Cyrus and I'm going to get my baby and I don't care what nobody gotta say. Not Maia, not nobody, you know? My sister, she used ta have this ugly soap dish on the edge of her bathtub. I hated it. It was gold but it was like a pink gold..... Like a rose gold. The last time I was conducting one of those homemade... uuhhh... procedures. I had held on to that ugly thang cause it was hurtin so bad. And you gon say I'm crazy but (pauses) I remember thinking how pretty it had made my skin lookcause I aint ever see it on nobody before, you know?

Bobbie's monologue is interrupted by a scene that shows Elise dying of complications related to her circumstances at birth. Surviving her mother's attempted abortion left her with medical complications that ultimately lead to her death as the scene concludes with the sound of a flatline. Meanwhile, unaware of Elise's death, Bobbie resumes her monologue in the spotlight:

So like I said, I'm gonna go get my baby... And I'm leaving him. We going to California because my momma told Maia they got more soap dishes out there. And I kinda wanna see Mickey Mouse. She so pretty Mister, and she so smart... She so smart. And I know she gon forgive me cause she real nice. (pauses) I love her. I don't know how a woman could love her own garbage, but I do. (pauses) And we leaving.

The exploration of trauma and Black motherhood through Bobbie and the surrounding characters' narratives opens the space to reconcile various traumas of abuse, loss, attempted abortion, and betrayal as well as acknowledge the resilience of the characters who endured them. The Hip Hop Theater production *Rose Gold* uses nonlinear storytelling to map the relational cause and effect of the characters' traumas to unearth the heartbreak and tragedy of their experiences as Black women. Noting sites of cause and effect exposes trauma's cyclical nature throughout the character's lives and its long term impact. This production thus creates a space in which critical consciousness is

formulated surrounding the cyclical layers of trauma. Though the play's characters and stories are fictional, the social issues addressed are realities that many Black women face. Placing these stories on stage breaks the silence on the social impact of the presented issues, allowing trauma to be explored, released, and reconciled to promote individual and collective healing.

Context

To understand the work that *Rose Gold* does in processing social trauma it is essential to understand how trauma manifests and its common presence in Black women's lives. Performance scholars Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis describe the manifestation of trauma "in terms of two occurrences, physically bound together: trauma-event and trauma-symptom. Individually or collectively, survivor-sufferers may become trapped in a pattern of cyclical and incomprehensible reiteration until such time as (hopefully) they negotiate a process of healthy analytical... 'working through'" (5). This cyclical pattern of negotiating trauma is triangulated in its phases. During the first phase, the person who experienced the trauma wants to forget the initial traumatic event. This leads into the second phase where the individual relives the traumatic experience consciously through memories or forms of reenactment based on a need to work through the experience. This reliving leads into the third phase in which the individual experiences "trauma-symptom" through which "the repetitive and uninvited intrusions of fragmented memories and reenactments of the event" lead the individual back to phase one in wanting to forget the experience (Duggan and Wallis, 5). The individual thus

finds themselves caught in a cycle of re-traumatization through the process of reliving the original “trauma-event” (Duggan and Wallis, 5). To break free from “trauma-symptom” requires an intervention against the compulsive intrusions of re-traumatizing memories and actions, allowing the victim to move away from reliving the trauma and into a space of working through it. This can take on many forms, but consciousness of the trauma and its effects along with positive re-associations with memories and actions can liberate a person from the cycle of trauma (Duggan and Wallis, 6).

Trauma can move beyond the individual when it becomes part of a collective memory. This can occur on a familial and performance level, both of which can make a generational impact. Trauma can occur generationally within a family through “postmemory” in which the impact of trauma and its stories as endured by the previous generation can invade the memory of the next generation (Duggan and Wallis, 7). The following generation’s lack of experience in the initial “trauma-event” leaves them without the ability to relive the trauma as a means of comprehending and moving beyond it (Duggan and Wallis, 5, 7). Additionally, the unresolved trauma can complicate the relationships between the original traumatized generation and the next. In performance, trauma can become collective through the “chain of witnessing” in which a performer reenacts trauma as a secondary observer to the original trauma, while the audience becomes a tertiary witness of that same trauma (Duggan and Wallis, 7). Duggan and Wallis note, “Bearing close witness to a perpetually unresolved trauma can install second-hand memories that are so powerful as to become traumatic in their own right. Moreover, such ‘collective traumatic memory’ can become installed across a

culture” (Duggan and Wallis, 7). This cultural absorption of trauma typically impacts marginalized groups in which large cultural traumas remain unresolved, the effects of which linger through collective memory.

Understanding collective cultural memory of trauma as it relates to Black women’s experiences requires an understanding of its historical occurrence. Sociologist and women’s studies scholar, Pétigny, considers slavery as a site of initial trauma. The systematic social and political structures that have been built on its ideology and policy have maintained oppressive structures that have generationally impacted Black women well beyond the initial trauma (Pétigny, 26). Pétigny asserts that:

Traumatic experiences—whether interpersonal or institutional—should not only be read as ongoing and un-finished, but also transhistorical. Spanning across multiple temporal spaces, legacies of slavery do not exist in some distant vacuums—isolated from changing currents of history. Instead, these scarring legacies are embodied in the consciousness and psychic landscapes of African Americans in the United States today. (26)

The cultural collective memory of trauma that has intensified generationally for Black women and that has largely been unresolved impacts a sense of self and community. The embodied consciousness of historical traumas is reiterated twofold through race and gender in Black women’s lives. A reimplementations of these historical traumas daily through a sociopolitical nexus of violent systemic oppression that attacks Black women both on the basis of their race and gender continues to build upon a collective cultural memory of trauma. In a society that sees past historical trauma as largely finished and often isolated from present sociopolitical issues, there is a lack of acknowledgement that these collective traumas exist, creating barriers to the development of spaces where these traumas can be worked through. Pétigny argues that this lack of space to negotiate

historical trauma leaves Black women in an endless survival mode, void of cultural healing (24).

Pétigny further suggests that a void in collective cultural healing can largely be attributed to the state's silencing of trauma. Those in positions of power weave the narrative of history that is told. Exploring trauma within that history threatens that power by exposing the layers of oppression ingrained in society, thus "as citizens struggle against powers of the state, they must struggle against forced forgetting, not 'only to save themselves, but to survive as witnesses to later generations, to become relentless recorders,' of a history which the state wishes to erase" (Pétigny, 45-46). Pétigny argues that generations of "policing and exploitation" of Black women's bodies as a means of maintaining systematic power and along with it the historical narrative of the state, has led to the implicit silencing of Black women's experiences (47). She further asserts that silencing Black women in expressing their experiences with historical trauma is a critical tactic in forced cultural forgetting even amongst Black women: "Interpersonal and systemic silencing breeds an internal silencing, an unconscious response of the body and psyche to mute experiences of threat and harm, not allowing the self to remember them" (Pétigny, 47). This lack of personal and collective cultural consciousness impedes collective cultural healing. Actively fighting for historical traumas to be remembered and recognized is not only a means of survival, but a fight for cultural remembering, which is essential for collective cultural healing.

Hip Hop Theater can facilitate collective cultural healing through both the writing and performance process. Outside of the canon of mainstream literature, Black women

writing their narratives is an act of subversive performance in that “their literature talks back, constituting an act of resistance and political gesture that challenges the politics of domination rendering Black women nameless and voiceless” (Pétigny, 48, 50). Black women can take agency over their narratives by using writing to expose pain and trauma that is largely ignored. The exposure of this trauma forces it to be remembered, disrupting cultural forgetting and the erasure of historical injustices against Black women. Pétigny further explores writing as a source of empowerment and transformation in its ability to articulate the lived experiences of Black women and their feelings towards those experiences for other Black women: “When Black women read texts about Black female experience, they are able to locate and historicize notions of internalized racism and hatred for themselves while dually constructing maps for healing. These maps are both roots and routes of/to liberation. In this sense, Black women’s writing has transformative, pedagogical potential” (Pétigny, 48). Other Black women having access to those writings creates an opportunity to understand one’s own experiences in the context of a larger cultural and gendered experience. Access to this larger cultural narrative, validation of those narratives, and the ability to connect to them creates a space for cultural healing by and for Black women. Pétigny argues that this self-produced space of cultural healing is essential for a culture to maintain agency over its cultural narratives and produce safe and constructive spaces to heal (52).

