

Voices Made (M)other

Lizbett Jorgene Monaé Bengé

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

University of Washington

2014

Committee

Beverly Naidus, M.F.A.

Edward Chamberlain, Ph.D.

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences

©Copyright 2014

Lizbett Jorgene Monaé Bengé

### Abstract

*Voices Made (M)other* is a theatrical project I created consisting of two original short plays, *Momologues* and *ILL*. This interdisciplinary project combines motherhood studies, feminist studies, whiteness studies, and theatre. One cannot have political change without revolutionizing each individual; and so I am sharing the process behind creating *ILL*, an autobiographical play tracing events throughout my motherline, to demonstrate the ways in which this project has helped create a more nuanced version of motherhood that incorporates mental illness, maternal abuse, and healing from trauma. This project builds upon the theory of empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2006) by which society begins looking at the situation and needs of the mother herself “in the context of her own life” as opposed to the needs of the children, family, or any other social factors (p. 327). Through the creation of *ILL* I am forming a community of empowered mothers and women who actively challenge rigid notions of femininity and how “nature” has been grafted onto women as if they are supposed to be more “nurturing” or “mothering” by virtue of their “womanness.”

*Keywords:* motherhood studies, feminism, empowerment, theatre, matroreform.

The three part video performance of *Voices Made (M)other* can be accessed at:  
<http://youtu.be/hhyOKxaFE8E> (*Momologues*) ; <http://youtu.be/7hQ0Y52AoRQ> (*ILL*);  
<http://youtu.be/inawQIK4iG0> (Talkback).

### Acknowledgements

I cannot include everyone who has played a part in crafting this project because I am indebted to each and every person who has entered and exited my life. I value the brief encounters at the store, in hallways, and at clubs in addition to the nights I spent at school crying with my friends in WCG104 because it was just “one of those days.”

I am truly appreciative of the commitment and enthusiasm my thesis committee has shown me. Having never worked with either of them, they both took a chance on me—one which I hope has yielded positive results. I cannot thank you enough for making this process more manageable, fun, and giving me hope for the future.

Dr. Elena Hartwell, Dr. Natalie Jolly, and Dr. Margaret Griesse deserve special recognition for their day to day support and believing so strongly in my abilities. Luckily, I still have the intellect and commitment of Dr. Jennifer Smith and Dr. Giovanna Urdangarain to draw upon as I move forward through life and academia. I am forever grateful.

Lastly, thank you to my family—Reth and Rhaya—for putting up with the late nights, early mornings, and the day to day absences I needed to complete this degree.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Feminist Art and Performance.....	9
Whiteness Studies.....	19
Motherhood Studies.....	29
<i>ILL</i> .....	41
Writing Process.....	63
Performance Process and Audience Reactions.....	74
Ideal Conditions for Performance.....	90
Reflection.....	94
References.....	100
Appendix A ( <i>Momologues</i> ).....	106
Appendix B (Artifacts).....	123

Reflecting on my work over the past five years, three threads run throughout each and every project I have undertaken. Issues of voice, representation, and identity production and performance are central to everything I do. One's stories communicate worlds of information that so often fall upon deaf ears. I value narrative, interpersonal communication and artistic expression as sites of resistance and vehicles to movement building. Because I wish to create a more just society that embraces and takes care of its members through honoring their dignity and recognizing their humanity, I continue to pursue a formal education in order to explore the testimonies of those left unheard. This master's degree allows me the opportunity to make sense of motherhood, advocate for community and social change, and to heal myself.

This thesis project began as a way for me to explore the question, "What is *this*?" and *this* being a sort of porous racial/ethnic border that I inhabit. "Some foster youth may distance themselves from individuals or groups within their racial/ethnic in-group because they generalize negative experiences in their family of origin to their racial/ethnic group" (Floyd, 2008, p. 103). I grew up in extreme poverty and was constantly on the receiving end of sexual and physical violence at the hands of white individuals. For many years I lived in transracial foster care placements and always felt more "at home" with people of color than those who more closely resembled my family of origin. Having incomplete and inconsistent knowledge of my genealogy complicates my ability to identify authentically to any particular racial, ethnic, or cultural group.

The only support system available to me as a child was school. Generally, it is the family's homespace that is broadcast as the primary place that provides companionship, food, and protection. However, for me, educational spaces provide(d) relations and benefits typically associated with the home such as: friends, family, food to eat, employment, and a chance to make meaning in my own life and the lives of others. School helped me find community with people

who invested their time and energy into my survival—an act which has made all the difference in the world for me.

Given these circumstances, I know that I am not alone. I know that there are others who are read as racially ambiguous or white but identify as something else or nothing at all. There are those of us whose life experiences move us closer to the out group than those who occupy the narrative of whiteness or white identity. I have not come across many people who really understand what it means to occupy multiple cultural and ethnic spheres and the impact this has on one's ability to have and maintain relationships.

After some deep thought and conversations with several faculty members, the aim of my work shifted away from my racial and ethnic makeup to navigating my emerging identity as a mother, survivor of domestic violence, artist, and foster child. I draw upon each of these facets in order to examine the legacy I am creating for my daughter and other women like me.

Through combining research in motherhood studies, whiteness studies, performance art, theatre, and feminist studies, I created a one woman show exploring my upbringing through the line of motherhood. This piece is about finding belonging in this world, creating resolution for past ills, telling the truth about my relationship to my mother, and envisioning change in the valuation of women and mothers. My goals are to create community among people by revealing pain and injustice as part of a call to understand the lack of support given to women in this society, especially mothers. It is also my goal to challenge rigid notions of femininity and how “nature” has been grafted onto women as if they are supposed to be more “nurturing” or “mothering” by virtue of their womanness.

With regards to this, I knew I needed to make art about this issue in order to strengthen my own voice within this degree program. My back was up against a wall and I was losing

confidence in my own abilities. I had to do something in order to preserve my mental and physical health. It was then that I decided I had to make art. The moment I decided to do a thesis project that would somehow involve art and identity, things were set in motion. Faculty members began telling me about the tremendous force of professor and international artist, Beverly Naidus. As soon as I met with professor Naidus it became clear that theatre would in fact be the perfect conduit to restore my voice, connect with others, and make a positive impact on campus.

The entirety of my life has been spent adapting and amalgamating different religions, cultures, customs, and identities. It is only natural that I have come to feel at home on stage and in artistic spaces where I can inhabit different identities and create new ones. Since age seven I have been attracted to theatre. I would create elaborate stories that I would act out in front of friends, teachers, and family members. I began receiving praise in second grade for my charisma, sophisticated understanding of the human condition, and ability to project my voice. I stayed involved in theatre throughout my education by creating skits, emceeding events, writing and performing poetry, being cast in plays, and formally studying theatre acting and directing in college. *ILL* is the culmination of my training and experience in the world of theatre and performance.

In the future I will extend the scope of *ILL*, my autobiographical one-woman show, to include the period of my life spent with my maternal grandmother and the birth and life of my young daughter, Rhaya. By treating each of these periods as key phases in my life and the development of my motherline, I will create a trilogy of plays which address abuse, belonging, mental illness, self-hatred, healing, and theories of empowered motherhood. The ultimate honor would be to have these plays performed by a theatre company in the area or to use them as a launching pad for the creation of a community based theatre project.

I hope that this thesis project can not only be therapeutic as I (re)discover my own sense of self and belonging, but also that it helps build more inclusive relationships and fluid borders amongst all people. By bringing raw, true, and deeply personal content into the public sphere, it becomes clearer that pain and injustice are prevalent but often kept private and we fail to recognize others who are suffering in silence. I aim to start conversations, share my artistic and academic work, investigate the work of others, and to keep writing, gathering, and speaking out.

### **Feminist Art and Performance**

One cannot have a political change without revolutionizing each individual. And that involves each individual's spirituality, personal and family relationships, and emotions—plus the ability to *communicate* those emotions. All personal growth efforts and self-healing are an essential part of the philosophical remapping necessary for political change, so we can fully deploy the imaginations we were born with. (Juno & Vale, 1991, p. 5)

I, like many feminists, have a desire to heal and transform lives (Davis, 2005; De Pisan, 1982; Hurford, 2001; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, Riley & Pratt; 2008; Moraga & Anzaldúa; 1983; Woolf, 1989). My work in theatre is about self-healing and revealing truths about women's experiences in order to move beyond pain so that we may envision a world where women are loved, listened to, acknowledged and supported. I recognize that I could have started a political campaign, written a memoir, become a social worker or done many other things to address the material presented throughout *ILL*; but instead, I wrote an autobiographical one-woman show. Because theatre rescued me from my demons, and it is a medium where I possess the power to transcend my message far better than any other form of social advocacy, it was clear I needed to create a play. Theatre serves as a creative medium to expose the fallacies of the patriarchal,

capitalist, hegemonic, and white supremacist imperialist order. For these reasons, I gravitate toward theatre because “within theatre new modes of being and new possibilities for humankind can be imagined” through the performance of radical stories and (re)imagined worlds (Pretki & Preston, 2009, p. 14).

