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To Arrive and Conquer: An Individual's Rite of Passage through Recognition of Ritual on Stage

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To Arrive and Conquer:

An Individual's Rite of Passage through Recognition of Ritual on Stage

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Theatre, Speech, & Dance from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, **High Honors**, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 7, 2013

As much as this is for me, it is for you.

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To Arrive and Conquer:
*An Individual's Rite of Passage through Recognition of Ritual on
Stage*

Introduction.....Page 5

Chapter One:

Discovering the Purpose and Ritual.....Page 8

Chapter Two:

To Arrive and Conquer: *My Rites of Passage*.....Page 12

Chapter Three:

Homosexuality and Need in a World Outside of My Own.....Page 22

Conclusion.....Page 27

Works Cited.....Page 29

Appendix:

How Wisdom Came into the World.....Page 31

INTRODUCTION

No book or set of instructions can fully prepare a young person for the four-year journey known as college. Four years ago, I began my undergraduate career at The College of William and Mary not knowing what to expect. Little was I aware that I was preparing to begin a journey like no other. I was fortunate enough to hear Dr. My Haley, widow of *Roots* author Alex Haley, speak on her life's work. She stated "If you don't know yourself, everyone will write on you," (14 Feb 2013). Her statement resonates with me because it affirms why I have embarked on this particular honors thesis research to further my journey of self discovery. Unbeknownst to me, my research and process had been underway since June 2009 when I graduated from Meadowbrook High School. My collegiate journey is deeply rooted in the theatre, and it is through theatre that I have succeeded and failed, cried and rejoiced, and found a song to sing. I did not even realize how it all was happening but my theatrical experiences over the last four years have shifted and changed me mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, and sent me through a series of life phases.

Theatre is such a powerful thing. It moves in ways, that words can never describe. Theatre serves as my refuge, a public, yet still personal safe space. Nothing in my life has ever felt right if I am not involved in a show or if there is not an upcoming performance for which to rehearse. Everything in my life could be in a state of disarray, but for the last seven years theatre has consistently remained an unwavering outlet of comfort, nourishment and healing for me. I rely on it for sustenance, and I always found that it strengthens all the other areas of my life. The theatre productions and events over the last four years have correlated with my personal growth.

My honors thesis solo performance was titled “*To Arrive and Conquer: MY RITES OF PASSAGE.*” The piece was a theatrical reflection of my personal journey over my last four years at the College and was constructed solely based on the theory of French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep. I celebrated and acknowledged my rites of passage through song, dance, recitations, and scholarly analysis. I wanted to share that moment with the people of the William and Mary community who had supported, uplifted, and encouraged me throughout my four year time. As much as the performance was for me, it was for them as well.

On April 7, 2013 at 7 pm, in the Commonwealth Auditorium in the Sadler Center on the campus of William and Mary, I delivered my solo performance to approximately 40 familiar faces and friends. By the end of my presentation, I felt liberated. I cried, I laughed, and I had cleansed my soul from all that burdened me publicly before my community. I assumed that my journey was complete, but I soon realized that there was still much for me to accomplish. My original belief was that my performance was solely based on Arnold van Gennep’s theory. However, further research pointed me in other theoretical directions that I will discuss elsewhere in this paper. There was something bigger happening on stage that night of April 7 that I did not initially realize. Through the personal narratives shared and performances given, what I had deemed to be a rite of passage also manifested itself into a series of rituals on stage. By presenting a culmination of my theatrical past, I was embracing and honoring older rituals studied by other scholars, artists and cultural workers such as Paul Carter Harrison, Barbara Ann Teer, and Beverly J. Robinson among others.

As a young adult, as a Black male, as a homosexual male, my performance was influenced by many diverse populations, and through my performance they were all intersected together. After grappling with more text, I was able to identify the ritualistic qualities in my performance and much like the concept of Sankofa which means “to go back and fetch what you forgot,” I discovered that I was expressing what was innately in my blood as a Black male. My age and my sexuality aided me in furthering the performance to tell a brand new story to the community at large. Van Gennep’s theory on rites of passage had shaped and contextualized my performance, but other identifiable rituals gave it purpose. Ritual performances in theatre function as creative and therapeutic avenues for an individual to arrive at complete self-awareness. Subsequently, through a ritual performance an individual can successfully conquer personal inhibitors and become a fully engaged and initiated citizen in their community. Thus, ritual performances conducted serve as mechanisms of self-development for the individual as they transition between different phases in their life journey.