Cultural healing takes on another level through performance that writing cannot guarantee as access to writing varies based on individual circumstances (Pétigny, 54). Performance produces collective cultural healing through acting out trauma as a means of

working through it. This acting out can create a cultural guide to healing through a trauma as articulated to an audience. This articulation of cultural trauma to an audience further produces a space that honors cultural voice and agency that works to disrupt cultural forgetting (Pétigny, 54). The public nature of performance can push the trauma away from a strictly individual experience where isolation and emotional pain catches an individual in the cycle of trauma. Creating a space of cultural healing can disrupt that cycle where common cultural trauma can be worked through. Pétigny suggests, “As trauma seeks to dehumanize the victim, the group takes on its duty to restore her humanity. Thus healing within a collective offers the most liberatory and effective path to mediated trauma and self-love” (57). Spaces of collective cultural healing share the weight of trauma and liberate the individual from bearing that traumatic truth alone. Producing these narratives of trauma through performance evokes critical consciousness and an opportunity for collective cultural healing in the performers and also the audience by creating a deeper understanding of trauma and how it affects the experiences of a particular group. Both sharing and seeing trauma narratives breaks the silence surrounding their existence, allowing trauma to be addressed, validated, and reconciled (Pétigny, 57).

Rose Gold delves into these complex layers of cultural trauma that are rooted in a historical perpetuation of sociopolitical injustices. Sanders’ explores the cyclical nature of trauma through her characters touching on the difficulty in working through trauma and escaping “trauma-symptoms.” Collective cultural memory is approached through the generational traumas of the characters that create a complex web of cause and effect, disintegrating the once strong relationships between the characters. *Rose Gold*’s

exploration of trauma as it relates to Black women and motherhood creates cultural remembering of the social impact of historical trauma. Voicing traumatic experiences through these fictional characters creates a space to analyze the social issues that impact Black women and that are largely ignored by society as a whole. Presenting a narrative on these social traumas claims agency over them and validates their presence in Black women's lives. Opening herself and the audience to the reality of trauma evokes a critical consciousness that can work to break the silence of these experiences and their largely social impact. *Rose Gold* thus performs a working-through of trauma that can lead those who engage with it a step closer to collective cultural healing.

Evoking Critical Consciousness

The Cyclical Nature of Trauma

Rose Gold employs an awareness of varying aspects of trauma that evokes a critical consciousness of the complex layers of trauma and how it impacts the lives of Black women. The first aspect of trauma Sanders' production explores is its cyclical nature. The audience sees the lingering presence of the character Bobbie's struggle with her failed self-induced abortion of her daughter Elise. This is approached in two ways, the first being through the use of symbolic triggers that recreate memories of the trauma. Bobbie's major trigger to the memory of the abortion is the rose gold soap dish in her sister Maia's bathroom which she held onto while having her self-induced abortions. Bobbie shows an attachment to the rose gold soap dish as she brings it up multiple times throughout the production.

Act 2, Scene 1 is Bobbie's first mention of the rose gold soap dish. She comes to Maia's house late at night, asking about files that will help her locate Elise in the foster care system twelve years after her attempted abortion. Maia's painful memory of saving Elise after finding Bobbie and Elise in her bathroom ignites a fury in Maia while Bobbie pleads for her to tell her where Elise is. Maia refuses to tell Bobbie and points out how she and her abusive husband are unfit to care for Elise which prompts Bobbie's own painful memory of the attempted abortion to surface and triggers her to talk about the soap dish. Maia cuts her off, telling Bobbie that she looks sick and should leave. In Act 3, Scene 5, Bobbie brings up the soap dish twice in her concluding monologue when she tells the judge her story of the attempted abortion and her desire to get her daughter back. She goes into detail about how ugly the soap dish is, but how pretty it made her skin look. She further mentions there are probably more soap dishes out in California where she wants to take Elise when she gets her back.

These two scenes highlight how things associated with traumatic memories trigger an individual to relive their trauma as a means of attempting to work through it. The nature of Bobbie's trigger, however, has taken on a compulsive and intrusive nature of "trauma-symptom" where she can't seem to work past the soap dish as it resurfaces when experiencing the pain of the abortion. The mixed feelings towards the soap dish, of it being both ugly and beautiful on her, forms a poetic sense of familiarity and fondness that is intermingled with the pain and longing that have resulted from her attempted abortion and the ultimate loss of custody of her daughter. Bobbie appears trapped in the memories of

this particular attempted abortion as she can't seem to fully work through the trauma or move beyond it, finding herself caught in a cycle of trauma.

The second approach to articulating the cyclical nature of trauma in *Rose Gold* is shown through the triangular process of Bobbie avoiding, working through, and running from the traumatic memory of her attempted abortion. Act 1, Scene 1 explores the first phase in the cycle of trauma in which Bobbie initially wants to forget her attempted abortion. The scene opens the production with Bobbie standing in a spotlight recounting her self-induced abortions. Her abusive relationship with her husband Cyrus was a primary motivator, as Bobbie explains: "My husband is the bad part of a good day. So I flush him. He be like 'I'll take care of you Bobbie, I'm gon' feed you girl' but my thighs never opened hungry, so if you ask me I think I LOST all my babies." Her physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive relationship led to countless abortions until her failed attempt which Elise survived. Bobbie explains that she thought about claiming Elise as her daughter at the hospital after Maia brought Elise in, but she didn't because of her husband:

It's taken me 12 years to regret that and I might die without ever seeing my baby. Without me ever apologizing for sopping up her bones in my panties. I think you stop living the day the child you meant to kill begins to. I didn't know how to tell her that Black women are disposable. Shadows of a good thing. That we are protected and raped in the same house. I wouldn't give him a baby because I didn't want to look him in the face twice. I bet you think I'm an unfit mother, but I can't even hold piss no more. Everything come out. And she don't even know. She got all her body and don't even know her momma sorry.

Bobbie avoided dealing with her trauma for twelve years before attempting to work through it in order to reconcile the situation with her daughter.

Act 2, Scene 1, the scene described previously in which Bobbie goes to her sister Maia in an attempt to locate her daughter, describes Bobbie's move towards phase two in the cycle of trauma by attempting to work through her trauma. Maia's refusal to help her sister locate Elise leaves Bobbie at a standstill until Act 3, Scene 3, during which a moment of coincidence brings Maia, Elise, and Bobbie together. The audience learns in Act 2 that Elise has various health complications as a result of her premature birth through the attempted abortion. Though she survived, the circumstances of her birth left her differently abled both mentally and physically. This leads Elise to go to the doctor for her conditions at age twelve. Maia ends up being the doctor who has Elise as a patient. The same day in which Maia is assisting Elise, Bobbie comes to Maia's office for some medication she needs since Maia is the only doctor she has access to. Elise and Bobbie end up talking to one another. Through their conversation Bobbie deduces Elise is her daughter as she learns about her age, where she's from, and takes notice of her similarity in features. This leads Bobbie into a panic that causes her to repeatedly apologize. This moment of confronting her fears reproduces trauma-symptoms that prompt her to leave in a hurry before Maia comes back with her prescription. This scene shows how Bobbie has moved into phase three of the cycle of trauma as she runs away, wanting to forget the origin of her trauma once again. Bobbie eventually repeats the cycle of trauma once more as she again attempts to work through the trauma by attempting to gain custody of Elise in the final monologue before the judge.

These moments throughout *Rose Gold* track the cycle of trauma in Bobbie, exposing what that cycle might look like for the audience and how it impacts the person

experiencing it. It highlights a narrative in which abortion was a necessary decision, one that many women need to make throughout their lives for various reasons. Though the experience can be a positive one for many women, *Rose Gold* articulates the potential for it to have a traumatic impact on the psychology of a woman depending on the circumstances that led to the abortion. Sanders' strategically layers the nuances of Bobbie's narrative and how the trauma informs her life to highlight its complex manifestations through triggers and phases in the cycle of trauma. The multidimensional character Sanders creates through Bobbie's narrative affirms her struggle and pain by exposing both somber and beautiful pieces of her that give voice to her story and the stories of women who have gone through similar situations. By showing how Bobbie's actively tries to work through trauma, the production attempts to help the audience understand what working through trauma can look like. Sanders' own critical consciousness of cyclical trauma in turn can educate and unveil that same critical consciousness within the audience.

The Generational Impact of Trauma

The second aspect of trauma *Rose Gold* expresses is the negative generational impact a series of cause and effect interactions, postmemory, and unresolved trauma can have on familial relationships. The production introduces various layers of familial trauma that add weight to the characters at various points in their lives. The nonlinear format of the play introduces the layers in relation to their cause and effect patterns. The first thread of familial trauma traced in the production occurs in Act 1, Scene 3 when the suicide of

Bobbie and Maia's mother, Sheila, is described. Telling a history of alcohol, sex, and depression, Sheila is eventually surviving off of disability, a state which Maia describes as, "And THAT is how you wake up in hell and learn to get comfortable." The scene articulates the impact of Sheila's suicide on Bobbie and Maia. Bobbie has a small monologue about her own suicidal thoughts and actions. The parallel of Bobbie's struggle and Sheila's shows a generational impact from the trauma of suicide where those who lose loved ones to suicide are often more likely to have their own suicidal thoughts or commit suicide (Suicide: Consequences). The scene flows into Maia talking about her mom's struggles, ending with a recount of Maia finding her mother after she committed suicide. Maia finding Sheila is paralleled to her finding Elise in her bathroom after Bobbie's attempted abortion as the end of Act 1, Scene 3 flows into Act 2, Scene 1 when Maia rushes Elise to the hospital. The weight of two intimate moments of death shapes Maia's pursuit of becoming a doctor and her coldness towards her sister. The trauma of finding her mother and Elise impacts her perspective on life well beyond those moments. Though Maia finds some ways to cope with the trauma, its effects still linger leaving a strain on her relationship with Bobbie. The different ways that Maia and Bobbie have coped with trauma highlight the difference between successfully working through trauma and getting caught in its cyclical nature.