In creating *ILL*, it was my goal to illuminate a particular social injustice. Although my play deals with mental illness, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and poverty, it became clear to me that what I was really commenting on was the lack of any organized institutional support for mothers. I am coming to understand the pain I experienced growing up as a form of state sanctioned violence. Due to the lack of institutional support for my mother (i.e., no universal childcare services, lack of Child Protective Services oversight, failure to offer mental health services specific to mothering/parenting and post-partum depression) I was placed back into her care as an infant and remained under her watch until, at the age of six, I called the authorities begging to be taken away.

Although this paper is an extended critical self-reflection, process oriented exploration of *ILL*, I have chosen to look broadly at feminist art and particularly feminist performance art, because traditional theatre is not where I have found an extended critique of patriarchy, feminist motherlines, and violence against women. Women performance artists “have spent the past several decades trying to disrupt conventional ways of seeing, looking, and viewing women’s bodies in both staged performance and in everyday life” (Carver, 1998, p. 394). Through performance art and autobiographical performance, these women subvert the male gaze and objectification by reclaiming women’s own perspectives, voices, and bodies. The performance artist herself is “normally the writer, producer, director, and actor, and is first of all a visual artist with little or no training in theatre arts” (Withers, 1994, p. 158). Performance events are

generally only presented once, in front of a live audience, and can happen virtually anywhere and involve just about anything. At its core, performance art blurs and problematizes the boundaries between art and life. For feminist performance artists, questioning the historical definitions of art and interrogating the idea of performance itself, are both key tenets of their practice.

Seattle area interdisciplinary artist, Storme Webber, serves as a well of inspiration because of her ability to create moving, interdisciplinary art addressing such subjects as gay rights, social movements, queer identities, love, mother earth, and indigeneity. Storme came to the University of Washington Tacoma on March 4, 2014, where she performed her spoken word poetry. Storme is a strong presence very rooted in her identity as a two spirit, Native American and African American woman. Running through each poem, story, and conversation that Storme shared was the idea that we are all connected and cannot deal with issues as if they are disparate and singular. What struck me the most during the performance was Storme's ability to tell truths and lay bare the facts of both the public and private spheres. I look forward to drawing on more of Storme's work to create pieces that are not traditionally theatrical but instead integrate song, visual art, and poetry in a meaningful way.

Additionally, I am drawn to and influenced a great deal by the work of writer and performance artist, Karen Finley. Finley's work is about destroying the practice of looking at women as objects and exploring what women are left with after experiencing trauma. In her book, *Shock Treatment* (1990), she is raw, uncut, and writes provocatively about taboo subjects such as the rape of black women in nursing homes, mother daughter incest, murdering babies, and eating semen.

Mother, do you have a prick?

Yes, I do. Just like cows do.

After my mother washed me, powdered me, I insisted that she masturbate me.

You wonder why I have panic attacks.

And you dreamed you ate me through my silken panties.

But baby, you got it wrong, I don't smile when I come. (p. 30)

The literary work throughout *Shock Treatment* alienates the reader and on many accounts shocks them. Behind each piece is a feminist desire to expose the violence perpetrated against women and the lack of resources available to them. I empathize with her motives in creating performance art. Finley wants “to give something—to do work which helps people connect emotionally in a sense of sharing and clarifying emotional pain” (Juno & Vale, 1991, pp. 43-44). Similarly, bell hooks speaks to the gravity of sharing pain openly and honestly, because, as she sees it, “true resistance begins with people confronting pain—whether it is theirs or somebody else’s—and wanting to do something to change it” (Juno & Vale, 1991, p. 78).

While consciousness raising is a valid form of action, at the heart of what hooks and Finley are describing is the act of exerting one's own power to *do* something. “Power resides in every perception, every judgment, every act” (Foucault as cited in Allen, 2010, p. 25). To think of one's broad range of mental, physical, and spiritual movement as having power is quite radical. While exerting power in various forms, “acts of resistance are as dispersed and innumerable as sites of power. Resistance may be overt or covert, simultaneously resistant and consensual, uniting and dividing, radical and conservative” (Allen, 2010, p. 31). *ILL* resists mainstream conceptions of motherhood. The play in and of itself is changing the way we talk about what it means to be a mother by staging mother daughter incest, physical abuse and neglect.

Much like Finley and hooks, the work of feminist writer and performer, Sapphire, is also about seeking the truth of an injustice. Sapphire's work grapples with madness, rape, and self-hatred in African American communities. She describes how slave masters repeatedly raped both men and women during enslavement and that this act manifests as madness or fear within the Black community, creating self-hatred and shame. Reading Sapphire's poems illuminates the threads of self-hatred I, too, harbor due to generations of physical and sexual violence perpetrated throughout my family of origin. I question my racial identity and surround myself with people of color precisely because I am ashamed of the actions inflicted upon me by fellow white people. I have internalized the pain, fear, and disgust as a form of self-hatred that is now becoming evident in my own work. Through Sapphire revealing her personal experience of being repeatedly raped by her father, I am coming to understand the incestuous relationship my mother created with me as residue of institutional failings, generational abuse, and historical inequality.

Speaking to such deeply ingrained structures and far removed events are Personal Legacy projects. These projects are all about stitching together lives, personas, and memories in order to embody an ancestor two or more generations before you. At the heart of this process is "the acknowledgement that everything we need to draw on for inspiration is stored in our bodies as memory. Personal Legacy work is an access point to ancestral memory. As a community based arts practice, Personal Legacy projects "help emerging artists understand more fully their present selves, family, and community" (Roberts, Hermant, & Sircar, 2011, p. 44). This is accomplished by conducting research into one's ancestor through archival research, family, and/or community interviews. Next, participants are mentored through the process of ancestral meeting. The participant will "live inside (without using words) a compelling moment in the life of their ancestor...for five to twelve minutes without trying to make anything happen" (p. 46). After the

meeting and embodiment phase, there is group discussion and feedback. No piece of this process is undertaken alone. Participants are mentored and supported by outside observers, other artists, and facilitators.

I am compelled to begin my own ancestral dig in an effort to emulate the process of Personal Legacy work. My play is the beginnings of the research and embodiment phase wherein I am creating three generations of my motherline and embodying them through performance. Writing, performing, and creating these women helps me come to terms with my own fractured relationship with them. I can better understand why I do not want my mother and grandmother to be a part of mine or my daughter's life. Ideally, I would engage in Personal Legacy work with other practitioners so that I could know more about family members further removed from me. I hope to begin understanding the trauma that has occurred through my ancestry and rid myself of the internalized hatred I harbor toward whites.

“Trauma is that which lies beyond experience and therefore cannot be absorbed into the cognitive framework of experience and our own personal narratives” (Fisher, 2012, p. 108). Trauma thus takes the form of an inexpressible and imprecise weight that has no beginning, middle, and end. By definition, trauma is incomplete and incomprehensible. Personal trauma is often triggered by geopolitical or historical trauma, which furthers the impossibility of *knowing* it. One's testimony of trauma becomes “a fragmented collection of emotional, physical, and bodily associations, and remembrances” (p. 109). Performing testimony becomes a way to speak despite the incommunicability of what must be expressed.

*ILL* deals with suffering and pain and communicating the incommunicable. Each individual who watches this play is revolutionized precisely because something that cannot be communicated by traditional means is conveyed and understood through theatre. My mother is

not and will never be coherent enough to understand the impact of her actions. To be able to write a play that humanizes my mother, makes her capable of taking responsibility for her actions, and allows her to hear my innermost thoughts has proven an effective way to perform testimony of personal suffering and distress.