CHAPTER ONE

DISCOVERING THE PURPOSE AND RITUAL

A ritual is a holy experience; you deal with a congregation of people. A ritual is a family affair. There is no such thing as a stage, no such thing as an audience; only liberators and participants. And you try to remove that psychic distance, that “nigger space” that separates Black people from each other. In a ritual you mold, meet, and merge into one. You feel, laugh, cry and experience life together. (Harrison 194).

-Barbara Ann Teer

I fully believe that in order to know where you are going you must know where you came from. This idea has never felt as profound as it does currently in reflection on my honors journey and my William and Mary journey at large. I think back to a text I encountered as a Sharpe Community Scholar my freshman year, and I realize how much it informs my research currently. A quote in particular from Marilynne Boyle-Baise’s *Multicultural Service Learning: Educating Teachers in Diverse Communities* has great inspiration for my own process states, “This process of becoming demands a willingness to look within, to reflect upon one’s past and present views, to root out false assumptions, and to reeducate oneself in ways that affirm cultural difference and support educational equality and equity” (55). This process to develop my creative honors project forced me to grapple with so much of myself that I was extraordinarily apprehensive to do but it resulted in cultural and educational enlightenment. Through my research and assessment I have gone through a spiritual and emotional cleansing in an attempt to re-evaluate myself. The resulting work is meant to exemplify the knowledge and the beauty that comes, when we as individuals cease to run from ourselves but rather stand still and embrace all of who we are.

When I began this journey, all I knew is that I wanted to do an honors project and I knew I wanted to perform. I knew I wanted to say something, and that I had something to say, but I did not know how to articulate my desire. In *Act Like a Man*, Robert Vorlicky states, “Man has choice whether or not to name and claim his difference within. It is on this level of self-realization that processes of change—personal, cultural, political, and moral—are located,” (189). I felt that I had a responsibility to myself and the campus community at large to attempt to successfully craft an honors thesis. My hope was to develop a performance that was a showcase of my uniqueness, and I wanted it to be a declaration that I believed in. I was trying to figure out how I could incorporate all the people and things that I admire into something scholarly and that could leave a lasting impact. I did not know upon me how for centuries Black people have utilized art for the expression of the self. In *Negro Art in America*, Albert C. Barnes declares in reference to the Negro and creation of art...

“It has lived because it was an achievement, not an indulgence. It has been his happiness through that mere self-expression which is its own immediate and rich reward. Its power converted adverse material conditions into nutriment for his soul and it made a new world in which his soul has been free. Adversity has always been his lot but he converted it into a thing of beauty in his songs” (20, 21).

I needed to share my own journey of self-awareness and awakening with the community so that I could be fully immersed as myself, and foster change through my performance. The piece was a vehicle for other people who could identify with me and the means by

which I could share with them that their story was worthy of assessment and sharing as well.

“Ritual can be defined as a recurring pattern of action that represents the desire to begin life anew, and the need to find some way of expressing that desire,”
(Robinson 332).

As people progress forward in their lives change is inevitable, however there will always remain ritualistic elements, unique to each individual, that consistently lasts throughout any season of change. I was highly intrigued by scholar Beverly J. Robinson’s work in understanding how the self ritualizes performance spaces. Robinson addressed how prevalent rituals have been to the Black American throughout history and how they still resonate within the community today. Robinson noted that the Black American self is prevalently ritualized in the spaces of the fields and plantations the pulpit, and the proscenium stage (332).. The pulpit and the proscenium stage were two of the ritualized spaces present in my solo performance. I was astonished of how so many characteristics of these ritualized spaces were present throughout my performance.