The second thread of familial trauma stems from Bobbie's attempted abortion. Noting already the impact Bobbie's abusive relationship with Cyrus had as the catalyst for Bobbie's self-induced abortions, the failed attempt that Elise survived had its own effects

on both Maia and Elise. Maia recounts the trauma of finding Bobbie and Elise in her bathroom in Act 2, Scene 1:

That was the hardest day of my life. Holding a baby that's barely a baby cause your sister... (Looks up) I washed my car for weeks, Bobbie! I didn't even feel her heart until we got to the hospital. She smelled like hair when you burn it. You know what that's like!? Watching somebody suffer and not make a sound? Dying on mute? And I'm sitting there like I did it, or can fix something but I can't.

The intensity of Maia's experience saving Elise was traumatic. Having barely arrived at the hospital in time to save Elise left lingering pain well beyond the initial incident. Bobbie's trauma moved beyond being her own through Maia's intervention. The lingering pain puts Maia and Bobbie's relationship at a tense distance as Maia struggles to forgive her sister while Bobbie struggles to forgive herself.

Elise's own trauma from Bobbie's attempted abortion impacts her physical and mental abilities, leaving her with a lifetime of health complications as she grows up in foster care. Beyond the bodily trauma of the attempted abortion, Elise endures the trauma of postmemory of the incident. Elise is aware of and notes that she is not the "ideal" desirable daughter in more ways than one. In Act 2, Scene 2 Elise expresses her understanding of how the visible evidence of the trauma she's endured impacts how potential adoptive parents see her: "And to the adopters, a daughter with a metal chest and a bunch of misdirected veins on her spine makes for a ummm... less-than-desired purchase. I get it. My parts come broken and still require assembly." Though she still maintains a positive sense of self, Elise is twice rejected from the opportunity to have a mother through the attempted abortion by not being adopted. The trauma of being a motherless child impacts her understanding of the world and how she exists within it. Act

3, Scene 1 further highlights Elise's knowledge of the circumstances of her birth and how the "postmemory" of the attempted abortion impacts her sense of self: "My body has a special way of reminding me that I'm the dog that survived being put down." Elise's statement powerfully highlights how she can never escape the impact of Bobbie's trauma which has become her own trauma.

Rose Gold thus presents the ways in which trauma can affect familial relationships and extend across generations. Moments of pain from one incident can create unstable relationships in other areas of the characters' lives, which can lead to further traumatic incidents. By exploring how unresolved trauma informs the decisions, relationships, and characters' sense of self, the production creates an awareness of how not healing from trauma can have dire consequences beyond the individual's own pain and suffering from the initial traumatic incident. The author's own critical consciousness of how trauma can impact a family generationally is expressed through the performance, which can in turn produce critical consciousness among audience members.

Historical Cultural Trauma

The third aspect of trauma *Rose Gold* explores is collective cultural memory. As previously addressed, historical oppression endured by Black women creates generational stressors and trauma. In addition to the impact disparities have on Black women in regards to the previous traumas addressed, *Rose Gold* also addresses the perpetuation of historical educational inequalities. This is first explored through the character Ada, a friend of Bobbie and Maia. Act 1, Scene 2 depicts Ada's experiences as a child in the classroom.

When she asks to use the bathroom her teacher won't let her go, prompting her respond in the form of a rap as a track plays in the background. Ada's rap skillfully brings in her life experiences, Shakespearean content from the classroom, and highlights disparities in the educational system. These disparities are addressed in the last part of her rap:

If this supposed to be a classic I'mma write one too/
About the teachers who don't care about the life I knew/
I call them all the whiteboard crew,
they only want people with money coming to they school/
so they put homework on the board and then watch T.V./
Like Mr. Lewis for Algebra hasn't taught in a week/
BUT THIS N---- WON'T LET ME PEE? That's cool,
I'll call him out on MTV.

Ada's character notes her experience where her teachers have little to no interest in the life she lives and the complexities that come with it. She creates a play on words with "the whiteboard crew" that suggests the educators are predominately white with a primary focus on bringing money to the school rather than focusing on the actual education of their students. This disconnect occurs with a lack of proper training for educators to work in multicultural environments, creating a situation where cultural and racial differences can lead to misunderstandings and an inability to connect with the students they teach. The lack of investment in multicultural training for teachers leaves them unprepared to teach inner city students, highlighting one of the ways in which disparities in inner city schools are perpetuated (Walker). Inner city schools typically have less funding, resources, and extracurricular opportunities (Chemerinsky, 1467-1468). They also face challenges in retaining quality educators that are sufficiently trained in their respective subjects ("Research Spotlight on Hard-to-Staff Schools"). This educational environment creates a greater disadvantage for inner city students to continue onto higher education and attain further academic success (Haveman and Smeeding).

Act 3, Scene 2 continues the conversation on historically perpetuated disparities in education by demonstrating how Ada's children are impacted. Ada is about to go out for the night when she asks to see her daughter's homework. She notices some errors in her work: "This one wrong. Where did your 2 go baby? Yea your carried it...off the page. See look, when you bring that one down this one 'sposed to change. Mmmhm. (Scans the rest of the page). Okay...okay, that looks right. Girl who told you that's an isosceles? EQUAL sides baby, Lord Jesus. I swear I hate that school." The scene shows Ada attempting to help her daughter get through the same struggling school system she did. The same issues that impacted Ada are still impacting her children, and will likely affect her grandchildren as well. This segment illuminates how historical educational disparities affect multiple generations as struggling school systems continue to be neglected.

These two scenes articulate a collective cultural memory of the disparities that result from historical cultural trauma. These disparities are evident in the educational system where generations of women have had to work hard to ensure a competent education for their children because access to quality schools and educators has been limited among historically marginalized communities. This limited access creates further disparities by decreasing opportunities to attain higher education or higher-paying positions. These fundamental barriers in the educational system embedded in racist and sexist systematic structures, reproduce the cultural trauma for Black women that has become a part of collective cultural memory. By exposing the perpetuation of cultural trauma through structural disparities and addressing its presence in collective cultural memory, Sanders' own critical consciousness of these sociopolitical issues is evident.

Rose Gold further works to unveil that critical consciousness for audience members and creates a space that can lead to social change and collective cultural healing among Black women.

Points of Transformation and Reclamation

Rose Gold creates transformative potential beyond producing critical consciousness; it gives voice through performance to sociopolitical issues that impact Black women. The topics addressed in the production are often seen as taboo and thus are largely underrepresented in educational spaces. Breaking this silence by addressing these issues publicly on stage is a step towards collective cultural healing. Though the characters in *Rose Gold* struggle to find resolution to their traumatic experiences, the production as a whole maps out collective cultural healing by showing how the characters attempt to work through personal and historical trauma. By exploring the cycle of personal trauma, examining the ramifications crisis can have on extended family members and future generations, and highlighting historical disparities that perpetuate collective cultural trauma, the production generates critical awareness that can create. For example, Sanders intended for the production to encourage Black women to heal their relationships with one another:

The plan for that show and that script was to write something that displayed, to kind of hold up a mirror to Black women and girls about how we treat each other and how we...how our relationships have been impacted by things outside of us. You know what I'm sayin? Colorism and you know...all of the really negative things that we can try to or attempt to start doing some damage control for. (Personal interview)

This “damage control” is a step towards collective cultural healing through which Black women can begin to explore the ways in which historical trauma impacts their relationships with one another.

