

Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness

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Abstract

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How do body image and eating disorders inform our understanding of embodiment? Body image is a multifaceted construct of embodiment. Eating disorders are a disturbance in one's relationship with food that can alter their physical and mental health. Although the two are not mutually exclusive, both intersect when examining the way we inhabit our bodies. *Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness* sheds light on my relationship with body image and eating disorders through an in-depth exploration of how the two manifest in my own embodiment.

Chinelo Okpala

Graduate Thesis — *Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness*

Jeffrey Fracé

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According to the National Eating Disorders Association, “an estimate of 20 million women and 10 million men will have an eating disorder at some point in their life.” (Spanjers) For diagnosis and treatment, healthcare providers conduct a series of physical and psychological exams that meet the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Studies show there is a disparity in research and data of eating disorders for Black women. Many Black women are underdiagnosed and suffering in silence. Body-related stigma is closely tied to the tropes that have been pushed throughout history. The idealized full figure of a strong Black woman connects to sexualization of Black bodies, “symbols of womanhood”, and food culture within the community.

Black food culture is sacred and celebratory; we refer to it as soul food for a reason. Soul food will leave your belly full and help “put meat on them bones” to give the desired full figure that is both shamed and uplifted. Many conversations around nutrition and wellness have been pushed into the shadows within my community. There is an absence of Black women in the larger discussion of eating disorders in the United States. Research shows that Black women are more likely to have binge eating disorders (often dismissed as overeating), which was medically recognized as its own disorder in 2013. But we are not a monolith and the experiences around body image and eating disorders vary. They are not exclusive to binge eating; anorexia, bulimia, and cosmetic surgery due to body dysmorphia affects the lives of many Black women.

Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness affirms the complex nature of my own dealings with body image and eating disorders. I embrace the fact that the work I am doing to overcome this is not simple. My time in the Professional Actor Training Program taught me that the discovery of truth in performance means cultivating authenticity within my own life. Showing up as my unfiltered authentic self is not easy, but the healing that comes from being who I am rather than who I am expected to be is liberating. When I walked through the doors of Hutchinson Hall, I knew I would be embarking on a journey that would involve a lot of learning and unlearning. At the beginning of my training, my relationship with my body showed in my performances. It was always safe, often disconnected, and sometimes uncertain. I always thought of embodiment as being while doing, but there was always a missing piece for me. Four classes were essential in reframing my understanding of embodiment: Alexander Technique, Play/Clown, Archetypes, and Chekhov.

In her book, *Integrative Alexander Technique Practice for Performing Artists*, Cathy Madden describes Alexander Technique as “the education and nurturing of the instrument of the performer” (Madden 35). This technique invites us to heighten our awareness of the way we work with our instrument. The process of building my solo show was messy. There were times I found myself falling into an old habit of making sure it appeared “buttoned up/put together” for all outside eyes. The external factors were at the forefront of my work. Nothing felt embodied and I experienced a lack of coordination in my attempt to build the physical and vocal life of each character. My thoughts and feelings around the show were scattered. I could not fully engage with an audience because I refused to engage with myself in a way that was not tied to factors beyond my control. After that discovery, I knew I needed to build the audience into my process from inception to performance. I made the decision to break the fourth wall and invite

the audience to be with me on this journey of bliss, messiness, and triumph. It was from a place of wholeness rather than a place of disconnect. Instead of depending on audience interaction I built a sustainable way to anchor myself in performance and trust that my audience would get on this subway ride with me the moment I invited them to do so. Reaffirming why I created this show and aligning that with my artistic purpose was the missing piece of the psychophysical unity necessary to build coordination back into my practice.