Another theatre practitioner working with issues of social injustice and personal suffering is Chad Goller-Sojourner. I am inspired by Chad's autobiographical solo show, *Riding in Cars with Black People and Other Newly Dangerous Acts: A Memoir in Vanishing Whiteness*. I brought Chad to the University of Washington Tacoma on May 8, 2014, to perform. Chad is a gay, dark skinned black man adopted by white parents in the early 1970's. His work incorporates statistics, folklore, and conjecture to paint a picture of his aging out of honorary whiteness and "becoming black." *Riding in Cars...* deals with issues of identity and how the building blocks of our lives sometimes have to be given a fresh coat of paint. Of the elements I found particularly effective and compelling in Chad's work, his ability to weave current events and quantitative data sets into his personal narrative made a strong statement about the pervasiveness of violence against Black Americans.

While the content of *Riding in Cars...* and *ILL* is dissimilar, they are the same in form and genre. Chad's retelling of his life experience is captivating and very well written. *ILL* could benefit from many of the theatrical devices employed throughout *Riding in Cars...* Chad's use of pictures to illustrate his life helped guide the audience into the world he created for us through words. However, I wish there was more mention of Black women's experiences in the play. Because the crux of the play is police brutality and the idea that just because something is not your experience does not mean it is not someone else's, it is remiss to not point out that Black women in the US are the fastest growing prison population and suffer severe levels of systemic

and physical violence (Alexander, 2010). While *Riding in Cars...* is a great example of how memoir can be written and performed, it highlights an issue of social injustice, but fails to recognize the author's own privilege and power in these situations.

Based on much of the same subject matter, Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991) is a partially autobiographical collection of poetry recounting her experience as a Black Scottish woman adopted by a communist, white Scottish couple. Kay writes in a manner that overlaps the voices of her adoptive mother, imagined birth mother, and herself. What is most compelling about Kay's poetry is that it is about connecting through voice and the author's desire not to "see her mother's face or even to be seen by her, but to hear her voice, to find a connection through the voicing of a shared lineage or bloodline, expressed in simple gestures such as talking with her hands" (Goodman, 2000, p. xxviii).

Voice is a key theme in all of my personal endeavors, particularly within *ILL*. Kay's poetry flows through time and is lyrical, compelling, and humanizing; it serves as an immense inspiration to me to see the level of mastery Kay has over words and creating distinct voices. Because my play is a one woman show containing multiple characters, it is paramount that the actress is able to embody characters through her voice. In the rehearsal and performance process, I was able to connect with my mother and grandmother in ways I had not previously, precisely because I was finding a connection through the voicing of our shared lineage. The intent of Lizbett's character throughout the play is to get her mother to hear Lizbett's voice, to understand, and to really listen. I emulate the way Kay (1991) stitches characters together to show the connections between their voices, thought processes, and actions.

Considering that *ILL* is not any *one* thing—not Personal Legacy work, not performance art, not poetry, and not completely theatre—it becomes difficult to give appropriate credit to any

one genre. What is unique about the work I am doing is that I take work from three distinct areas of study and combine them in a way that creates a cultural artifact representative of the literature in whiteness studies, motherhood studies, and simultaneously encompasses elements of feminist performance art, theatre, and poetry.

As I continue my study of feminist art forms and theatre for social change, it becomes clearer that should I have to situate my work within a bounded category, it very well may fit within the realm of applied theatre. Applied theatre work is defined variously among the scholars, but always points back to “theatre practice that engages with areas of social and cultural policy such as public health, education, criminal justice, heritage site interpretation and development,” but applied theatre is also “intervention, communication, development, empowerment and expression when working with individuals or specific communities” (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p.131). This branch of theatre practice is about developing new possibilities for everyday life as opposed to segregating theatre goers from their experience of theatre and other aspects of life. Through *ILL* it is my intent to speak as a member of multiple communities to challenge and question the hegemonic order. While resembling applied theatre work, my play can also fit within the scope of drama and theatre in therapy.

Behind both drama therapy and my own personal process for creating a play is a model where thoughts are embodied and reflection leads to action. Drama therapy “has distanced itself from the medical model of diagnosis and illness, embracing holistic models of wellness and an alternative notion of assessing clients (rather than patients) through the art form” (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p. 171). At its heart, drama therapy is the application of theatre to people who choose to address personal and collective problems and take action toward transformation. Forms can include, but are not limited to: storytelling and story-making, improvisation, puppetry

and mask, role-playing and theatre performance. The main reason why I do not explicitly align my play with drama therapy is because contemporary drama therapy takes place with a trained and licensed drama therapist. This element has been absent throughout my creative process. The option of engaging in drama therapy was unbeknownst to me before beginning this project, and while I find it worthwhile, it simply was not feasible for this thesis.

The work of Deborah Hurford closely resembles drama therapy. Hurford researches, writes, and performs community based, collective theatre about sexual abuse, violence, and assault that is both healing and women-centered. Her plays have been performed in prisons, women's centers, juvenile camps, family violence drama programs, and community halls. *Theatrical Exploration in Healing: Running Through the Devil's Club* (2001) is the telling of Hurford's journey in creating her play of the same name. What is so enduring about Deborah Hurford and her work is that she has been doing it for over fifteen years, and she combines scholarship, personal narrative, and nature into each of her plays. The process by which these plays are created involves interviewing women, casting actresses, and creating a script based upon the reciprocal feedback of interviewees, actors, and members of the community. This type of work gives women permission to talk—permission which is usually denied in our society. By giving women the permission to share themselves in word and spirit and translating that to art, we expose society to itself—art brings things to light.

It is precisely in the idea of exposing society to itself, giving women the space and permission to talk, and challenging rigid notions of femininity that *ILL* excels. The preceding material serves as the basis for understanding and constructing the material throughout my show. Where Chad's solo performance work fails to make mention of the experiences of women, my work does. Although Finely's work is raw, feminist in its motives, and women-centered, it relies

heavily on shock value and is less concerned with creating three dimensional, real characters as I have done. While many of the other artists mentioned have perfected their craft and continue to create powerful and moving art, many do not make explicit the theoretical underpinnings and scholarly tradition that has come before them.

In the discussion of scholarship in whiteness and motherhood studies that follows, I move back and forth between the institutional and the subjective in order to create a dialogue between academic and general discussion. The ability to shift between these two realms allows for a much broader, fuller discussion and analysis of my work. Whereas the literature within whiteness studies does not serve as direct inspiration for *ILL*, it functions as a launching pad for an exploration of identity beyond gender identification and helps me to understand my station as researcher and cultural worker. Mapping the terrain of motherhood studies is far more effective for presenting a micro and macro level conversation regarding the function, purpose, and impact of *ILL*.

### **Whiteness Studies Literature Review**

Whiteness studies is a relatively new discipline predicated on the social construction of race and an examination of whiteness as expressed through white supremacy and colonialism and the manifestation of individual/group subscription to white identity. Many of the scholars working within the field of whiteness studies are sociologists and critical race theorists. While whiteness studies corresponds to a fresh way of asking questions of race, power, and privilege, it is rife with its own concerns as an emergent field. Brander-Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray (2001) asked, “is “Critical Whiteness Studies” the Trojan horse through which the study and perspective of whites will be re-centered in studies of race and ethnicity?” This activity in and of itself could prove destructive because there is already too much power and voice given to those who occupy white, conservative, neocolonial spaces. By allowing whites significant space

to make claims about race and ethnicity, society denies space for people of color who are often at the receiving end of injustices supported by whites and white supremacy. Kolchin (2002) answered this by suggesting that whiteness studies offers a new way to address old questions as we examine the global currency of whiteness. Although whiteness studies may appear nationalistic and to advocate white supremacy, most whiteness studies authors write to confront white privilege through anti-racist actions and most identify with the political left (Brander et al., 2001; Conely, 2001; Frankenberg, 2001; Gallagher, 1997; Haney Lopez, 1996; Lipsitz, 1998; MacKinnon, 1997).

### **Materializations of Race and Systems**

Feagin and Elias (2012) argued the shortcomings of Omi and Winant's racial formation theory through comparative analysis of systemic racism theory (i.e., "a social science theory of race and racism that elucidates the foundational, enveloping and persisting structures, mechanisms, and operations of racial oppression that have fundamentally shaped the USA past and present") and racial formation theory (p. 932). The authors' thesis rests on the assertion that "racial formation theory lacks the conceptual tools for fully understanding the deep foundation, layered complexities, and institutionalized operations of systemic racism in the USA" (p. 931). Race, for Feagin and Elias, is defined as "an unstable and de-centered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (p. 933). Through Feagin, Elias, Omi, and Winant's eyes, race is variable, contested, and constructed. The difference is in the angle by which these scholars studied the impacts of race/racism. Racial formation showed the variability, contestation, and constructedness of race, particularly through the examination of policies and practices that sustain systemic racism. Feagin and Elias focused on the origins of systemic racism and the continuing significance of race.