Sanders further explores how systematic disparities impact relationships among Black women:

If you are already a part of a minority where there is a limited amount of resources that we're going to give you all, then it's a crabs in a barrel thing, you know? Everybody feels like they have to better or best each other in order to get a slice, a sliver of the entire cake, you know? That's being reserved for what seems like a majority group and then it gets nasty. People become vindictive and malicious towards one another. (Personal interview)

This social pressure produced by systematic disparities as a result of historical trauma incites a situation where collective cultural healing is hard to foster. This is particularly difficult when the majority of the cultural energy is expended towards surviving in a society that oppresses Black women and forces them to compete for limited opportunities. Sanders notes how the pressure of competition and “elitism is a sickness” and her observations of it in higher education were the initial inspiration for writing *Rose Gold*. She wanted to address these social issues as a means of starting the conversation and thus breaking the silence on how they impact Black women. As the production evolved through the writing and performance process Sanders indicated the intent of the production shifted to include more:

I think now it's just to get people comfortable with the onset of tragedy and dealing with it because we experience very unfair situations. But then you have some people who just get one after the other. I mean, they have 30 years of life where it was just like...there was something that just kept happening, things just wouldn't go right. So it's learning to find joy in the face of tragedy I think, in being willing to work through hard things and talk about them. (Personal interview)

This focus on dealing with trauma and tragedy more explicitly through the narratives and experiences discussed in *Rose Gold* produces a performative space where collective cultural healing can begin to occur. Through mapping out ways of working through trauma and breaking the silence surrounding the social issues addressed, a transformation can begin to occur to heal the collective cultural community of Black women while informing others of their lived experiences of historic and structural disparities.

The process of writing *Rose Gold* was personally transformative for the author as it gave her an opportunity to resist the artistic pressure to create something that others would like instead of work that was meaningful to her: “I got into the habit and developed an appetite for creating things that were impressive and *only* impressive. And so if I had a poem that I was just, you know, I just kinda needed to get something off my chest, I would *never* perform it because it wouldn’t get a ten or wouldn’t get thunderous applause” (Personal interview). This hesitation to find value in one’s narratives because of the fear that it doesn’t meet an aesthetic ideal can limit the opportunity for underrepresented experiences to be shared and heard. Writing *Rose Gold* was an opportunity for Sanders to empower herself by writing for the sake of writing and seeing what she could do with her artistry. She reflects: “I think the reason why it was empowering this time is because I did almost everything myself. And it was so great, because I didn’t think I could do a lot of what I did...and the fact that I was able to do everything I wanted to do” (Personal interview). Writing *Rose Gold* was transformative for Sanders as a reminder of the value of her work and a reclamation of her agency over her own artistry. *Rose Gold* further reclaims agency over Black women’s cultural narratives and representation. Though the

characters and stories in *Rose Gold* are fictional, the social issues it addresses are real and necessary to talk about. Sanders' production creates a space where addressing social issues that impact Black women is done by and for Black women. This self-produced space of collective cultural healing through writing and performing can address collective cultural trauma as a means of working through it to move forward to better the lives of Black women.

Unveiling Truth

Rose Gold explores the reality of living with trauma and considers how that trauma can morph into a generational and historical phenomenon through collective cultural memory. Sanders' strategic engagement with the cyclical nature of trauma and the need to work through it helps to unveil strategies for collective cultural healing that address both internal and external sites of trauma for Black women. The performance, based on Sanders' own critical consciousness, encourages the development of that same critical consciousness among audience members by engaging them in a talkback about the content of the production. Hearing feedback from the audience and having conversations with the audience on the issues addressed in the production helped Sanders understand the educational value of *Rose Gold*. Sanders shared that "for a lot of people, it's just holding up a mirror or recounting things they had experienced... I think it's educational for everybody that's out there 'cause I can just keep using examples for different people" (Personal interview). The ability of her production to reach so many people worked to validate the lived and witnessed experiences of those who have endured them in their lives.

Seeing a production that brings light to the traumas and tragedies that can come with structural inequalities creates a better understanding of those who live with those experiences. Moreover, by staging her production in a university setting, Sanders hopes that her piece can create critical conversations in academia: “*Some* of the world’s greatest minds come from the world of academia, that’s why it is what it is. And that’s why they invest so much money into these institutions. And because of that, I hope that putting it in an academic setting is sparking academic conversation where these minds and these people with these great ideas and these desires to create change” (Personal interview). Producing that change starts by evoking critical consciousness through such performances, which can lead to conversations among those in a position to rectify the structural inequalities and historic cycles of trauma explored in *Rose Gold*, and provide an opportunity for Black women to work through and heal the wounds of collective cultural trauma.

CHAPTER IV

BREAK THE CYCLE

The application of Hip Hop Theater in educational environments can offer a platform for marginalized students to articulate the ways in which they experience inequities based on their various intersecting identities. Understanding the intersectionality of marginalized students' identities can highlight the overlapping layers of discrimination and inequality that inform their overall experiences in educational spaces. A particular Hip Hop Theater production, *Break the Cycle*, works to address systematic inequalities based on race, class, and first generation college student status within higher education. Based on the true stories of former students and alumni from the University of Wisconsin – Madison, *Break the Cycle* tackles the barriers these students have encountered in their lived experiences as marginalized students in higher education. The production's narrative centers on the cyclical nature of systematic oppression as it addresses the various social symptoms that are a product of generations of systematic inequalities. *Break the Cycle* explores these cyclical consequences of systematic oppression and how they impact marginalized students' overall success as they navigate higher education. The cyclical nature of systemic oppression and its consequences are alluded to in the theme song that reemerges throughout the production:

(Singing) Cycles. Cycy Cycles. Start at one place. End where you started. Start at one place. End where you started. Hard to Break. Hard to break. Your mother grew up poor, her daddy MIA. You grew up poor, your daddy MIA. Afraid you'll stay poor, baby daddy's MIA. But you're hard to break. Grandma was bruised and mommy's roughed up too. Now the

love of your life just put his hands on you. But you're hard to break. I know it's hard to...break these...

Break the Cycle is a one-woman show written and performed by Kelsey Pyro, an alumna of the University of Wisconsin –Madison. The production explores the real-life experiences of students who are first generation, low-income, and from communities of color as they navigate the application process for college and the struggles they may face in successfully attaining a college degree. As a multimedia Hip Hop Theater production, it incorporates digital media, break dancing, music, voice over, and acting to illustrate how systematic barriers within higher education impact the success of marginalized students. In the author's words, the purpose of the production is to "bring to light the unique challenges that students may face in order to inspire dialogue around how to better support low-income and first generation college students" (Personal interview). *Break the Cycle* engages in the production of critical consciousness surrounding the disparities marginalized students in higher education face as well as the level of persistence and endurance those students employ as they attempt to change their statistical outcomes in life.

Context

To understand the lived experiences portrayed in *Break the Cycle* it is essential to realize the systematic barriers certain students face based on their specific identity markers and how the intersection of those identities complicates those students' experiences and their successful completion of college. *Break the Cycle* focuses on the ways in which a student's opportunity to enroll and succeed in higher education is

affected by one's race, socioeconomic status, and being the first in their family to attend college.

A major area of disparity in higher education is demonstrated by the low enrollment rates of students of color compared to white students. In 2013, the percentage of college students by race was as follows: Black students 14.7%, Hispanic students 15.8%, Asian 6.4%, and Native American 0.8%, two or more races 2.9%, and white students 59.3% ("Total Fall Enrollment"). Of the students of color who attended college, only a small percentage of Black and Hispanic students successfully attained a degree. In 2014, the percentage of young adults (age 25-29) who attained a college degree within their respective racial groups was as follows: 22% of the Black population, 15% of the Hispanic population, 61% of the Asian population, and 41% of the white population ("The Condition of Education"). This reflects inequalities that impact access to and success in higher education, especially for Black and Hispanic students. The majority of students who drop out of college cite financial hardship as a primary motivator (Johnson et al., 7). Additionally, racism and sexism that manifests through subtle microaggressions, overt remarks, or physical acts of violence can negatively impacting marginalized students' success in higher education (Caplan, 66). Daniel Sue explores the impact of microaggressions on marginalized students in higher education:

"Microaggressions can affect the student body composition through recruitment (which students selected), retention (which students drop out), and promotion (graduation rates) of students of color. If racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions present a hostile and invalidating learning climate, these groups are likely to suffer in any number

of ways” (Sue, 235). Students of color cited microaggressions on the basis of their race and gender as negatively impacting their ability to navigate higher education:

...many students of color and women have experiences reflecting that substantial manifestations of both racism and sexism remain today. This is consistent with the structuralist understanding of students’ difficulties on campus and confirms the occurrence of many on-campus experiences that contribute negatively to the environment in which students attempt to acquire an education and that could well interfere with that attempt. (Caplan, 66)

Many students of color find campus climates to be non-inclusive and at times hostile both inside and outside of the classroom, especially at institutions with a predominantly white demographic. Paula Caplan’s research on the experiences of women and students of color finds that “racist and sexist treatment cause their targets confusion, sadness, self-doubt, anxiety, and frustration and constitute drains on their energy and attention, and this suffering is often silent...” (28). From inappropriate and unsympathetic remarks by professors and students to a largely white, male hegemonic curriculum that lacks diversity, many marginalized students feel undervalued and negatively impacted by their campus’ climate and community (Caplan 37,49). Consequently, “more than one-fourth of participants of color feel that race has some bearing (usually as an impediment) on their success at college” (Caplan, 42). Many marginalized students face a larger pressure to demonstrate their academic abilities to their educators and peers amidst an unwelcoming campus climate. Furthermore, marginalized students “especially African-Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans (but almost no whites and only a few Asian-Americans) — at a vulnerable time in their lives feel that they have to prove they are qualified to be at the university and say that they do not have a sense of belonging or

fitting in in either the academic or the social realm” (Caplan, 30). These and other factors contribute to the stress and discouragement of students of color as they attempt to attain a college degree.