Once I shifted my thinking around the work, I was able to have fun and play in the space. The skills I gained in Play/Clown with Bradley Wrenn were life changing. Something cracked open for me, and I discovered that embodiment in this work meant authentically committing to my impulses. Professor Wrenn kept us on our toes in class and there was no time to hide or devise something masterful/clever. He dared us to fail and wear it as a badge of honor and there is so much humanity in that. The core of what we do is play and in its purest form it is vulnerable, imaginative, and expansive. My breakthrough came from giving myself permission to unmask, find the game, fail, find another game, and truthfully invest in each character I created. Finding the game between myself, the audience and all three characters was essential for my comedic timing. My first game was getting the audience to take a metaphorical bite of the Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick. I tried every tactic that felt fun and truthful to what a crispy, flaky, and golden-brown fried chicken drumstick would do (serenading them, rapping, and seducing them). Although maintaining the integrity of my script was important, I still wanted to give myself room to utilize my improv skills. Play provided me with the tools I needed to remain flexible in performance, especially during the moments I interacted with the audience.

The specificity and commitment to the physical and vocal variation of each character was the final piece that would elevate my show. Throughout my training I really struggled with my

vocal power. The challenges I experienced motivated me to work relentlessly on developing my voice. The physical and vocal skills I learned in Archetypes and Chekov with Bridget Connors was the glue that held the quick shifts between myself and each of the three characters (Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick, Aqua, and Auntie Shola) together. During my rehearsals, I meticulously went through my archetype journal and respectively used Michael Chekov's qualities of movement to deepen my archetype journey's.

For my Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick, I immediately knew he would be the trickster of the three. So, I moved as the trickster and played with where he lived in my body vocally. The trickster is very staccato; instead of imagining the sound pouring from my body I imagined it as a splatter of paint. The chicken drumstick is described as crispy, flaky, and golden brown. Somehow this translated to smooth, flashy, and unpredictable for me. Staccato movement and vocal quality made sense for the flashy and unpredictable nature of the character, but it didn't scream SEXY. My next archetype journey was Lucifer, who is more legato. This exploration felt very powerful and closer to the essence I was looking for. Lucifer was my baseline, and the trickster would reveal itself from time to time. By playing with gradations, cocktails, and twists of the two archetypes, I was able to get as specific as possible with my physicality which intensified my vocal power.

To take my work a step further I incorporated Jaques Lecoq's pedagogy on embodiment, specifically focusing on mimodynamiques (imitation of life). Lecoq's method allows actors to experience the world at a pre-verbal and purely physical level. Through the instruction of Adrienne Mackey, I used the four elements (fire, water, earth, and air) to continue my exploration of physical life for each character. Although Aqua was water, her movement pattern flowed differently from water. She had the quality of air. Like air, she was light but possessed

great power. My vocal choices for Aqua needed less nasality than the two other characters so it was essential that I raise my soft palate and allow my tongue to rest. I often relied on the open back vowels as my base to maintain this distinctive vocal quality.

My final character Auntie Shola was grounded, and she had the quality of earth, solid and resistant to any attempts to move it. She was the huntress archetype; she was very maternal and maintained all authority. Auntie Shola was an absolute delight to play with, especially vocally. I used the work I learned in dialects to vocally find my way to her essence. The Nigerian Igbo Accent of English is very close to home, and I attributed it to one of the reasons I felt so grounded in my exploration. In *African Accents* by Beth McGuire, she says the melody of the Igbo dialect “goes up and down like a bumpy road” (McGuire 280). From a technical standpoint, I practiced the use of warm vocal tone, pitch changes to stress middle syllables, and lengthening vowels in operative words to practice the melodic pattern. I also listened to audio recordings from my aunts to lean on the fact that I developed an ear for the dialect growing up. In comparison to the other characters, my performance of Auntie Shola involved the most improvisational work.

The improvisational piece of my work served my story in such an expansive way, especially when comparing this process to the performance I devised in Solo Shows spring 2023. During Solo Shows, I spent weeks developing my script and using the tools I gained in Script Analysis with Nikki Yeboah. The story was linear and the inciting incident was very clear, but I remember feeling lost when I tried to put it on its feet. Most of my concerns came from being word perfect with my lines. Yes, that preciousness is important, but so much of my storytelling was compromised due to lack of specificity in the physical and vocal life of each character. Professor Mackey encouraged me to try something new by building my thesis through a series of

short explorations. The thought of initially working without a script was scary, but I could not let my fear stop me. Anna Deveare Smith said, “The life of an artist is risky: There’s a lot to be afraid of. The supreme danger is that you become invisible” (Smith 128). My fear stemmed from not wanting to reveal too much about my relationship with my body. I wanted to hide how much binge eating, extreme dieting, and body dysmorphia played a part in my graduate school journey. The magnitude of my experience was overwhelming, and letting people in on something I am still battling with feels too raw. Writing my thesis first meant I could simply edit certain parts of myself out and comfortably hide behind the characters I created. Writing them off as broad manifestations was my safety net. I had become so reliant on working in ways well within my comfort zone, that a suggestion to try something new sent me spiraling. However, I came to graduate school with the intention of transformation. This could only happen with resilience, faith, and courage.