Slavery was one of the most horrific periods in American history, especially for Black Americans, but through the pain came an art form. “Plantation life did not kill early African Americans’ sense of identity and intelligence but taught an enslaved people to mask these qualities in words, movement, and song” (Robinson 338). This how I understand rituals were transported from African and utilized in a new world. African captives and their later descendants utilized performance, whether by force or voluntarily, and relied on ritualizing spaces in an African spirit for their survival (Robinson 342).

Performance was a mechanism of survival for early Blacks, and because of that, individuals like me can use these performance rituals as modes of expression and freeing of my own identity. In *The Drama of Nommo*, Paul Carter Harrison states “Whatever the modality, Song, Dance, or Drum, African ceremony is performed, not merely for pleasure or entertainment, but to communicate and affirm the ethos of the community, and the sanctions of the life-style. The rituals are purposefully functional: they teach,” (220). The rituals that I have experienced and learned all my life taught me to be the individual who I am today and therefore I gave back through my performance the rituals the community gave to me.

This honors project is a personal narrative of my story thus far, and I could not have developed it without my many communities. The communities of my family, my friends, and William and Mary all play an integral part of the rites I experienced. In *Learning through Serving* I read “Commitment is crucial in order to have positive change within the community that you’re working in, and also to have positive change in the individuals,” (Cress, Collier, & Reitenauer, 2005, 17). It was imperative for me to be completely committed to telling my whole truth in the performance and being as honest as possible. “Storytelling is not a passive event; it is actively conjured” (Harrison 39). I understand now how a ritual takes a communal experience. Rituals can elevate an individual to the next level, but it needs the community to be engaged in the process and to share in the experience. It becomes a much more deeply and spiritual experience in that way.

CHAPTER TWO:

TO ARRIVE AND CONQUER: *MY RITES OF PASSAGE*

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say

-Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Act V.III)

I wanted my solo performance to be crafted as a genuine reflection of how I felt in order to serve as an honest depiction of my tenure at the College. It was my vision that this performance would serve as my most intimate one to date because I was truly allowing my audience into my world and not a character's. I could have easily spoken about a lot of theories and performed theatrical pieces, but this performance forced me to break through the surface and make myself emotionally available to my audience.

There were rituals throughout my entire performance. The pre-show music choices were songs that I utilized for *The Color Complex*. They were testament for youth trying to advance their own ways in life. The opening and closing rite performances were the telling of an African folktale and a dance of celebration, and the art of storytelling and dance are both universally similar in relation to theatre as ritual elements (Robinson 332). Another ritual is the usage of ties. There were three ties meant to represent bondage, as well as each phase of my rites of passage journey. With the release of each tie, not only does it represent the completion of each phase, it proves that I was able to arrive and conquer. In "Performance Method", George C. Wolfe best describes why I thought it would be powerful to give a solo performance, "An isolated body, dancing/speaking/singing in an open space and lit by a single shaft of light, produces a feeling, a sensation in the human heart, like nothing else," (400). I had something to

share, and honestly the entire time throughout my performance felt like another-worldly experience it felt far beyond me I must say. I wanted to have a personal connection with the audience while I shared my narrative because they were very much a part of the story as well. “Improvisation, or the personalization of the performance practice, is part of traditional ritual. This technique enables the performers to have a uniquely personal and internal connection to the work and allows for a collage of different genres and forms,” (Young 299). I was allotted the space and platform to be vulnerable and honest. The remainder of Chapter Two are segments of the script I referenced throughout my theatrical performance:

In reference to rites of passage van Gennep says that ,

“An individual is placed in various sections of society, synchronically and in succession; in order to pass from one category to another and to join individuals in other sections, he must submit, from the day of his birth to that of his death, to ceremonies whose forms often vary but whose function is similar. Sometimes the individual stands alone and apart from all groups; sometimes, as a member of one particular group, he is separated from the members of others” (189).

A rite is an event, either positive or negative, that shapes and influences an individual, and the rite assists the individual on their continuing passage. Arnold van Gennep states that life is a continuation of three separate phases for an individual, divided into separation, transition, and incorporation. The separation phase is when an individual is completely removed from the community and environment in which they have always

known and must embark on a brand new journey. It is during the transition phase that a metaphorical death for the individual occurs. Van Gennep explains that it is as if the individual is at a blank slate in which they are now able to fully begin anew so that growth and self-development can occur. Lastly, it is through incorporation that the individual completes their passage and is re-incorporated into the world the community as a brand new individual.