Another major disparity in higher education affects students from lower socioeconomic statuses. Upward mobility in many ways is dependent upon obtaining some form of postsecondary education: “The need for education beyond high school is growing, as nearly two-thirds of all U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training by 2020” (Saunders, 1). Students from low-income families are likely to remain low-income for the remainder of their lives. Only 26% of low-income individuals move up to middle class and only 4% reach the upper class. A little more than half of those who experienced upward mobility earned a bachelor’s degree and had a two-income family (Hargreaves). However, rising tuition and fees leave low income families unable to contribute to their child’s college education thus deterring many young adults from pursuing a degree. As Saunders points out, “low-income students – especially students of color – are more likely to be financially independent for the purposes of student financial aid than their higher-income and white peers” (Saunders, 1). Without reliable financial support, low-income students are often unable to afford college in any way or have a higher risk of dropping out (Saunders). In 2012, of the 19% of Hispanic students enrolled in college, only 9% graduated. Similarly, of the 14% of Black students enrolled in college in 2012, only 9% graduated (Krogstad and Fry). This low retention rate can be attributed to by many factors, but financial stress while attending school accounts for 85% of dropout rates (Johnson et al., 7). Between having

to work while attending school (54%) and not being able to afford tuition and fees (31%), many low-income students are unable to graduate because of financial hardship (Johnson et al., 7). Additionally, “twenty-three percent of college students have dependent children” and thus face further financial strain as they cannot forgo working and attending school at the same time (Johnson et al., 4). These factors perpetuate a cycle of poverty as low-income students are unable to secure better-paying jobs that require a postsecondary degree.

First generation college students also face increased disparities in higher education. Only 24% of first generation college students successfully obtain a college degree compared to 68% of students whose parents hold a bachelor’s degree or higher (Chen, 4). This can be attributed to several factors. Many first generation college students come from poorly performing high schools and thus face disparities in college preparation. As a result, they may lack the knowledge needed to submit competitive college applications and successfully navigate curriculum expectations once enrolled: “First-generation students often require developmental coursework and tend to have lower grade point averages than their peers with college-educated parents. This results in lack of confidence in their own ability to be academically competitive and successful” (Falcon). First generation college students may also struggle to acclimate to campus climate and culture due to cultural and socioeconomic differences. This can produce a lack of social and academic connections to access opportunities that would enhance first generation college students’ experiences while enrolled. Familial support may be hard to come by as some parents “may look upon their child's desire to go to college as

offensive or arrogant. Furthermore, whether they support their children's college aspirations or not, parents without college experience may not understand the amount of time and academic focus required” (Falcon). A lack of familial support can further isolate first generation college students and increase stress in adapting to the demands of college life. In short, these and other factors can contribute to the low rate of degree attainment among first generation college students (Falcon).

Disparities in higher education impact students of color, low-income students, and first generation college students significantly at all levels of the process, from applying to degree attainment. A student with one of these identities markers alone faces risks in successfully attaining a college degree. Kimberle Crenshaw notes that “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum” of an individual’s identity markers, it is important to address intersectionality to effectively expose the ways in which systematic structures of oppression produce disparities (140). Those who have intersecting marginalized identities are at an even greater risk of dropping out. *Break the Cycle* acts as a platform for expressing the lived realities of marginalized students and educating academic audiences about the disparities marginalized students face in pursuing a postsecondary education. This exposure through performance can help university educators, staff, and administrators more competently prepare for and address the concerns and needs of marginalized students while revealing areas where their campus curriculum and climate lacks inclusivity, culturally competency, and safety for these students. Providing better support services, financial resources, and routes for academic success could help to increase the graduation rates of marginalized students

while also allowing for more diverse perspectives in classroom and within the university community at large.

Evoking Critical Consciousness

Systematic Inequalities in Higher Education

Through an exploration of the many barriers and disparities marginalized students face, *Break the Cycle* evokes critical consciousness of how such obstacles impact these students' overall academic success. Noting the reality of poverty as a cycle for a high percentage of students who are low-income, first generation, and from communities of color, *Break the Cycle* stages the educational system as a video game that the main character, Pawn, must navigate in order to access a limited opportunity for upward mobility. The educational system is represented through the pre-recorded, looming, deep male voice of the Game Master as he makes the rules and controls Pawn's path through the system, determining her failure or success along the way. He also verbalizes Pawn's inner self-doubt, magnifying it as she attempts to progress into and through higher education. The set design of the production emphasizes the constraints of the game space in which Pawn exists. A wide hexagon on the stage establishes the boundaries of the restricted access she has in the game, suggesting Pawn is limited by her background and identity as she can only exist within its confines. From the start of the production, Pawn is already statistically disadvantaged as the game takes into account her identity markers as a low-income, first generation, student of color to determine her future obstacles and potential success. Pawn is trapped in the confines of

the system, forced to play the game with structural inequities and barriers in place that more privileged students do not face. Despite these challenges, she must try to successfully enroll in college and obtain a degree in order to improve her socioeconomic outlook in life.

At the beginning of the performance, the systematic disparities and barriers marginalized students face are established as Pawn is told to choose her character only to realize she doesn't actually have a choice. She is denied access to the locked white male character, Lance, and the white female character, Shelly, as the Game Master laughs at her attempt to choose them. Pawn is forced to enter the game as a low-income, first generation, female student of color with all the obstacles ascribed to those identity markers, to which the Game Master states, "Poor choice," despite her inability to actually choose. The Game Master refers to her as "Pawn" throughout the game, to which she attempts corrects him multiple times stating, "That's not my name!" informing the Game Master that her actual name is Paris. The Game Master ignores her interjections, eventually leading her to give up and accept Pawn as her name. This suggests an indifference to and dismissal of her identity and autonomy as an individual within the educational system. Additionally, the character's given name, Pawn, itself acts as a metaphor for her disposability in the educational system and creates a sense of being just a pawn in the game. This metaphor alludes to the feeling of not belonging that many marginalized students experience while applying for and navigating higher education and highlights the ways in which characters from white, male, high-income, and/or educationally advantaged backgrounds are automatically privileged.

Despite Pawn's inability to choose a different character, one with a stronger potential for success, the Game Master prompts her to start the game anyway, noting, "If you don't play the game, you and your family will be poor, blue collar, and living on welfare FOREVER." Hesitant on enrolling at first the Game Master taunts Pawn playing on her concerns: "Enjoy digging ditches and flipping burgers for \$7.35 an hour. You know you don't want to be a single mother now." Pawn agrees to play the game, instantly becoming subjected to the limitations, rules, and challenges enacted under the Game Master's control. This is highlighted in her movement on stage. The Game Master appears to have control over her body as she hunches slightly with repetitive idle motions that mimic the movement of a video game character. She is informed she will face a series of challenges that she must complete in order to change her outcome in life and if she fails at any point, she must start completely over. The Game Master promises Pawn an easy journey by telling her that she simply has to avoid dropping out in order to attain upward mobility. He further offers unrealistic expectations of success if Pawn were to graduate: "If you make it to the end of the game, you will be able to graduate and buy your mother a house in the Hamptons." The Game Master's naïve view on the barriers a student like Pawn will face suggests that educators, staff, and administrators within the educational system do not understand, admit, or address how much more complicated and difficult enrollment and degree attainment is for marginalized students.

Disparities in College Prep and Access

The first level of the game is the college application process through which Pawn struggles immensely. Systematic barriers are explored as Pawn attempts her first challenge of taking the SAT examination, applying for schools, and filling out her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). When the Game Master explains the challenge, Pawn asks “what’s a FAFSA?” The Game Master ignores her question and starts the challenge. Without any guidance, Pawn struggles to take her SAT while the Game Master laughs, expressing doubt that she will receive a sufficient score. Moving on to her college applications, the Game Master further mocks her, suggesting she won’t be admitted to a university and that “at least there’s always community college... or trade school. Nothing wrong with an associate’s degree. HAHAHAAAAA!” The Game Master’s mocking of these educational options shows a negative perception of those who attend such institutions, which are at times the only options for marginalized students as they have a lower cost of attendance, allow for more flexibility in scheduling classes around work, and offer a better chance of acceptance and degree completion for those with less academic preparation. Pawn moves on to the FAFSA portion of the challenge, struggling to explain what it is and its significance to her mother. Her mother, unfamiliar with the jargon of the FAFSA, relies on Pawn, who is just learning this information herself, to understand the application. With all of the confusion, Pawn’s FAFSA ends up being submitted late. After her first attempt at this level, the Game Master announces Pawn failed the challenge and was denied access to college because her low SAT score and her failure to submit her FAFSA on time.