Valerie Curtis-Newton encourages artists to cultivate brave space. Training to be an embodied performer meant I had to confront the way I embody who I desire to be in this world, myself. I am a young Black woman who struggles with the pressures to have the perfect body. These struggles don't define me, my courage to take up space and be in my fullness does. Knowing that I am enough was the greatest gift I received from this process. Sharing that gift without shame is the reason I love what I do. As I approach the final weeks of my time in the PATP program, I reflect on the ways my training pushed me as an artist. I know that the work will continue beyond the walls of Hutchinson Hall. The greatest advice I can give to myself as I transition into the professional world is to continue pursuing the art that is vulnerable, messy, confusing, and challenging. **JUST DO IT BOO!**

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Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness

A Solo Play

Written By: Chinelo Okpala

Time:

Now

Where:

A New York City platform and subway

Characters:

Black Girl

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick

Aqua

Auntie Shola

Note: All characters are played by the same actor.

Ode to a Black Girl: body consciousness

Scene 1: Crispy Thang

*Lights Up. We see a Black girl enter and step onto a subway platform waiting for the train to arrive. [sound cue] The train pulls into the station, and she enters the subway. [sound cue] She sits on the subway and scrolls through her cellphone. [voiceover cue “Ughhh. I wish I looked like that. Her waistline is to die for. Okay. Close Instagram. Great. I’m hungry. Maybe I should order fried chicken. No, Chinelo remember you have to stick out this diet. *yawns*”] She dozes off and wakes up a little overheated. She unzips her hoodie. [lights shift and sound cue] We enter her dream state.*

Black Girl: *screams* What are you doing here?

A Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick appears on the other side of the bench and takes over

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Baby. Baby. Baby. You thought you could get rid of me? I’ve been running through your mind all week long. Mmmm mmmmm mmm mmm. Talking about putting some meat on them bones. I’m all the meat you need. The dark meat.

Black Girl: Trust me that’s not the kind of meat I want. I don’t even like chicken legs. Everyone knows wings are a crowd favorite.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Lies! I’m everyone’s vision of pleasure. A golden brown crispy flaky and well-seasoned fried chicken drumstick. Your mouths are watering at the sight of me. Yea that’s right take me in baby, you can look but don’t touch. *grunt*

Don’t do me like that sugar lips. They can’t help you, I’m in control now. You have nowhere to go, this is a one-way trip to euphoria. Uuuuuuuu yea I see her salivating. She wants a piece of this. I promise you won’t feel guilty this time around. Not like when you binge on me every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Black Girl: I only binged on him twice last week.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: I know. I know. I'm just so tantalizing. Not to toot my own horn, toot toot. I'm here to free your mind from the shackles of worry. And pssst remember they consider me soul food for a reason.

Black Girl: *enticed* *slaps herself* Nooooo. You're bad for me. You're bad for me. He's bad for me.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Hahahahaha who said I'm bad for you. I ain't like that other shit that makes people feel lethargic, moody, and stereotypical. Cause I'm so sexy. Sexier than Popeye's. Yea I said it, I'm sexier than Popeye's chicken.

Can popeye's chicken do this?

Song

WUUUUUUUUUUUUUU [melody is *Fortunate* by Maxwell] au au au au wooooo

Never seen crispiness like this

Never seen me golden brown like this

Never seen me get live like this

Even if you did, it aint like this.

When you bite? You feel the delight? I'm that dark meat, so you know my flava is nice.

Crispy, you know I'm mmmm mmmm good. I'd lick myself if I could.