The Separation Phase

18, excited, unsure, intimidated, and ready for anything pretty much sums up Jamar at that time. I was initiated into the world of theatre in the 10th grade, and my separation came in June 2009 when I graduated from high school. All I knew was that I was looking for my place in this brand new community and it was through the art of theatre that I could find it. “How Wisdom Came into the World” (*see Appendix*) will always be close to my heart because it is a gateway to my foundation. The foundation of when I realized that theatre would undoubtedly always be a part of my life. The African folktale is about how wisdom spread across the world, and I feel it challenges listeners to evaluate their own knowledge. Kwaku was separated in the woods himself during this time. Van Gennep says in some tribes a boy is separated from his mother in order to transition from adolescents into adulthood and for a period of time is left alone in the dark to fend for themselves.

Like Kwaku, during this time I was in the dark myself. The dark of who I was and all that I could be. Like Kwaku, and to quote my favorite artist, Janet Jackson, during my passage I was going to have to get down, and get up, in order get over and through many things that were about to come my way. With that comes the wisdom. The beginning of

the folktales is the separation of Kwaku because it represents him being alone in the woods and confused. I first encountered this folktale in the 11th grade with some of my dearest friends who were my theatre family. I was fortunate enough to use my foundation of theatre from high school as a platform to initiate me into a brand new community.

My separation phase lasted from June 2009-March 23, 2011. After the very first iREP performance I felt like I was everywhere, wanted to try new things, re-establish who I was in this new place. I began to separate myself from me. I remember having so much apprehension prior to even auditioning for the play *Before it Hits Home* during the end of my first semester knowing that the story centered around Wendall Bailey, a bisexual man who contracts AIDS. What would participating in this play say about me? What were people going to think? This play scared me, because I thought that my life very much could become the story of Wendall Bailey. Simultaneously, I was entering into a brand new world through the exploration of my sexuality.

By the beginning of my sophomore year, I felt as if I was in a forest all alone. I felt as if I had no theatrical outlet that I could enjoy, I was confused about my sexuality, and overall everything felt very bleak and dim. However, in the spring of 2011 my performance in a William and Mary main stage production of *Rhinoceros* was the first rite that began to shift me into the next phase of my passage, and soon after *The Color Complex* happened.

The Transition Phase

My transition phase lasted from March 23, 2011 until December 2012. When the idea of *The Color Complex* came about I was feeling extraordinarily stifled. There was something missing in my life, and that was theatrical works that I could identify with and that fed my soul. I wanted to work on a piece that spoke to the black experience or the African Diaspora and I was not getting that. It literally was making me feel slightly depressed, because the pieces that were occurring in the theatre department, while intriguing, I did not feel that I could identify with. I wanted there to be a piece that I was excited about, I wanted something to actually *move* me once again because I had not felt that in quite a long time. It is quite strange because during my freshman year I had prophesized the creation of *Color* with a friend without even knowing that was what I was doing. Thanks to Professor Green, my future mentor, and Alex McBath, a fellow student, the wheels for *Color* started turning.

Alex and I got together and began eliminating pieces that were not going to work and then selecting those that would. It is really intriguing how different things come back around in your life, because many of the pieces I selected for the show I had encountered in some form or fashion. I either had previously seen them or heard about them. *Color* ended up being one of the best things for me because I fell in love with theatre all over again. Our cast was a little over 15 people, and seeing the cast shine was a feeling that I had not experienced before. I felt overwhelmed with so much pride and joy that I was able to have a hand in creating an opportunity for such immensely talented people to show off their skills. In my opinion, they were beyond amazing. I loved helping coach

people through their performance work, and because of them I learned so much about myself. All the pieces in *Color* spoke of the black experience and culture in some form or fashion and I loved that. The entire show moved me; it made me believe in myself and so much more all at the same time. It changed me, and I truly believed that I could do anything in the arts. I wanted to continue my work in exploring Black theatre and also creating opportunities who love it as well.