At this moment, Pawn reflects on her status in life, taking a moment to educate the audience on the cyclical nature of poverty that results from not being able to obtain a postsecondary education. She defines the cycle of poverty as “a set of factors or events by which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is outside intervention.” The performance acknowledges that Pawn may have succeeded if there had been an outside intervention such as access to student services to help her navigate the application process. Outside interventions such as college prep courses, SAT prep courses, FAFSA workshops, and application essay workshops could have helped to prepare Pawn to apply for college. Not having such forms of support nor the knowledge to properly prepare for her SAT and navigate the application process, Pawn was unable to score high enough, get her FAFSA in on time, and gain entry into college. She is forced to restart the game and attempt the level again. With her second attempt, Pawn is admitted into college as a result of her increased knowledge of and experience with the application process, suggesting marginalized students will need to seek out extra help and guidance in order to successfully apply for postsecondary education.

Disparities Upon College Entry

The second level of the game occurs once Pawn levels up to underclassman status in college. Upon enrollment, she faces financial difficulties in meeting the costs associated with being a student. Not having yet received her financial aid check and unable to afford all of her books and materials without financial assistance, Pawn is forced to decide which textbooks she will purchase first. The delay in obtaining her

books negatively impacts her ability to prepare for class and complete her assignments. Off to a bad start, the Game Master interjects a few weeks into the semester: “Bad news. You are failing your English class. Good news. Your financial aid check arrived. You may buy the rest of your materials. But you have to get a job in order to afford the rest of your tuition.” This reflects the experiences of many marginalized students who must be employed while in school to cover the expenses associated with tuition, class materials, housing, food, and other basic needs. Eventually Pawn’s one job turns into having two jobs as she works to support herself and send money back home to help her family. Juggling two jobs while attending school full-time weighs on Pawn and negatively impacts her academic and social pursuits.

Racialized microaggressions add to the stress Pawn endures during her first year of college. In one scene, Pawn is in class when discussion turns to a book that addresses racism. The professor calls on Pawn stating: “Pawn, I’m sure YOU have something to say about this.” Being called on to speak for her entire race in front of the class creates an uncomfortable, isolating, and unsafe space for Pawn, exemplifying the ways in which students of color are often the victims of stereotypes and ill-informed assumptions about their lived experiences. The scene highlights the ways in which marginalized students may be expected to contribute to discussions about racial topics while not being able to share their valuable insights about other issues discussed in class. Pawn’s experiences with racism, both blatant and covert, further isolate her during her first year in college and negatively impact her social and academic successes. The production thus shows the need for and importance of inclusive and culturally competent classroom spaces.

Having come from an underprivileged elementary and secondary school, Pawn faces disadvantages in succeeding academically at the college level. The Game Master scoffs at her need to take remedial courses during her first year to catch up on the material her high school failed to help her achieve proficiency in. Taking remedial courses further increases her overall cost of attendance. Pawn expresses her inability to keep up with the coursework as she struggles to study and manage her time, leaving her overwhelmed during her first year of college. The demands of working also limit her ability to commit enough time to her academic work, complete class assignments on time, and prepare for exams, resulting in low grades. The mental, emotional, and physical drain of stretching herself thin increases Pawn's risk of dropping out, demonstrating to the audience that despite marginalized students' best efforts, the lack of support and adequate preparation for college can impede their ability to successfully complete their degree.

The struggles Pawn faces as a low-income, first generation, student of color during the second level of the game, her first year in college, complicate her ability to balance school, work, and everyday life. She reflects on the struggles faced by marginalized students like herself while listening to her professor talk in class: "Maybe the cycle of poverty is less like a circle and more like a spiral. You start moving forward, you shoot up, then something happens and it sets you back, you crash back down, and end up almost where you started but a little bit ahead." If Pawn had access to better student services and financial resources, she may have progressed through her first year more smoothly with less barriers in the way of her academic achievement. Pawn barely

passes her first year classes and consequently begins her second year on academic probation.

Additional Barriers to Degree Attainment

At the start of her second year, Pawn faces another challenge in the game, her social life. Enticed by opportunities to party, Pawn takes risks in her social life that lead to an unplanned pregnancy. Initially she is determined to make it work by working longer hours at her jobs, possibly taking up a third to make more money to support a baby. Eventually the father of the child falls out of the picture, leaving Pawn with the burden to provide for herself and her child alone. Already stretched thin, Pawn is unable to balance her obligations as a mom-to-be, student, and worker. Pawn reaches out to her family, but her mother refuses to support her despite the fact that Pawn had contributed financially to the family while her mother was unemployed. Without outside support, Pawn ultimately drops out of school, landing her back at the beginning of the cycle of poverty. This highlights the ways in which marginalized students have less ability to take risks or make mistakes as college students as they do not often have readily available financial and emotional support to help them in unexpected situations.

Pawn notes the way in which she has been systematically conditioned to end up like her family her whole life. Using the metaphor of track, she observes that her family has been running in circles for generations trying to get somewhere while not realizing that they never left the track. She articulates her desire to break the cycle of poverty in her family through her monologue following her dropout: “I have no intention of

running away or in circles, but with fingers outstretched to a sky of dreams. But sometimes I round the bend and take another lap because it's safe. I've been trained to turn back. To not move forward. I'm a track star trying to retire but it's hard to unlearn the mistakes of our parents." Pawn realizes she's fighting systematic barriers that make it extremely difficult to avoid falling back into her family's cycle of poverty and single motherhood. The generational cycles she faces are strong, attempting to pull her back into their grasp every step of the way. Being the first in her family to pursue college in an attempt to invest in her future, Pawn is navigating without a road map to deal with challenges and setbacks along the way.

Pawn must reapply to school having formally unenrolled. Like other students from marginalized backgrounds who have dropped out, Pawn knows that her chances of doing well with her increased responsibilities are low. Attempting school with a baby would mean increased expenses, sleep deprivation, and difficulty balancing work, childcare, and school. Despite the odds of her not returning, especially full-time, Pawn eventually does reenroll in school entering the third level of the game as an upperclassman in college. She faces similar challenges as before, but is determined to remain diligent and focused, avoiding social risks and academic probation. Upon entering her last semester, Pawn struggles through her remaining finals in hopes of graduating. When her final grades are announced by the Game Master, the production reveals that marginalized students not only acquire typical skills gained in academia, but additional ones unique to their experiences in higher education. The Game Master announces: "American Lit 470 Effective Responses to Stereotypical Questions: A.

Business 270 Practicum in Working Two Jobs: A. Social Science 380 Structures of Support in Low-Income Families: A. Independent Study 400 Being the First in your Family to Graduate College: B+.” Pawn’s course list reveals that she not only had to master the academic rigor of her major and navigate campus climate, but specialize in how to overcome the barriers that impact her because of her intersecting identities.

Disparities Beyond Higher Education

Having passed her courses, Pawn finally makes it to a long awaited graduation to obtain her bachelor’s degree. Upon graduation, we see Pawn step outside of the hexagon resuming her normal body posture and signaling her release from the challenges and limitations she faced while pursuing higher education. This moment of elation is quickly deflated as Pawn realizes that college was only one game on the path to successfully breaking the cycle of poverty. Pawn reads her diploma out loud: “Congratulations on getting here. But ya ain’t there yet.” This note is a reminder that although she made it through this massive obstacle, further barriers will present themselves on her journey to break the cycle of poverty in her family. Pawn’s upward mobility is constantly at risk despite attaining her degree because she will continue to face systematic barriers as a single mother and woman of color that will impact her continued success. The intersectionality of Pawn’s identity makes her continued success contingent upon her ability to navigate disparities and discrimination in the work force and other aspects of her life. This risk becomes an omnipresent threat that Pawn must actively navigate in order to refrain from falling back into a cycle of poverty.

Break the Cycle is based on the lived experiences of the performer and author Kelsey Pyro along with other former students and alumni from the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Recordings of interviews Pyro had with former and graduated students are woven throughout the production creating a collective voice that highlights the various ways in which systematic disadvantages can manifest in higher education. These narratives echo Pawn’s experiences as she navigates the video game. By drawing on real-life examples, the voices hauntingly remind the audience that Pawn’s efforts could end in failure, but they also serve as a reminder that she’s not alone in her experience. The collection of narratives surrounding the struggles Pawn faces in the production creates a deeper understanding that this isn’t an isolated experience. Pawn represents a larger collective voice of marginalized students who are often underserved and unheard. The opportunities that come from Pawn’s pursuit of higher education require a great deal of hardship and risk, but the reward of changing not only her future, but her child’s as well, motivates her to persevere. Her experience in higher education serves as both an example of the struggles marginalized students face and a model for successfully graduating with a bachelor’s degree. The production suggests that the path towards success through higher education can become normalized for marginalized students rather than an anomaly. Continued success of marginalized students in higher education can help those from underrepresented communities attain positions that will allow them to enact positive changes within the educational system and their communities.