Another method of defining race and whiteness is through critical race theory, or the legal construction of racial identities. Ian Haney Lopez's (1996) *White by Law* began by examining laws on migration and citizenship and the attendant prerequisite cases that forced "courts to establish by law whether, for example, a petitioner's race was to be measured by skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry, the speculations of scientists, popular opinion, or some combination of these factors" (p. 2). The courts had to decide not only who was white, but why someone was white. Lopez showed throughout the first chapter that whites "do not exist as a natural group, but only as a social and legal creation" (p. 18). Lopez went on to address the legal rules fashioning race, system of penalties and rewards, law as an ideological system, role of legal actors, and the larger relationship between law and society. Of law fashioning race, Lopez wrote, "by shaping what we look like, the prerequisite cases, and immigration laws more generally, powerfully contributed to the racialization of the U.S. population. Such laws defined not only the racial status of the immigrant communities, but as the prerequisite cases demonstrate, the racial identity of those already here" (p. 117). Indubitably, Lopez showed that law influences what the US demographic looks like, the meaning ascribed to our looks, and the material reality that confirms the meanings of our appearances.

### **Defining Whiteness**

Although many scholars have focused on the social constructedness and (possible) biological basis of race, others have argued that one must be critically attentive to the language used to make claims about race and race-based privilege. Whiteness is dynamic and context-specific, and not rooted in biology. Whiteness is structural privilege, violence, terror and the institutionalization of European colonialism (Brander et al., 2001). Frankenberg (2000) built upon this by stating that "it is necessary to widen our interpretation of the word "whiteness" to

examine its coconstitution with nationality, class, ethnicity, and culture” (p. 82).

There is a strong connection between attention to whiteness and a broader antiracism. Whiteness is situated racially and takes on unmarked status in society when equated with nationality, heterosexuality, and culture. This means whiteness is normalized in relation to said categories because of the hegemonic belief of white as the “default” of US identity. To create a more egalitarian world, we must challenge the assumptions of white entitlement/struggle, and recognize the continued presence of racial injustice because racism is such a “profound and convoluted part of our belief system that Americans don’t recognize it when they hear it and don’t know it when they practice it” (Ross & Mauney, 1997, p. 557).

Kolchin (2002) pointed out that a great deal of scholarship on whiteness works to reify the construct of race and, often times, posits the same destructive attitude that whiteness is an empty, stale “thing.” This line of thinking is similarly addressed in Hughey’s (2009) comparative ethnographic study of a white nationalist organization and a white antiracist organization. While exploring hegemonic whiteness, Hughey found that persons in both groups understood whiteness to be “‘normal’, ‘dull’, ‘plain’, ‘boring’, ‘empty’ or even ‘inauthentic’” (p. 1299). Defining whiteness based on what it is not is symptomatic of white privilege and the erasure of white identity as a racialized identity. Seeing one’s self as not having a race or culture is often not a choice for those in marginalized groups. Because we fail to give attention to the racialized aspects of white identity, systems of oppression are allowed to persist because whites fail to see themselves fitting in and affecting that very order. Oftentimes race, ethnicity, and culture are amalgamated and distinctions between these particular constructs are indeterminate, which leads to further confusion around defining whiteness (Hughey, 2009; Kolchin, 2002).

Because of the splintered relationship I have with my family of origin and my own internalized hatred toward whites, I continually find myself in peer groups and intimate relationships with people of color. My daughter is of mixed heritage because I, too, view whiteness as dull, empty, inauthentic, etc. I want her to feel a sense of belonging and rootedness with other people like her who have a shared history, a common language, and similar physical features. This is a desire that goes against everything I have come to learn about race, ethnicity, and culture; but it has as a real and tangible effect for those seeking membership in particular groups. The reality of the matter is that I know my daughter will still likely be troubled about who she is and how to identify precisely *because* of the fact that she is a first generation, Cambodian and white American.

It is suggested by Hughey and Kolchin that whiteness be defined in such a way that maps its cultural processes and contestations through history, policy, politics, and the racist beliefs and practices employed by those deemed as “white”. “Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness” by Frankenberg (2001) advanced the idea that “the making and marking of whiteness needs to be accounted for before one can begin to understand its occasional, partial, and temporary *unmarking* in the late twentieth century” (p. 74). She provided eight conditions of whiteness, the two most important being:

- (1) whiteness is a location of structural advantage in societies structured in racial dominance; ...
- (7) whiteness is a product of history, and is a relational category. Like other racial locations, it has no inherent but only socially constructed meanings. As such, whiteness’s meanings are complexly layered and variable locally and translocally; also, whiteness’s meanings may appear simultaneously malleable and intractable. (p. 76)

Frankenberg did not engage with whiteness in practice in the same manner as Hughey, but did highlight how racism, classism, and xenophobia are often couched in terms of whiteness and how we must educate ourselves to the history of colonialism in order to address racism in an impactful way.

Conley (2001) shared what he learned whiteness to be through his learning what it is not. Conley's work is a narrative essay that explored his middle-class, white upbringing in a "bad" neighborhood on the Lower East Side of New York City. He explained the gentrification and removal of housing projects, the political economy of race, and the dynamics of oppression within the classroom. For Conley, white racial identity has been "a master status that defined who I was....it overwhelmed all other attributes in defining how I was treated and marked my day-to-day interactions" (p. 38). Regarding the (un)marking of whiteness, Conley spoke directly to Frankenberg's analysis of white identity as being made invisible and normalized. Instead of feeling invisible or "normal" and "dull," race was the most salient feature of Conley's identity due to growing up in a low-income community comprised of African American, Puerto Rican, and Chinese families. In this way, Conley encountered whiteness through constant interaction with people of color and the structural differences and group attitudes he encountered as the racially privileged "other."

Gallagher (1997) found that whiteness is in the midst of a serious transformation. Whites have begun to go through the process of racialization and the factors shaping such processes include "the decline of ethnicity, the rise of identity politics, and the perception that whiteness is a social and economic liability and the precepts of neoconservative racial politics" (p. 7). Whites defined themselves based on the perceived scarcity of social and economic resources all the while "moving to delineate white culture in a non-demonized fashion" (p. 7). The author found

that for his respondents, white identity is based on the belief that whites are now under siege, a common, yet vague, connection to immigrant ancestors, and the deployment of color blindness as a source of white entitlement (pp. 8-9). The implications of such an identity are that it allows for the erasure of privilege that whites hold in matters of political and cultural resources and furthers a false premise of social equality and equal opportunity.

Members of my family, particularly my mother and grandmother, constantly felt that “minorities” were a drain on society. While in the custody of my mother and grandmother, I always heard them speak negatively about people of color. The more I would hear these negative things about people of color coming from the mouths of people I already distrusted and resented, I would move closer and closer to the groups they disliked so much. I chose to leave the lines in where my mother calls Jay-Z a jigaboo and my grandmother degrades Mexicans “for being needy” because these lines help to illustrate the environment from which I came. My own motherline now includes a woman of color, so it is important for me to include instances of prejudice and racism within the play because I have to acknowledge my own power and claim to these attitudes and practices.

### **Power**

Another form of power which constitutes whiteness is the interplay of whiteness and its connection to political and civil rights. Ross and Mauney (1997) exposed the ways white supremacists are recruiting youth through legislative and moral attacks on the rights of Americans by posing under the guise of “anti-abortion movements, anti-gay movements, English-only movements, and the militia movement” (p. 557). Beyond hate movements, civil rights laws—contrary to their stated intentions—have actually amplified the possessive investment in whiteness, not because civil rights legislation is by nature unwise or impractical,

but because “these particular laws were structured to be ineffective and largely unenforceable” (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 25). Although the existing state of prejudiced distribution “is the product of institutionalized white supremacy and economic exploitation, it is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things that cannot legitimately be disturbed” (p. 44). As such, power is created and maintained through the conflation of cultural images with social relations. People of color are seen by dominant white culture as undeserving, lazy, incompetent, and as living off of government handouts. People of color needing government assistance generally end up in that situation not by their own accord but due to the systematic exclusion of people of color in most socially privileged arenas.

The *Bell Curve* is an example of the ways biological white supremacy filtered down through the ranks to infer white individual superiority. Many of the works that the *Bell Curve* drew on are predicated on black inferiority and the view that society should foster the reproduction of the genetically superior. Much of the data is “classist” and operates from long expired paradigms of biological white supremacy (Rosen & Lane, 1997). The implications of such thinking are that ethnocentricity, eugenics, and racial essentialism help reify whiteness and confer power to whites while pitting racialized groups against one another.