You see I hit that falsetto like Maxwelll

Black Girl: hahaha yea I'm not impressed.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Oh yea she a Brooklyn chick ya'll. So I gotta spit some game.

Rap [melody is *One More Chance* (Remix) by Notorious B.I.G.]

Uh Uh Uh Uh. First thing's first I'm crispy n golden brown honey

When you take a bite you feel delight in your tummy ahhh

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: WOOOOOOOO that was hot. Baby that was hot and I'm not even dunked in no buffalo sauce. Just naked and extra crispy the way you like it.

So, are you gonna have a piece of this finger licking good dark meat?????

Black Girl: Go away. You and me don't go together.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: You know you want a piece of me baby.

Black Girl: Chicken wing.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Stop bringing up those damn chicken wings. I'M NOT A CHICKEN WING, I'M SEXIER.

Black Girl: Chicken wing. Chicken wing. Chicken wing. Chicken wing. Chicken wing. Chicken wing.

Crispy Fried Chicken Drumstick: Bitch! I hope those wings are bland as hell. I hope they give you a gut, bigger than the one you bitch and moan about every day. You're going to have to Unbig your fat ass back.

Black Girl: Chicken wing actually worked, wow. Now how do I escape this train ride from hell. And why are all of y'all sitting around and staring. HEY! Snap out of it and help me. Maybe I'm losing my mind. Maybe this is a punishment. It was that damn happy hour. I'm never taking shots of tequila with my co-workers again.

Blackout

Scene 2: "Just Flow"

screams

Lights up

Aqua appears sitting on the bench with a beautiful blue net

Aqua: Greetings. We should use our inside voices, we are inside.

Black Girl: Who the hell are you?

Aqua: My name is Aqua. I come from the most beautiful spring in the world. Where you get the freshest Aqua ever. I'm a special kind of H2O.

Black Girl: Are you in cahoots with that fried chicken leg. The one that tried to seduce me to take a bite? Now that I think about it, you kinda look like him. It's in the eyes.

Aqua: Oh him. That seductive one he's a bit of a player, no type of loyalty. But not to worry, I'm here to help you regain control. I am a part of you. I know about those pathetic diets you search on YouTube. I say to myself... she seeks a sense of control. She has nooooo confidence.

Black Girl: Hey hey hey Aqua, watch it. I was just starting to like you sis.

Aqua: I'm here to guide you to the flow, there is no need to worry. Let's just flow to this vision of wellness, confidence, and sexy.

I already know what you're thinking. No this isn't a water fast. Water fasts are way too dangerous for you in this state of mind. But a month long aqua fast will give you the body your heart desires. Your stomach will be flat, and your waist will have everyone saying what waist? You'll never be thirsty. Your cheekbones will pop! Your skin will glow. You'll be perfect. You'll be a skinny legend. Just in case some of y'all didn't hear, she'll be a skinny legend.

Black Girl: Ohhhhhh a small waist. No no no no no. Maybe I should talk to a doctor.

Aqua: Oh no, there is no need to consult your physician. The Aqua fast won't leave you fatigued, lightheaded, fluctuate your blood pressure, cause muscle loss, irritability or destroy your relationship with food.

Remember this is about the flowwww. And I am an expert on flowwww. So let's just flowwww. Splish Splash This will be a testament of your strength; your awakening awaits you on the other side.

Aqua and Black Girl are flowing and dancing

Black Girl: No, I can't do this.

Aqua: It's ok we are flowing and becoming one with the H2O. Walk on that wave and flowwww

Black Girl: Flowwww [*snaps out of it and pulls out bible*] I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. Only Jesus walks on water. Get to steppin Aquafina. Poland Spring. Dasani. Whoever you are.

Aqua: *gasps* How dare you associate me with those cheap brands?

Blackout

Black Girl: Where did the electricity go?

Scene 3: BBL-O

screams

Lights up

Auntie Shola appears in a wig and an oversized butt

Auntie Shola: Yesss my child, you are in troubleeee. Aqua can't help you, she went to do what she does. Flow.

You weren't expecting me now were you? Heehhhh. You know who I am. Come closa. Closa. Closa than that. Bia!