Winning the William and Mary NAACP Image Award for Best Original Group Effort was the official beginning of my transitional phase. And the following three characters from productions I was involved in helped me cross a certain threshold which is representative of the rites needed to further along in the transition phase, and I was bettered by these experiences.

“Children, come in. I have things to tell you. I don’t know if you’ll be able to read this, Mr. Wiggins, I can hear my heart beat and my hands shake. But I see the sun coming up in the morning. There is a bird in the sycamore tree. A bluebird. I’m writing it down. Sky, tree, bluebird. Mr. Wiggins. Tell them, I’m strong. Tell them I’m a man. Sincerely, Jefferson” (Linney 52-53).

“They say we are the renegades. We don’t respect the rule of law...but how else do we protect ourselves against their aggression? Huh? How do we feed our families? Ay? They bring soldiers from Uganda, drive us from our land and make us refugees...and then turn us into criminals when

we protest or try to protect ourselves. How can we let the government carve up our most valuable land to serve to companies in China. It's our land. Ask the Mbuti, they can describe every inch of the forest as if were their own flesh. Am I telling the truth?" (Nottage 52)

"These niggers coming up here with that old backward country style of living. It's hard enough now without all that ignorant kind of acting. Ever since slavery got over with there ain't been nothing but foolish-acting niggers. Word get out they need men to work in the mill and put in these roads...and niggers drop everything and head North looking for freedom. They don't know the white fellows looking too. White fellows come over and in six months got more than what I got. But these niggers keep on coming. Walking...riding...carrying their Bibles. That boy done carried a guitar all the way from North Carolina What he gonna find out? What he gonna do with that guitar? This the city. Niggers coming up here from the backwoods...coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening" (Wilson 209).

This time was all about discovering my own power and self worth. I did not realize that I was capable of doing whatever I truly put my mind too, I needed that confidence and strength to learn to believe in myself again. I think between the end of freshmen year and end of sophomore year I had lost a little bit of that. Albert C. Barnes states "It is a great art because it embodies the Negroes' individual traits and reflects their

suffering, aspirations and joys during a long period of acute oppression and distress,” (19). It pulled me out of a dark place emotionally, spiritually, and artistically. And for that I am forever grateful. Performing works unbelievable wonders for me. It was in this year, I started to learn what I truly enjoy and what I wanted to do, and I really decided to dedicate myself to theatre that makes me feel something or moves me in a certain way. If I can’t believe in it, it won’t work.

In the first monologue from *A Lesson Before Dying* the death of another character informed my character Grant Wiggins on what it meant to be a man. Grant had to die himself, in order to escape his old ways. Van Gennep discusses how there is somewhat of spiritual death of the individual so that they can later be resurrected in the incorporation phase. *Ruined* took me outside of my comfort zone and I began to transition in my craft of acting. I was crossing the threshold between truly understanding how much of yourself you had to give as an actor and learn the importance of doing your research. Lastly, my experience with *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* taught me to listen and embrace the personal ‘song’ I had within. I began to understand that there was a purpose for how all of my cards had been dealt, and none of this had been by mere chance. In the play, all the characters were attempting to identify their very own songs in life. I too had to learn to put trust in the fact that I have my own song to sing, and I cannot avoid it. Every individual has a song in their life and it is our duty to sing it because the song gives purpose, and purpose gives life. The biggest thing I realized was that it was extraordinarily hard to live truthfully as other people if I couldn’t do it myself. And *Joe Turner* taught me to deal, and when I say deal I mean to deal with all of who I am, and

stop running. I was tired of running, and to be quite I didn't have the endurance to keep going.

Joe Turner was the beginning of the end of my transition period. It is very strange how the world operates. Three years prior to the time I performed *Joe Turner* I was a very different individual. In the month of October 2012, a series of events occurred that directly align with van Gennepe's philosophies. A week after *Joe Turner*, I performed for the fourth time at iREP Africa and something highly unusual occurred. While performing alone on the stage I felt someone had pushed me forward. It was somewhat of a shove, but there was no one else present on stage with me. I believe this was my call from ancestors before saying move forward and prepare myself to be re-incorporated into society as a brand new being. It was a spiritual encounter that called for me to go forth in my journey.