From colonial times to present, by keeping white assets exclusive to whites, whites have institutionalized group identity and effectively solidified their economic and societal privilege. “Even in cases where minority groups secure political and economic power through collective mobilization, the terms and conditions of their collectivity and the logic of group solidarity are always influenced and intensified by the absolute value of whiteness in US politics, economics, and culture” (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 22). In chapter four, Lipsitz addressed the ways “political and economic leaders have fashioned cultural narratives of nationalism and patriotic excess to

obscure and legitimize the drastic changes in national identity engendered by their economic and political decisions” (p. 73).

Mary Waters (1994) identified another facet of power at the individual level when she explored the meaning of symbolic ethnicity for middle class whites living in the suburbs. Whites garnered power through the invocation of symbolic ethnicity in that whites desired a quest for community on the one hand and a desire for individuality on the other without taking into account the individual, political, and economic ramifications of being a racialized group. Advertising stresses the freedom of choice and individuality and group membership—there’s a very similar appeal with symbolic identity in that people only want the positive aspects of culture. There is a disparity between the idea and reality of ethnicity for white ethnics, meaning that many white ethnics do not understand the continuing significance of race, and that for those who are not classified as “white,” ethnicity and/or race is not an option.

### **Gendered Whiteness**

There is much literature to be found discussing the making and meaning of white identity, but much of the literature fails to address the significance of gender in any real way. MacKinnon (1997) told the reader, “I better find out what one [a white woman] is” (p. 300) because of the lack of gender specificity in conversations surrounding women and minorities (read: white women and a male standard for race). The author argued that “how the white woman is imagined and constructed and treated becomes a particularly sensitive indicator of the degree to which women, as such, are despised” (p. 303). Recognizing that the category of “woman” exists and that oppression based on this category operates regardless of the specific contours of being a woman in practice, one can better understand whiteness and womanness. The author’s statement that, “White, for instance, is not a residual category. It is not the standard against which all are

different” (p. 302) needs to be more fleshed out. As scholars have pointed out, systems of power prop up whiteness as the norm and circulate it as empty, dull, and stale so as to shield it from scrutiny (Frankenberg, 2001; Hughey, 2009; Kolchin, 2002).

Moraga (1997) wrote about being a güera, or, fair-skinned (Mexican) woman. Moraga shared that she was also a lesbian, a category that forced her to deal with the dangers in ranking the oppressions. A woman, and a lesbian, and Mexican, the author brought an intersectional look at what it means to live multiple subordinate identities and how, in the end, “white was right” (p. 474). Similarly, Grillo and Wildman (1997) advocated for ending the practice of ranking oppressions due to the specific experiences of women of color and white women counterparts. The authors cautioned the use of analogies to compare situations and how doing so “makes the analogizer forget the difference and allows her to stay focused on her own situation without grappling with the other person’s reality” (p. 619). In many ways, this is how white women have continued to erase the voices of women of color and asserted their white supremacy through their understanding of sexism but total disenchantment with race and racism.

*ILL* combines race and feminism by indirectly exploring the linkages between white as a vacant racial identity and my self-hatred and disassociation with white identity and my family of origin. As a whole, I want to make more explicit the slow and painful realization that I am white and how narratives of historical trauma that closely resemble those of oppressed populations crop up in my motherline. I do not wish to claim that my life experience resembles in any way shape or form the daily micro aggressions, institutionalized racism, and historically ingrained prejudice that many people of color deal with on a daily basis. My aim is to combine race and feminism in a way that exposes the fallacies of blood quantum or any biological basis for race

and its primacy in our lives when it comes to finding community with others who look like us or we believe to have experiences parallel to our own.

### **Motherhood Studies Literature**

A friend once told me that many feminists say you truly gain your “feminist consciousness” once you become a mother. I laughed as I told her I disagreed and lamented that there has to be something less oppressive and less essentializing (the idea that for any one thing there are specific characteristics or attributes that are essential to its function and identity) than motherhood that could awaken the feminist consciousness.

I was three months pregnant during this exchange and still coming to terms with the reality of the matter. I was going to have a baby. I was going to be a mom. Reflecting on my own initial feelings of hesitation and fear, I became interested in the field of motherhood studies. Motherhood studies is focused on the experience and labor of mothering, motherhood, and mothers. It is a relevant site of inquiry because there is a serious undervaluation of women and mothers in this society and this affects everyone—it is not an isolated issue pertinent to any one group. It affects us all. We all have caretakers, mothers of sorts, sisters, daughters, and women identified friends, and we must care for them, too. I gravitated toward this discipline because of its potential for shedding light on my non-traditional upbringing and journey into motherhood.

I will survey the current trends and scholarship within the field of motherhood studies (MS) and highlight works that speak to my own personal experience of growing up in transracial foster care placements and experiencing abuse, neglect, and mental illness within my family of origin. The literature on these topics is “mixed, heterogeneous, and mostly disconnected” (Kawash, 2011, p. 995). In keeping with the practice of moving from general to particular, I will outline the terrain of MS, define key terms, and move into the larger picture of motherlines and

matroreform. Subsequently, I will examine the work on the experience of adoptees, white women mothering biracial children, and mother-daughter sexual abuse. Lastly, maternal art, a topic embodied by my thesis work, will conclude the material covered here. The chief goal of this map of the literature is to expose the gap(s) within the contemporary study of motherhood and to set the scene for my own scholarly work that expands upon the aforementioned elements.

The overall foundational scholarship in MS consists of Rich's (1976) *Of Woman Born*, Ruddick's (1980) *Maternal Thinking*, Hill Collins' (1994) *Black Feminist Thought*, and Walker's (1983) *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. The last two authors offered maternal representations and practices from the perspective of working class, low income, women of color. Nevertheless, all of these authors conceptualized motherhood as both subjective experience and institutional entity. Themes explored throughout much of the literature include: popular motherhood movements, moms in academe, locating motherhood, mothers' voices, reproductive technologies, maternity, deviancy, emotional work, maternal satisfaction, maternal distress, social support, social policy, and economics.

A 2011 survey of the landscape of MS found that the discipline was still largely ignored and far from institutionalized, which indicated how some academics and administrators viewed the field of motherhood studies as being less significant and valid than other interdisciplines (Kawash, 2011). The author declared that in order to become legitimized in academia, MS needed the commitment of feminism/ists as well as the institutional resources that both women's studies programs and feminism have accumulated. In its present state, MS is a more recognizable force because of Andrea O'Reilly. She is a feminist scholar pushing for the institutionalization of MS as evidenced by her academic activism to found the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*.

Although there is a dearth of literature on various aspects of maternity, MS is still in its infancy in the sense that much of the research is focused on mothering as one's primary identity and the valuation of sacrifice, selflessness, and childrearing as an essential part of both motherhood and womanhood. While society needs to recognize most mothers experience a sense of inequality and undervaluation, it is paramount that this does not take place at the expense of a more nuanced conversation about the identity of woman and mother. Common conceptions of motherhood are often about caring and nurturing, but I am making a point that it is also about hating children, becoming severely depressed, leaving your children, abusing children, and sometimes, worse. We rarely feel like we can talk about the less than desirable aspects of motherhood, but these are important elements to consider because they validate a great deal of women's experiences and help move private, seemingly isolated anguish to the public sphere. *ILL* fills this void by giving a subtly distinct version of motherhood that is public, honest, raw, and dark.

There is a chasm between two prevailing sites of investigation. On one hand is the work on motherhood that is "interpretive, critical, hermeneutic, qualitative, and feminist" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1193) and on the other hand is the tradition which values "statistical methodologies; where variable relationships are explored and causation patterns determined. Findings are intended to be verifiable, reliable, and generalizable" (p. 1193). Research within the discipline does not effectively integrate these two approaches, and "[by] drawing on a variety of methods, we will attain not only a fuller, richer, and deeper understanding of mothering but, also, more generally, of practices of caring and ethics of care" (p. 1202). Various scholars writing within MS call for bounded and connected work that creates more movement between academic and popular discussion (Arendell, 2000; Kawash, 2010; O'Reilly, 2006).

Considering this demand for scholarship that can move dexterously between academia and society at large, *ILL* and this process paper occupy a unique space where they are both theoretically grounded and accessible to the general population. Employing the method of playwriting to delve into mothering helps us gain that fuller, richer, and deeper understanding that Arendell (2000) demanded. My play can be critiqued within the discipline of theatre, but it can also be located within the literature of three divergent disciplines, critical whiteness studies, theatre, and motherhood studies. This fact alone opens new pathways for work that bridges the “town and gown” divide so as to make room for a multitude of voices, opinions, and ways of being.