The complexities in *Break the Cycle*’s narrative and how it incorporates a critical

understanding of the barriers and inequities marginalized students face indicates the author's critical consciousness of these issues. Pyro's understanding of the ways in which the system of higher education impacts marginalized students creates the opportunity for her performance to evoke that same critical consciousness in the audience. Since *Break the Cycle* was performed at the Line Breaks Festival hosted by First Wave, a University of Wisconsin – Madison program, it was publically accessible to members of the campus community. The festival advertises its productions throughout campus inviting educators, students, and university members to attend. Free entry to every show in the festival allows low-income students and members of the local community to access the productions. With the platform the Line Breaks Festival provides, the critical consciousness *Break the Cycle* exhibits on the disparities faced by students who are low-income, first generation, and from communities of color can reach the people who are directly part of the system that reproduces those disadvantages. *Break the Cycle* can provide community members and university staff with a richer understanding of marginalized students' lived experiences so they can begin to consider effective ways to address the disparities marginalized students face and work to provide the necessary services to improve their overall academic and social success in higher education.

Points of Transformation and Reclamation

Insight into the lived experiences of marginalized students not only produces critical consciousness on the disparities and barriers faced when pursuing higher

education, but offers a space of reconciliation, validation, and empowerment for those narratives. Discussing her motivation for writing *Break the Cycle*, Pyro stated:

I really wanted to talk about something that I experienced and that I know a lot of people experience. Whether you're honestly first generation or not, college is hard. You don't have a certain type of support or family structure in place, you know? And I really feel that some things need to be changed so we can ensure that people become successful during school and after school. (Personal interview)

Wanting to reach an audience of students like herself and educators who have the power to impart change, Pyro sought to produce a piece that both brought to light the difficulties of being a marginalized student and made the audience laugh through the humorous components of the video game. Moreover, Pyro speaks to the transformative benefits of producing Hip Hop Theater and expressing her experiences through performance: "It was so healing and refreshing to be alone in my friend's apartment and come up with this. Really go into that space and feel emotions. It was very therapeutic and it made me feel good. That I'm like yes, I'm doing something that I love" (Personal interview). Being part of the First Wave program was key to her discovery of this artistic outlet as a means of empowerment and validation:

I think my experience being in First Wave was very, very helpful for me to be in that space...to get me through that space. To get me through this process. Cause being a student in Madison, Wisconsin was very intensive. A student of color, a first generation student, low-income student. You're in this place where it's a totally different cultural and family structure. Where most people who come from this type of culture and family structure and you don't. And you're trying to fit in their world, you know? And struggling hard. I definitely did. And I feel like First Wave really helped me out. And I think the productions of First Wave do help other students out too. (Personal interview)

Pyro's experience speaks to the benefit of programs like First Wave and Hip Hop

Theater festivals like Line Breaks, which can offer spaces and support for marginalized students to articulate their experiences and validate them through performance in an academic space.

Additionally, Pyro noted that the format of Hip Hop Theater is accessible to a wide range of audiences: “Hip Hop Theater is cool and it’s fun. It gets a lot of perspectives and points across from a diverse arena. And I haven’t met anybody who doesn’t enjoy a Hip Hop Theater show” (Personal interview). Because *Break the Cycle* voices the perspectives of students within the campus community who are largely underrepresented in the culture and curriculum, the performance can be transformative for both the performer and audience members, as Pyro observes: “It’s educational. I think it either preaches to the choir, a choir that hasn’t heard their story being told in such a way, so that they know they’re not alone. And then I also think it’s educational for people who’ve never heard that story being told before” (Personal interview). Hip Hop Theater’s ability to be accessible to those within and outside of the community produces a space where critical consciousness is evoked, and thus transformation in the campus community can occur. Having the space to work through personal experiences with Hip Hop Theater and share that with an audience not only offers empowerment for the author and performers, but can validate the experiences of audience members who relate to the content of the production. As Pyro reflect, “I feel like being able to use art as a medium to express yourself, your thoughts, and your feelings, and communicate in that way, it’s very helpful” (Personal interview). Feeling empowered to share her own experiences and the narratives of those whose experiences mirror her own, Pyro

commented, “I hope that I’m able to empower some other people through work that I do” (Personal interview).

Unveiling Truth

Break the Cycle’s unique opportunity to represent the experiences of marginalized students in higher education on the exact campus where those experiences occurred creates a highly educational space for the audience that places these narratives directly in their everyday realities as educators, administrators, and students on campus. Being exposed to the narratives in *Break the Cycle* reveals the barriers and disparities marginalized students on their campus have had and continue to endure. *Break the Cycle*’s talkback with Pyro about the issues addressed in the production helped to encourage a deeper level of critical consciousness in the audience about the disparities marginalized students face. Pyro notes how exposure to the narratives produced through the Hip Hop Theater productions in Line Breaks thus far are “...needed in the university for sure. I think Hip Hop Theater is impacting Madison in a very positive way” (Personal interview). Attending the production and engaging in the talkback helps initiate the necessary conversations that may lead to changes in the educational system.

Awareness is key to creating change, and critical consciousness is the foundation to teaching others about complex social issues and how they impact others. The power of awareness that *Break the Cycle* and the Line Breaks Festival produce on campus are not lost on Pyro: “All those stories are so powerful, because they’re important to hear. And that’s why every time a Hip Hop Theater show goes up about a certain topic, people are

so blown away because it's a new perspective that maybe they never knew existed" (Personal interview). Students who are marginalized in higher education are experts on their experiences and creating a platform for their perspectives to be heard is essential to producing a better campus climate, inclusive curriculum, and services that allow these students to not only succeed, but thrive in higher education.

Break the Cycle successfully articulates the inequities students who are low-income, first generation, and from communities of color face and how those inequities impact their futures. Systematic barriers become extensive obstacles in marginalized students' journey towards success through higher education. Producing critical consciousness about these disparities can help lead to necessary changes that alleviate and ultimately eliminate barriers that prevent marginalized students from becoming college graduates. With greater success for marginalized students in higher education, there would be a wider range of opportunities for success in the workforce and opportunities beyond graduation. These attempts in creating alternate outcomes are the purpose of many programs and services that work towards helping such students succeed in higher education. Productions like *Break the Cycle* can help articulate the need for such programs and services to help marginalized students succeed by evoking critical consciousness in members of the university community. The critical consciousness generated by viewing *Break the Cycle* and engaging in the talkback afterwards can ignite the necessary conversations that lead to change.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Hip Hop Theater as a multidisciplinary genre has the ability to transform the individual, evoke critical consciousness in the artist and audience, and ignite dialogue on complex social and political issues. Through these three highlighted productions - *Manikin*, *Rose Gold*, and *Break the Cycle* - the utility of Hip Hop Theater is evident in how they each address the narratives of underrepresented communities to inspire and empower. The creative process critically engages the author with the sociopolitical content their piece works to address. This evokes a critical consciousness of the production's content that awakens the artist to the complex intricacies of their own and others' lived experiences. Developing a production that validates these underrepresented narratives creates a source of empowerment for the author, performers, and audience members who see their own experiences represented on stage. The production further unveils a level of critical consciousness for the audience that benefits from the educational potential of the content addressed in the piece. The awareness produced through Hip Hop Theater productions and their accompanying talk backs offers the spark for dialogue about sociopolitical issues. Hip Hop Theater's diverse range of topics and narratives become an agent for critical consciousness and can start the necessary conversations that can produce tangible outcomes.

Uniting Hip Hop's Generations and Elements through Hip Hop Theater

Hip Hop Theater is an accessible genre that produces a powerful impact not only on the Hip Hop generation it was produced by and for, but on others as well. Hip Hop Theater's ability to reach multiple generations in the community draws varying experiences and perspectives to the stage and theater, as Natalie Cook, author of *Manikin*, suggests:

I always think that Hip Hop should be this conversation between generations. Because you have older generations who came before Hip Hop who when it came out was like, "What the fuck is this shit?" Then you have the people who started Hip Hop who look at new Hip Hoppers like, "What the fuck is this shit?" And then you got the new Hip Hop people who are just like, "Y'all old people need to get off my back and I'm 'bout to do me." And it's just a cycle... I feel like Hip Hop Theater should honestly be used to unite the gap that's between all these different generations and within generations too. (Personal interview)

The genre offers a platform for the unification of generations where the diverse narratives and perspectives produced can be represented, valued, and explored across generational and artistic divides.