A week after the iREP performance, I was humbled to receive the title of Homecoming King. Van Gennepe notes that it is a ceremonious ritual in some village societies as an initiation to enthrone a king into the community (94). This solidified that my passage was headed for completion. As a senior my time was really winding down and it would soon be time that I must re-incorporate back into my old community anew.

The Incorporation Phase

My incorporation phase began in December 2012 and will end once I graduate from the College on May 12, 2013. In the fall of 2012, I was fortunate enough to take a course entitled "Solo Performance Art", and with this came my self-awakening. My final performance in the course included a ritual executed through dance. I danced for 5

minutes and 43 seconds to “Control” by Janet Jackson. It symbolizes my ability to take control over the individual I am and who I want to be in society.

CHAPTER THREE

HOMOSEXUALITY AND NEED IN A WORLD OUTSIDE OF MY OWN

It can be challenging to take a step back from your own world in order to see how it can apply to the community at large. As a Black gay male, it was a challenge simply for me to articulate this in the community to which I belong. I could not imagine what it must mean to have to share with a much larger and more unfamiliar community. However, I have learned in this process that it is not enough to satisfy your own needs. While I am thankful that I am now capable of being fully self-aware of whom I am as a person, I understand how valuable it is to utilize the platform of this performance to assist others in their own transitioning life phases.

If it is during adolescence that the personal narrative that constructs the identity of an individual obtains its ideological setting, then it is during adolescence that the individual comes to internalize the discourse of identity available in a particular cultural context.” (Cohler and Hammack 50, 51)

My story can be applicable to many individuals. I am a 22 year old Black gay male, but that is not to say that a Black lesbian may not be able to relate, or someone who identifies as a minority on their college campus. I truly feel that once you have been blessed with a platform that has aided and bettered you in your own journey it is your duty and responsibility to pass the blessing on to others. We must pay it forward.

I am fortunate because in 1963, I would never have had the opportunity to stand on a stage at the College of William and Mary and be able to discuss a form of sexuality that goes against the norm in addition to being a person of color. The performance

occurred because of what an entire history of people did before me, and I hope that my performance can do the same for another. In my performance, I was implementing ideas of Boyle-Baise's "social change view" theory which looks to examine the root of problems and issues and not just skim the surface of societal problems with the youth (19). Youth who identify as LGBTQ put a great deal on the line, because in today's society one never knows how other individuals will react. I used ritual performances in the theatre to narrate my journey to self-awareness but even narrated in a seemingly safe this community; the narration comes with weighted baggage.

The reflection of homosexuality in theatre for young audiences often comes with a preconceived idea of what the individual will be like. "When homosexuality is represented in theatre for young audiences, it is treated as a calamity, discreetly packaged in plays intended to teach lessons about tolerance...these characters are contained by a discourse of "troubled gay youth," which limits representation to those who are victimized because of their sexuality" (Van De Water and Giannini 103). While my performance was not a completely scripted well-made play, I had a responsibility as artist to uphold the integrity of several communities. Regardless of what anyone may think, I was a reflection of the Black community, the gay community, and the William and Mary community. I am not the sole representative for all, but I do represent a product of each community and I was sharing my artistic journey theatrically.

I wanted my performance to function in two manners. I wanted to use it as a platform for change so that others can engage in their own communities through their choice of self-expression. A wonderful metaphor about homosexuality states, "Homosexuality is a way of singing. I can't *be* gay, I can only *sing* it, disperse it. I can't

knock on its door and demand entrance because it is not a place or fixed location. Instead, it is a million intersections-or it is a dividing line, a membrane, like the throat, that separates the body's breathing interior from the chaotic external world" (Kostenbaum 156). While my sexuality played a major role in my performance, it is not all of who I am or what I will be. I was once told that my sexuality does not lead my life and it does not ultimately define who I am. Van Gennep has said that we are constantly starting a new rite of passage, and this current passage of my life has brought me to this level of self-awareness in my journey and I will continue to expand.