In its most general form, motherhood is defined as “the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women” (O’Reilly, 2006, p. 325). Mothering, on the other hand “refers to women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women” (p. 325). O’Reilly advocated staunchly for mother-centered theory and feminist mothering. These two elements make up the glue for which most scholarship on mothering is centered. Both of these can be realized through anti-sexist childrearing and maternal activism, specifically, making motherhood a public, political and social act that is empowering to women. “The first and primary aim of feminist mothering [must be] the empowerment of mothers,” and this is achieved through looking at the situation and needs of the mother herself “in the context of *her own life*” as opposed to the needs of the children, family, or any other social factors (p. 327). Time and time again conversations on mothering are hijacked by discourse about children and care as opposed to care and concern for the mother herself.

Motherline can be best understood as a thread that connects every woman—each born of a woman—back to her maternal lineage through her roots in family and culture (Lowinsky, 2000). Motherline might be best exemplified by Maatita's (2013) article that looked at the transnational experience of mothering through the stories her grandmother in Mexico, her mother in both Mexico and the US, and the author's own story of growing up in the US. Maatita's account pointed out how each woman's life is different while acknowledging how each thread in the family story relates to one another.

In terms of challenging dominant conceptions of mothering, matroreform as theorized by Wong-Wylie (2006) is a form of empowered mothering that is defined as “an act, desire and process of claiming motherhood power” that specifically refers to “a progressive movement to mothering that attempts to institute new mothering rules and practices apart from one's motherline” (p. 135). Matroreform is a powerful concept that extends Rich's (1986) theory of matrophobia, or the fear of becoming one's mother, by highlighting a daughter's “empowering process of claiming and acting on power from within” (Green, 2008, p.11). Green drew upon the concept of matroreform in her investigation of feminist motherlines. She studied the processes daughters of feminist mothers used in claiming their motherhood power by (re)claiming one's overall agency, independence, and confidence as opposed to solely fearing becoming like their moms.

*ILL* takes up the theories of empowered mothering, motherline, and matroreform by looking at the needs of the mother (in this case, me) and looking at them within the context of her (my) own life. Throughout the play I am exploring my relationship to my mother and its present day effects on me. I do this for the purpose of wanting to “get right with myself,” to create dialogue, and establish a network of support in order to heal and have closure for past

abuses and injustice. Though one could argue my mother is the protagonist of the story, it is I who is at the heart of the action; I am active in making decisions and am a much fuller and complex character than my mother. It is her antagonism that drives me to call her out for her cruelty and lack of accountability.

Matroreform is at the heart of my exploration of my biological motherline. It became important for me to distance myself from my mentally ill, abusive mother for my own sake and for that of my daughter. To truly gain my own maternal independence and claim to motherhood power, I had to begin to understand the incomprehensible—my birth mother. Instead of fearing that I would fail myself and my child because of the lack of a mother during my formative years, I took charge by digging deep and confronting the skeletons of the past. This act of writing and performing an autobiographical play tracing my motherline is truly an act of confidence, independence and claim to my agency. To lay truths bare and liberate myself from the constraints of mother daughter incest, extreme physical abuse, and complicity in these acts moves me far beyond the fear of becoming my mother. I am undergoing matroreform and claiming my power from within.

For those women whose experience of “family” may be different from most others, Deans (2001) revealed the fallacies of DNA possessing an “essence” or “nature” that bonds us in any way more “real” than societal expectations and the discourse of love. The author wrote about the disarray she and other adoptees experience(d) during the birth of their own children. Many adoptees who become mothers feel a need to search for their families of origin in order to validate the birth of their children and abate their longing for innate connections. Davis (1999) traced her motherline, both adoptive and blood, and relayed the same sense of longing and disarray present in defining herself. She structured her article as a series of letters to her birth

mother and adoptive mother interspersed with first person narrative. Many of the sentiments shared by Deans are echoed in Davis' raw and emotive reflection about her upbringing.

Spending a considerable amount of my childhood in foster care and never knowing the identity of my father, I can relate to the sentiments as expressed by Davis (1999) and Deans (2001). Part of reclaiming my power and instituting new practices of mothering apart from my motherline has been writing *ILL*. I felt the need to reconnect with my family of origin when I was pregnant with Rhaya because I felt confused, lost, and I wanted to give her something I never had, family. For a long time I was on the fence about whether or not my daughter would come to know her grandmother and great-grandmother. Creating my play cemented the idea that one has relatives—those of blood relation—and family—those who you choose to love and love you back. In writing and performing the trauma of abuse and molestation, I could distance myself enough from the idea of my relatives as family and effectively bar them from my life because of their perpetuation of abuse, failure to protect myself and others, and complicity in unlawful, damaging acts.

Drawing on feelings of belonging, ruptures in one's family, and complicating boundaries, lay the experiences of mothers whose children are of mixed heritage. Tangled emotions arise when mothers appear to belong to different ethnic backgrounds than their children. There is a strong theme of "body physical" and feminist identities rooted in practices of racialized motherhood and interethnic families. Verbian (2006) reviewed the literature relevant to white birth mothers of black/white biracial children and concluded that:

women in interracial relationships and white birth mothers of black/white biracial children become the subjects of public and familial discourses about their sexuality and

maternal competence incomparable to those about white women in monoracial heterosexual unions. It is incumbent on us to have a framework for understanding these women's particular struggles. (p. 220)

Overall, it is imperative that we meet the needs of this population of mothers who are still largely unknown in psychological research. Gormely (2007) would agree and added to the conversation her own critique of multiracial labels which, in Western contexts, work to eroticize, fetishize, and commodify peoples of mixed heritage. This phenomenon arises out of the increased attention on physical beauty that multiracial children and their mothers receive. The increased attention to physical appearance "is expressed in such labels as exotic, beautiful, or fascinating" (p. 54). The commodification of peoples of mixed race is common in all social spheres, not just motherhood.

This literature is pertinent because everything that I do as it relates to my motherline and my own feminist mothering must take into account the fact that my daughter is multiracial. My parenting must be openly anti-sexist and anti-racist (and anti-oppressive in general) and provide Rhaya with the necessary framework to express a strong, powerful, prideful identity. Verbian (2006) notes the need for more literature on birth mothers of black/white biracial children, and as the birth mother of a Cambodian-American child, I too am subject to public and familial discourses about my sexuality and maternal competence incomparable to those about white women in monoracial heterosexual unions. Thus, there is more urgency for me to be grounded and centered and to create an empowering, resilient legacy for my daughter. *ILL* provides me the opportunity to do just that.

For the purpose of producing a more robust picture of mothering, child abuse is another component we must consider within this work. Maternal sexual abuse completely defies our logic relating to femininity and motherhood. The sexually abusive mom's behavior ruptures the societal expectations of women and the deeply embedded belief that in motherhood it is natural for women to love—not harm—their children. “Nature” has been grafted onto women as if they are supposed to be more “nurturing” or “mothering” by virtue of their womanness (Juno & Vale, 1991). Consequently, women who sexually abuse are generally pathologized as “mad” “bad” or “victim.” A female perpetrator is “labelled bad or evil or explained as mad or victim because she violated the social constructions of her gender” as opposed to only violating a criminal act (Peter, 2006, p. 284). A fixed identity as mad, bad or victim means that the woman who abuses is “never responsible, never culpable, never rational, and always the object who is more pitied than blamed” (p. 285). The consequences of such crystallization include perpetuating a societal myth that any mother who abuses her child must be mentally ill; it can “prove” that such women are nonnurturing and antifemale because their transgressions serve as makers of gender insubordination (Peter, 2006). Additionally, it silences the experiences of survivors because of the limited constructs that exist for making sense of their mother's sexual abuse.

When considering the impact of child abuse on mothering there are hardly any voices from mothers in the literature (Ford, 2008; Peter, 2006). Ford (2008) shared that being abused as a child affects her parenting because she has little sense of how to have and maintain healthy relationships, let alone create a family. The author also experienced prolonged bouts of depression and extreme physical pain and emotional numbness relating to her experience of childhood abuse. She experienced matrophobia and unfortunately found herself evolving as a mother very much like her own disconnected, disassociated, conniving mother. I complicate

Ford's story by asserting that the situation becomes more and more complex as a mother who was sexually abused by her own mother tries to understand its impacts on herself, parenting and children. This is where my play, my paper, my voice is unique.