Black Girl: Auntie

Auntie Shola: Hey, yes Auntie Shola but with a twist. Think of me as your fairy god moda. I have been watchin you oooo. Yessss. All those thoughts about your ass. Feelin inadequate, chasing dreams being sold to you by that thing everyone obsess ova.

What do they call it? Biko, im talking to you.

Yes you

Instagram

Scrollin Scrollin Scrollin

Looking at all these girls with big buh bum

Black Girl: No no no you misunderstand. I don't actively search for them, they just pop up on my feed.

Auntie Shola: You want a big nyash-o? Why? Because it will make you happy?

Black Girl: No. Maybe. Yes.

Auntie Shola: Or is it because of that boy? Because he broke his neck when you were on a date to look at another girl's ass. Well, such is life. Now you want BBL-O?

Ah ah ah ah I see you contemplating

You want this Brazilian Butt Lift

Does your fada know? Hey, well he does now. I can see his shame. Yesssss. Her mind corrupt.

Black Girl: Hey Daddd, didn't even see you there. It's lies. Lies.

Auntie Shola: You want to be sexy with big buh bum fine. Can you afford Dr. Miami? Cus your bank account never looks sexy, just zeroes.

Black Girl: I thought you were a fairy god mother.

Auntie Shola: Oh, I am, since you are looking for a BBL. I can refer you to someone. He's not Dr. Miami but he is just as good. His name is Dr. Nyash. He only accepts client through referral and lucjy for you, I can be your referral. This train is going to Bodacious Badonk a donk Avenue. When you get off, exit on the stair case on the left or maybe it's the one on the right. Anyways you walk two blocks and you will see a red building with a BIGGG gray door and a peephole. You have to do the special knock.

Black Girl: A special knock....really....I'll entertain it. Is the Dr. Board certified?

Auntie Shola: Now you want to ask about board certification. All these demands. Just Ungrateful. Let me continue [*hiss teeth*] Are you watching and taking notes, I won't repeat. So, you knock three times. One two three

Then you back up so he can see you through the peep hole. Now really work your waist for this part because your butt is kind of flat like a board.

movement sequence

Waaa wuuu

Waaa wuuu

Waaa wuu

I ate more food, it did not grow my butt [*repeats three times*]

Black Girl: Ok so it's like this? [*she takes off wig and oversized butt*] [*repeats movement sequence with text*] I feel really stupid doing this. [*she stops and tries to continue movement sequence again*] It kinda feels like the electric slide, maybe we could remix it. [*does movement sequence like the electric slide*] Auntie Shola. Auntie Shola. [*she looks around for Auntie Shola but she is gone*]

Voiceover cue "Now you get to stay on this train forever. HAHAHAAAAAAAAHA"

sound cue

Black Girl: [*panics and drops to the floor*] Let me off the train. Let me offfffff. Auntie Shola, help me. I don't want the big butt anymore. Please. Aqua! Chicken Leg!!! Whyyyyyyy?

Blackout

screams

Scene 4: Back to Reality

Lights Up Voiceover cue "Due to signal issues this train is no longer in service. Please exit the train and wait for the next southbound train"

Black Girl: Signal issues. Yesss!!! I'm back. People of the train I am back!!! Hahahahaha take that chicken leg, aqua, and auntie shola. Fairy god mother my ass. Oh my gosh, woo! I am grateful for this body. It's not perfect. The chaos of nitpicking and forcing myself to fit into things that are not me just because it's being sold as something trendy. I mean I know it's time to let that shit be. But there are days I wish I have carved out abs, and a big butt. Lifted, but not with too many flabs but just enough jiggle and firmness. Killer legs that make all the people nervous and cheekbones that I know y'all wanna purchase. But I have this body that carries me through my day to day and it's beautiful. Even on the days I don't say it. But today I am choosing to love on it, and I thank God for every dip, curve, and part of me. Wow y'all, I'm actually hungry. I'm gonna go and get an order of oxtail with rice and gungo peas and sip on

some sorrel under that beautiful sun (or sip on some sorrel with lots of rum. But before I go, I must give it up to the highest, most exalted one.

Blackout

END OF PLAY.