Hip Hop Theater produces a transformative space that unites the artistic elements of Hip Hop with Knowledge to empower, inspire, and transform. As Kelsey Pyro, the creator of *Break the Cycle*, suggests, the stage becomes "an outlet for them to share their stories and to use their voice" (Personal interview). Producing a space for underrepresented stories can offer a site of collective community engagement with the content presented. As Cook puts it, "You can't heal until you face the ugly... If you want to form a community you have to hold yourself accountable and hold each other accountable, that's what a community is" (Personal interview). Critical engagement can

lead to reconciliation of the social and political issues addressed in a production's narrative to promote individual and communal healing. The benefits of Hip Hop Theater for the artists and community are articulated in its utility for empowering those who share the represented narratives, creating transformative insights and conversations on the content presented, and inspiring those engaged in their own growth and healing.

Social Justice Theater

Social Justice Theater is produced by and for oppressed communities by actively addressing systems of oppression in the rehearsal process and production through a development of critical consciousness within the author and artists. The critical consciousness of the author and artists is then expressed through the production to unveil that same critical consciousness for the audience. It is a theatrical form that draws on Paulo Freire's critical consciousness theory and dialogical theory⁴. The aim of Social Justice Theater is to explore sites of systematic oppression and its resulting sociopolitical issues to produce a deeper critical understanding of them and their systematic and historical ties. Evoking critical consciousness is a foundation to guide the artists and audience during productive dialogues post- performance surrounding the issues addressed on stage. Dialogical engagement that takes a critical approach by incorporating educational components surrounding the addressed sociopolitical issues with a competent facilitator is essential to the development of critical consciousness that

⁴ Similarly, Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed has been a long standing pedagogic approach of incorporating Paulo Freire's work into a theatrical method to address oppression and practice action towards change by incorporating audience members into the performance as spect-actors to act out scenarios to practice for real life sociopolitical engagement.

extends beyond the performance space. Audience members are able to gain a deeper insight about the content explored and develop a vocabulary for these critical dialogues. From these critical dialogues, action plans towards tangible change can be developed amongst participants to explore how the sociopolitical issues presented manifest in their own communities and how they can be productively addressed.

The critical consciousness component of Social Justice Theater makes it ideal in educational and informative spaces. The production of knowledge through Social Justice Theater can be a useful tool for developing more critically conscious individuals. Hip Hop Theater's engagement with the production of critical consciousness in these ways makes it a form of Social Justice Theater. A Social Justice Theater approach to Hip Hop Theater in higher education, secondary education, and non-profit arts based initiatives can provide a productive approach to multicultural education that connects the theoretical to students' lived experiences, while putting that knowledge into practice through performance.

Hip Hop Theater's Application in Higher Education

The educational aspects of Hip Hop Theater were widely recognized and valued amongst the artists when expressing their perspectives on Hip Hop Theater's application in higher education. Cook notes that "what makes an educational Hip Hop Theater piece is providing new perspectives or providing perspectives that aren't commonly told... it really makes the work come alive" (Personal interview). The ability to draw in an audience through the performative components of a Hip Hop Theater production and

enlighten them with hard hitting truths about the experiences of underrepresented communities allows for a learning environment through art that connects with the audience on an intellectual and emotional level of understanding. Zhalarina Sanders, the author of *Rose Gold*, points out: “For a lot of people, it’s holding up a mirror or recounting things they had experienced... I think it’s educational for everybody that’s out there” (Personal interview). To recognize Hip Hop Theater’s educational potential is to acknowledge its ability to be an agent of change through evoking critical consciousness of the underrepresented narratives Hip Hop Theater often explores.

Hip Hop Theater’s utility in higher education can be seen both on the stage and in the classroom. The Line Breaks Festival at the University of Wisconsin - Madison for a decade has been a platform for students to showcase original works that encourage critical thought and discussion, while creating a space where narratives that are underrepresented in higher education can be voiced and valued on stage. Hip Hop Theater productions like those in the Line Breaks Festival can offer an educational opportunity for both the performers and the audience. Exposing the lived experiences of marginalized students and the problematic elements of campus and classroom environments that persist can provide a foundation for university faculty, staff, and students to recognize and address the experiences and needs of marginalized students on campus. Moreover, the productions can generate critical consciousness among the student body, leading to more well-rounded and culturally competent scholars. Using Hip Hop Theater in conjunction with guided discussions about the issues raised can

generate awareness within the university community of the very real issues that exist on their campus.

Crucial to Hip Hop Theater's educational application is the recognition of the scholarly value of the art itself and the responsible engagement with sensitive issues in discussion settings, including facilitated talk backs, workshops, lectures, or classroom discussions that critically engage the work. It is important that those who intend to use Hip Hop Theater or similar art forms in their courses be first qualified to teach the sociopolitical content addressed and have the facilitation skills that are essential to productively navigating the conversations such content will generate. Being prepared to teach and facilitate such content is critical to creating a positive learning environment for students that both challenges and enlightens them on the topics explored. Furthermore, Hip Hop Theater's value extends beyond discussion settings and can be used as the primary foundation of a course both through production creation and interactive engagement that moves beyond analysis. A balance of academic analysis and artistic creation is critical to tapping into the potential of Hip Hop Theater in higher education.

Developing a Hip Hop Theater production can help marginalized students evolve their own critical consciousness of their lived experiences both within and outside of academia. Learning through writing and performing offers an alternative mode of understanding that taps into creativity, movement, and the embodiment of knowledge beyond simply reading. By bringing their lived experiences into the classroom, students can help draw deeper connections to course content that empowers and energizes. The interactive learning it provides is valuable in creating spaces and educational content that

is produced by and for marginalized students. The ability for Hip Hop Theater to affirm underrepresented narratives in the classroom allows such students to find empowerment in their identities, communities, and histories. Such a transformative process in a course can instill critical consciousness, validation, and the ability to present and talk about complex issues in creative and engaging ways. Programs that integrate and explore the lived experiences of marginalized students can create institutional spaces that empower and validate them through their academic journey. In such ways, the First Wave program at the University of Wisconsin – Madison offers students a learning community that merges the artistic and academic utility of Hip Hop Theater and Hip Hop arts to create a pathway for the success of its students throughout and beyond their academic careers. The incorporation of more programs and festivals that use the educational potential of Hip Hop Theater can create the critical consciousness necessary to transform the lives of students who partake in the genre and those who engage with its productions as audience members.

Hip Hop Theater’s Educational Potential Beyond Higher Education

Hip Hop Theater’s utility can expand beyond higher education as well. The artists whose productions have been explored in this thesis all successfully graduated with their bachelor’s degrees and are using their artistic talents and the skills they have gained from their experiences with Hip Hop Theater in other pursuits. All three artists have had extensive involvement in non-profit organizations that work with marginalized students in community programs and high schools. Pyro has contributed to the

community through her involvement with youth arts-based initiatives. Sanders has founded and currently directs The JVN Project that uses Hip Hop as a tool for social change and youth development in the local community. Cook has founded and currently directs Atlanta Word Works that provides workshops and events centered on writing and spoken word for youth in the local community. After graduating from the First Wave program, these artists became leaders and agents for change in their communities by using their knowledge and artistry to make a positive impact in the lives of youth. Hip Hop Theater can develop more critically conscious individuals with the skills necessary to creatively and effectively address sociopolitical issues. Hip Hop Theater can be applied to non-profit academic and arts-based initiatives as well as high school curriculums to offer critical development for marginalized students and inform others about the experiences and needs of these students. The utility of these programs can reach a wider range of communities to evoke critical consciousness and initiate the dialogues necessary to create positive change.

Hip Hop Theater is a newer genre that has the ability to unite artists across the artistic elements of Hip Hop as well as various generations and lived experiences. Its versatility and accessibility make it ideal for marginalized students from a diverse range of backgrounds to explore their own lived experiences as well as reach diverse audiences from various backgrounds. The incorporation of Hip Hop's element of Knowledge allows for the educational potential of Hip Hop Theater to be recognized and used to evoke critical consciousness in the theater, classrooms, and community spaces. A deeper awareness of sociopolitical issues that affect marginalized communities can lead to the

conversations necessary for producing change. Moreover, the transformative and empowering elements of the genre validate and express underrepresented narratives both inside and outside of academia. Investing in the educational potential of Hip Hop Theater can lead to programming that benefits marginalized students and communities while educating others about their experiences and needs. Hip Hop Theater is a useful means of bridging marginalized students' academics, artistry, and identity in ways that promote critical consciousness, empowerment, and activism within their own communities. Its ability to reach diverse audiences and produce empowering and inclusive educational spaces for marginalized students highlights the utility in creating curriculum, workshops, and programming centered on Hip Hop Theater in educational spaces. The echoes of critical consciousness evoked through the burning embers of knowledge in each performance is Hip Hop Theater's spark towards a chain reaction of awareness and positive change.

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