Being black and gay is not as uncommon as some like to treat it. I think often collectively as a culture people wish to negate or isolate certain characteristics as mutually exclusive. People either have to identify as this **or** that, they cannot be this **and** that. However, black populations and gay populations do not have to be mutually exclusive of one another. They are both seen as marginalized groups. A scholar, William E. Cross, Jr. explains the Nigrescence model in which he compares "becoming Black" to the LGBTQ coming out process. He expresses that a positive sense of identity is established as an individual experiences a series of events that alter their very own self-perception (Halverson 663). Both embracing your blackness and embracing your gay is a ritual in itself. One must go through these ritualistic processes in order to fully come into 'being' themselves in order to transition in their stage of life. It is through this ritual performance that I discovered, "a place where one's uniqueness unfolds and provides revelations about one's existence, revelations that cannot be given over to the scrutiny of a system of values that socially alienates one, and that is inconsistent with traditional sensibilities" (Harrison 196). There is no need to exclude or run the qualities that make

you unique because once you embrace them you are in control of your own self definition.

About Face Youth Theatre

When I learned that About Face Youth Theatre, based in Chicago, Illinois, existed it validated that there was a space for work such as this and that there is a community who actively works to search for projects as such.

Their mission is to:

Foster positive youth development for at-risk youth, to promote civic dialogue about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth issues, and to educate students and teachers about issues facing LGBTQ youth in schools, with an eye to reducing school violence and fostering safer, more nurturing learning environments for all young people (<http://www.aboutfacetheatre.com/about/>).

Here, young people who are working on self-identity development utilize theatre as a creative process and outlet to tell their stories. It is a safe place where people of the same community can come together for encouragement and uplifting. In “The Dramaturgical Process as a Mechanism for Identity Development of LGBTQ Youth and Its Relationship to Detypification”, Erica Rosenfeld Halverson assesses “Through storytelling, youth have the opportunity to share their individual experiences and tie those experiences directly to other AFYT members, creating a story chain that results in the development of a common, cultural narrative” (660). A program such as AFYT shows that the content of the performance is valid because there is a community out there trying

to develop their own stories so that the LGBTQ community is not marginalized or limited in theatrical works. Often times in theatre, Gay youth are often depicted as particularly distressed (Van De Water and Giannini 105), however I see AFYT as a creative avenue directly challenging this sentiment. It gives young people to find the opportunity to not only raise their voices but to articulately craft it for the stage. The stories deserved to be shared and told by the individuals who experience them. I think that my performance could further assist AFYT mission because not only am I a part of the LGBTQ community, but the Black and collegiate as well. For the young who are at-risk, a performance of *To Arrive and Conquer* could easily become one of their own as well.

CONCLUSION

One of the most frightening things that I discovered throughout this entire process was that for a significant portion of my college career I allowed myself to be oppressed by no one other than me. I was terrified of who I was, and that was overwhelming. As individuals, we are constantly **arriving** at new challenges and phases in our lives and it is not until we **conquer** that challenge or phase that we are able to move onto the next a little bit stronger, and a whole lot wiser. Our successes are rites. Our failures are rites. The rites that we experience throughout all of the various phases of our life shape and shift the individual we will be when our time here on the planet comes to end. What I have learned throughout this entire process is a single rite is not meant to define you, regardless of whether it is negative or positive; you must use every rite to shine your light. The various rituals an individual must encounter throughout each phase are kinesthetic moments of growth and change. Their purpose is to inform and educate so that the individual can apply and move forward.

With this closing thesis performance, I know I have completed my rites of passage. That is my rites of passage for my time here at the College of William and Mary. I am being fully incorporated back into society as a new being. The Jamar that walked onto this prestigious campus four years ago is no longer present, but the one today will not always be as well. There will always be a steady evolution of rituals that will continue to propel me forward. When one arrives, it arrives to conquer and move onward and upward, not downward and backward. I am indebted to my experiences through the theatre and all who have impacted me on this portion of my journey because without them this rite of passage could not be.