Much of the work on maternal sexual violence is incomplete, which means that survivors' voices have often been rendered silent. Thus, what has been ignored is how survivors interpret or make sense of their mother's sexual abuse that, according to the limited survivor accounts available...is often fraught with an overwhelming sense of confusion. (Peter, 2006, p. 288)

This gap that exists in the literature is being filled not only by Peter's study, but through my own work as a survivor of mother-daughter sexual abuse. I am making sense of such abuse through art. Amidst *ILL* and the larger investigation of my motherline, I am attempting to contextualize and recognize that what happened between my mother and I as an event that is not isolated or completely based upon her illness.

In my experience, my mother was mentally ill and abused all eight of her children. She was not classified as mad *because* she abused us, but her mental illness did lend itself to justifying her convoluted relationship with her children. Constructing women who sexually abuse their children as nonnurturing and antifemale allows for re-sexing of sorts that denies the woman of an integral part of her identity, but also forecloses the opportunity to situate violence and abuse outside of patriarchy. Because my mom is mentally ill, people dismiss my claims of incest and molestation or take the stance that it is only *because* of her illness that anything like this could have happened. I become a survivor of her mental illness and delusions as opposed to a survivor of such abuse. She can never be culpable due to her serious illness and history of

destructive behavior and so my testimony becomes watered down, or worse, null and void. Even if people believed me about what was going on (which defies conceptions of femininity and motherhood) they saw no way to stop it.

Sadly, motherhood “appears to remain a forgotten role systematically” within mental health centers and overall patient treatment plans (Benders-Hadi, Barber, & Alexander, 2012, p.65). While Benders-Hadi et al.’s study does not directly link to mothers who have abused, the authors investigated data on child custody status and the effects of mental illness on parenting. The authors found that no one has pursued this line of inquiry. Thus, there is insufficient data on the topic. This is destructive because women are more than their illness. We need to incorporate parenting status into treatment plans and track the information systematically so that we may holistically help mothers and their children at an institutional level.

Lastly, rounding out the literature relevant to my thesis work is the topic of motherhood and art. In 2003, Moravec chronicled the work of Mother Art (1974-1986), a grassroots feminist artist group based out of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. Mother Art combined the personal and political in order to challenge motherhood both as an institution and experience. The group worked with all artistic mediums and presented work that put private activity into public space. Moravec wrote, “They saw motherhood as part of their identity as feminists and connected to multiple feminist issues” through creating pieces about “women's work, abortion, nuclear war, homelessness, and refugee women testimonies” (p. 75). MotherArt and Maternal Health (Rosenzweig, 2009) describes a form of feminist art dealing with grief, loss, and the mother daughter relationship. Art can be a “transformative process of healing for the mental well-being of the artist and audience alike” (p. 224). MotherArt moves from individual experience to larger societal issues while art therapy is more institutionalized and individualized.

These two forms of feminist maternal art pave the way for my thesis work which combines elements of therapy, grief, compassion, and bringing private activities into the public sphere.

Based upon the literature surveyed above and my own thesis work, I have come to the realization that there is a rather large gap in the literature concerning mothers, mental illness, and maternal incest. This is a rather far-reaching event having profound effects on one's connection with women, family, and children in particular. While I find pieces of myself within each of the articles presented, I have yet to encounter anything substantial that parallels my experience of being molested by my mentally ill mother, living in foster care, and growing up to have a multiracial daughter of my own. Creating a feminist motherline and positive familial legacy is central to my parenting and sense of self; to not have my own experience reflected in academic discourse is simultaneously disheartening and refreshing. While one's personal experience is intersectional and infinitely complicated and cannot be completely explained by any one article, I hope to effectively insert myself into the literature within MS. Whether through feminist performance art and theatre or autobiographical means, I have a story to tell that is absent from current scholarly conversations. Rather ironically, motherhood has been the very vehicle to more fully realize my feminist consciousness and capacity for creativity.

ILL

A short play

By

Lizbett Benge

Lizbett Benge  
700 Sleater-Kinney RD SE B330  
Lacey, WA 98503  
Bengelj@uw.edu

CHARACTERS:

All characters are portrayed by a single actress moving fluidly through each role.

Lizbett: Daughter; 4, 5, 11, 20

Yvonne: Mother, Mid 40's, suffers from mental illness

Grandma: Mother to Yvonne, early 60's, enabler

WIC (pronounced "wick") Attendant: public health employee, female

Mrs. Odom: First grade teacher

Bank Patron: wealthy Indian man, mid 30's

Alvaro: Cook of Chilean and Mexican decent, mid 30's, interested in Lizbett

LOCATION: A bare stage which becomes a classroom, a WIC office, a jail, a bank, a living room, a restaurant, and a bedroom.

TIME: Present day.

All lines in parenthesis are delivered directly to audience. Stage directions appear in italics.

## SCENE 1

LIZBETT

(Thoughts and feeling of inadequacy, shame, and ridicule flooded my mind as my turn for show and tell approached. I had nothing to show or tell. Maybe I could bring the stray kittens my mom brought home the other day? I was so excited by them. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I decided I wanted to bring them with me to class.)

*As a confession*

(It was during this time that I became acutely aware of the fact that my mom, me, my life, it was somehow different from everyone else's. What was normal for me was sickening and obscene to others.)

YVONNE

Why are you asking me this, you want those fucking kids to touch our kittens, our cats?

LIZBETT

I dunno what else to bring, mom. No one else brought their pets; maybe I can be the first?

(What was I thinking? Everything inside me told me not to ask her, not to plead with her to bring them, not to bring our home to school with me. What if she got angry at the teacher or at a student? What if, like she did so often, she attacked someone because they said something "inappropriate"? I knew in that moment, that I was ashamed of my mother. I knew I couldn't control what she was going to say or do because she lived a different reality and I wasn't tapped in. I was scared she would be violent and angry; I was scared she would hit me in front of everyone. But I asked her to come and she did. I think she did it because she wanted to be normal but knew that it so was far out of reach that all she could do was bring our strays to class. The class reacted nervously to my mother's presence as she shook and plopped the box of kittens. I could tell in the teacher's face that she was intimidated by this grotesquely over-painted woman entering the class. She wore no bra and smelled of cheap, imitation perfume. I could see my mom was depressed, she was having another episode. All I could think about was getting these kittens out of the box so that everyone would no longer stare at her and judge me for all of her abnormalities and ugliness.)

*Beat.*

LIZBETT

(My mom was a fleshy, voluptuous, and sensual woman. Her breasts were always exposed and she talked of sex as if it were groceries—just another part of the everyday list. A woman like her with all of her size and presence—if you got on her bad side—she would kill you. I imagine that

## LIZBETT CONT'D

in jail she had many enemies. I saw her with my grandma when she was at the jail in downtown Seattle. I didn't particularly care to see my mother after I was taken from her. My grandma was always working toward having some semblance of family, some morsel of normalcy, and so she forced me see my mother although I never wanted to. My grandma Laura had a particular affection for my mother that I never understood. Even while in jail, my grandma made sure my mom got whatever she wanted.)

*Pantomimes picking up the telephone.*

LIZBETT

Hi, mom. How are you?

YVONNE

They have me in this fucking place. God damn fuckers won't give me a goddamn thing. Where are all of my men? Mom just tells fucking lies. They are all lying about this.

LIZBETT

So what do you do all day?

YVONNE

Oh, my baby, Lizbitt. You are so beautiful. I think about my babies and mom always tries to take everything that is mine. Don't let her take you.

LIZBETT

Take me where? I'm here to see you not talk about grandma. *Pause.* Hey, do you want to hear what they're playing on the radio?

*Takes walk man out of pocket and unplugs headphones so that*

*Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" is heard over the phone intercom.*

YVONNE

What are you listening to? Turn that shit off. I don't want to hear some fuckin' jiggaboo.

GRANDMA

Liz, hey, turn it off. Your mother said to turn it off. Don't make her mad.

LIZBETT

What? I just wanted to show her what was on the radio....

GRANDMA

I said turn it off! If you don't listen to me we're both getting kicked out of here.

LIZBETT

What? What did I do? I'm not talking about how to escape? They let me bring it in.

YVONNE *angered*

I have to go. Tell them I will be out soon.

LIZBETT

Who?

YVONNE

They are all hungry for me. They miss me and my twat, you tell them Yvonne still tastes like pussy.

LIZBETT

Ok. Fine. I don't want to come back here.

YVONNE

And don't you listen to mom.