Looking ahead, I think a brand new phase of separation is to come and I am simultaneously nervous and thrilled for its arrival. Van Gennep once referred to there being “similar endings to the beginnings”, and I can appreciate his theorizing. I prepare to leave with the utmost gratitude and love for this community as I go forward and I hope I can continue to take strides upward as I situate myself to begin anew rites of passage and once again to arrive and conquer.

Every single individual participates in their own rites of passage. While this thesis is a reflection of my journey...it could easily become a reflection of your own. This thesis is a learning process that extended far more greatly than scholarly research. It re-introduced me to me. Dr. My Haley also said that “It is important to stand on who are”. And that is what I did. I wanted to take a stand on myself and it has certainly been a journey thus far.

As human beings we are constantly evolving and developing in different phases in life. When faced with a new phase or challenge we are arriving. Arriving in the unknown with the hope of leaving a little bit better than when we first got there. *To Arrive and Conquer* is exactly what I had to and set out to do during my tenure at the College. I arrived at the College unaware of what I was to experience, what my purpose was here but I soon found that out. I had a journey to take in order to elevate myself to my next stage in my life. I feel that I have conquered. Thank you to all who have embarked on this journey with me.

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APPENDIX: HOW WISDOM CAME INTO THE WORLD

SONG:

What good is a story, if it don't inspire

What good is a story, that don't take you higher

What good is a story if you can't excel, it's not good enough to tell.

One of the oldest and most distinguished storytelling traditions in the world is that of the West African Griot. The Griot is an oral historian known as the jewel. He is the transmitter and keeper of his African people. He transmits from generation to generation: the myths, laws, legends, and codes of behavior of his African people. The lives of these people: past, present, and future is preserved through the art of the Griot.

How many of you consider yourselves wise men and women?

Now, the Akhan people of Ghana say “That a wise person is a person who knows the difference between right and wrong, and good and evil.”

Now how many of you consider yourselves wise men and women?

They say there was a man named Kwaku Anazi.

Kwaku possessed all the wisdom and all the knowledge in the world, but so greedy was he that he did not want to share with anyone.

So he decided to take all the wisdom and all the knowledge he possessed and hide it in the tallest tree he could find.

He called to his wife, “Wife! Wife! Bring me a basket!” And she did.

Then Kwaku started to collect all of his wisdom and all of his knowledge and put it in the basket.

When the basket was full Kwaku took a rope and tied one end of the rope to the basket and the other around his neck.

And out he went into the forest with the basket of wisdom and knowledge plopping up and down on his belly.

Out in the forest, Kwaku Anazi found a tree that was tall enough to suit his purpose.

When he tried to climb the tree with the basket on his belly, he could not get a firm grip on the tree.

After many tries Kwaku gave up and sat down beside the tree to think about how he was going to solve his problem.

Kwaku thought no one knew what he was up to. But Ah, he was mistaken

Because while he had gone about his compound collecting the wisdom and knowledge he had awoken his son Nitikuma.

Nitikuma was so curious as to what his father was up to. He had watched his father fill the basket with wisdom and knowledge and tie one end of the rope around the basket and the other end around his neck

He had follow his father deep into the forest and hid behind the tree his father tried to climb.

The whole scene was so funny to Nitikuma that he could not hold his laughter.

Nitikuma laughed out loud “AHAHA” and Kwaku heard him.

“Nitikuma, why are you hiding there and laughing at your father?”

“Oh father, it was so funny watching you try to climb that tree with the basket on your belly.

Don’t you know if you put the basket on your back, then you’d have your hands free to climb the tree?”

Kwaku became so angry that it took his little boy to provide the solution to his simple problem that he took the basket of wisdom and knowledge and through it down on the ground.

And wisdom and knowledge spread all over the world. And that is why we’re wise today.

You see my friends...you cannot be foolish like Kwaku Anazi...and take your wisdom and your knowledge and throw it down on the ground.

You must harvest that knowledge, enrich it and spread it all over the world!

SONG:

What good is a story, if it don't inspire

What good is a story, that don't take you higher

What good is a story if you can't excel, it's not good enough to tell.