LIZBETT

(My mom hung up the phone and signaled to the guard to take her back to her cell. She moved like a cow through mud as she left the window and passed through the multiple corrections officers. Glad that was over. The whole thing perplexed me. I saw the guard at the booth listening in to our conversation but he didn't tell me to shut my radio off. Why did my grandma take my mother's side? What, they didn't like the music? I was visiting my mom in jail for prostitution and somehow Jay-Z was the completely inappropriate one? The guard didn't even terminate our visit. It is not like I was sending coded messages about drugs or illegal activities. I wanted my mom to feel like she was outside again; I could tell she was hurting. She didn't have her men and she didn't have me. I just wanted to bring her something, something meaningful, and in a way, beautiful.)

\*\*\*\*\*

## LIZBETT

(I went to the WIC office after hearing I was pregnant. I told the woman working there that I could use some counseling services. They followed protocol and proceeded to ask me why I thought I needed counseling and how much of a threat to myself or my baby I might be.)

Well, I think I might develop post-partum depression.

## WIC ATTENDANT

Why do you feel you're at risk for PPD?

## LIZBETT

Because, I don't know, I think a lot of people in my family have dealt with depression. And... I just don't know how to begin to be a mom. I need to deal with things.

(The woman's eyes glazed over and she looked at me as if I were some immature, inept, young-minded fool. I was the reason why WIC offices existed, because I didn't know how to be a mom, but I'd spread my legs and gotten pregnant and now had the nerve to ask for help. They give you a check for ten dollars in fresh fruits and vegetables, and a check for peanut butter, cereal, juice, milk, and a whole grain option. Thank you WIC for shitting on me. I worked at Foot Locker again only to find myself at the WIC office because I had no food eat and no idea how to deal with the reality that I was pregnant. The WIC attendant with her half-assed smile and low, brown ponytail proceeds to invalidate me.)

## WIC ATTENDANT

Well, we can set you up with someone if you feel you need to talk.

## LIZBETT

(Ugh. They're going to put this on file. Now the state has documentation that I'm afraid I am going to become depressed after the baby is born because I don't know how to be a mom because I never had one myself. But, I did have one. She just wasn't the one I wanted. She wasn't the one I needed. Every other mother figure I had in my life couldn't be to me what Yvonne could have. She was my flesh and blood and the woman who brought me into being but she could have NEVER been what I needed her to be. Regardless of how many pills she took or drinks she had, she would never be better for it. All the mind altering could never put her back right. She was humpty dumpty and her personalities had shattered into a million pieces, fragmenting her life and her interactions with all those around her.)

(I'm told several stories of my conception, each one a bit more unbelievable than the next.)

*Lizbett becomes thoughtful*

## LIZBETT CONT'D

(As my mother walked along Alki beach on a day late in August, an acquaintance greeted her. They stopped and chatted and this man offered my mother some cocaine. He offered her an entire ounce if she slept with him. She accepted and they made love on the beach. My mother took her reward and sold it for a generous profit. This man was my father.)

(As my mother walked along Alki beach on a late August day, an acquaintance she had met previously greeted her. He was friendly and invited her to walk with him near the water. After accepting this offer, the acquaintance walked hand in hand on the beach with my mother. As she sat near the edge of the sand where the pebbles met the waves, the man came up behind her and bashed her head with a rock. After hitting her three times, he pretended to lay with her near the waves as he raped her unconscious body. That man, Gary Ridgeway, was my father.)

## YVONNE

YEAH! I know your father, Lizbitt. I met him on the beach. I walked along Alki beach in August and I met Clark. Clark Theodore the fifth. He was in the army. He was a general. They all served in the military, all the men in his family. They died too. He lives in Everett. YEAH! He was a good fuck. He took me on the beach and made love to me. He came inside me and told me he loved my pussy.

## LIZBETT

(I heard it all before. The truth is, she might know. But I am never going to know, and I really stopped caring. I stopped caring after hearing that my father was a rapist and murderer. I stopped caring after hearing that my father was a drug dealer. I stopped caring when I became familiar with the saying, "like attracts like." I figured if all of these men were anything like my mom, I wanted no part of that.)

## YVONNE

I love you. YEAH.

## LIZBETT

(Love. She said she loved me. My experience of love was quite different than how I imagine other people come to know love.)

(The first time I understood what an abortion was, I was maybe seven. My mom was pregnant with twins. She was 38 and her body couldn't withstand birthing another two beings. I wasn't in the room with her when they told her, but I learned she would die if she didn't abort. My mother was no stranger to death. She was such a strong and spirited creature. Years in Western State

## LIZBETT CONT'D

mental hospital, corrections facilities, group homes, half-way homes, and countless bodily afflictions later, she still stood. Her posture was rather terrible, her back bending like a twig in the wind, but I imagine her like an impenetrable fortress, the Fort Knox of females. She was square, solid, intimidating, and big. My mother was huge. She was probably no more than 5'7, but she was dense and her breasts extended far past her frame. Her hair was brown and coarse like a brillo pad and created a giant fan around her face. Her eyes were hazel and very almond shaped. I might almost say they were pretty. Her top lip was thin with a much defined cupid's bow which formed her upper lip into the shape of a heart. Her skin was olive and she wore garish pink makeup to further accentuate her features.)

*Lizbett glides her hands over her stomach*

(To think... she would be lost to the world if she brought these twins into being. Maybe for her, that's what she wanted. She was so fixated on children. She wanted so many children and dearly loved each child she came into contact with. Such enthusiasm reigned over her at the prospect of being fucked. She kept no secrets. I always knew her desires. She wanted men and she wanted children. Jealousy swelled within her at the sight of women with their burgeoning bellies or small crying infants. I never shared her joy. Instead, I felt fearful and incompetent around babies and children. All I knew was that once they are old enough, someone comes and takes them away because you aren't good enough to have them.)

YVONNE *groans animalistically*

YEAH!

*She rolls her head. Stands up and begins to sway from side to side shifting her weight from the left foot to the right, over and over.*

You always want to fuck my men. You took my husbands and you made them lick your cunt.

LIZBETT

(She hated my grandmother, but she needed her. My grandmother enabled her to continue her life of dysfunction. She only played nice when she needed groceries or extra money. She drank a lot of beer. Wine coolers were a favorite; she's always had a sweet tooth. And like clockwork, Grandma hands my mom a small wad of cash.)

GRANDMA

Now Yvonne, this has to last you until the end of the month. I don't have anything else.

YVONNE

Mom. I just need enough for Lizbitt. I only need coffee and bus fare.

GRANDMA

Yvonne, this is all I have for you until next month, ok?

LIZBETT

(My grandma was always doing this. Why did she give her money? I hate it. She knew damn well where the money went. If it didn't go to alcohol, it went to drugs, or it went to some store selling porcelain fineries and brick-a-brack. My mom loved gaudy and ornate antiques. For some reason they stuck to her. There was meaning and status embedded in the dated figurines and plates my mother bought. I remember her collection of antique porcelain dolls—all of whom were milky white, dressed to the t's, and somehow emblematic of her eight children. The state took us from her at different points in our lives, but she lived as though we were all within arm's reach. She favored me, but only because I was convenient. I was under her watch, and thus, subject to her misguided affection and care.)

\*\*\*\*\*

LIZBETT

(To get an abortion I had to go back to where my childhood started, where my earliest memories were formed, White Center. How funny. The same area where I waited in line with my mom every month to pick up our booklet of food stamps was where I had to return to stand in line to kill my baby. I had to take a pee test and sit down with a public servant to discuss my "options." For me, there was only one option. I couldn't keep this baby. All I wanted was the medical coupon they gave to women requesting an abortion. My grandma's advice to me was to look poor when I went into the DSHS office or else they wouldn't give me anything.

GRANDMA

Liz, whenever you go in there, know they look at you. They see what you're wearing and who's with you. They let all those Mexicans and minorities have all the benefits and so we have to be needy too. You have to fight for it and that means looking and playing the part.

LIZBETT

Sometimes people need help, and I don't care who gets what. Why should I change anything about myself because I'm going to some damn office? The proof is in the pudding.

(Why did I have to look poor? I was poor. The only things I had now were gifts. I would get gifts, mostly from older men.)

## LIZBETT CONT'D

(Gifts— a diamond ring, a Juicy bag, and money deposited into my bank account. A trip to Hawaii, a laptop, iPod, iPad, makeup, perfume, gift cards, expensive skin care products, Jordans, North Faces, a digital camera, literally thousands and thousands of dollars....and for what? I am always asking myself, for what? I didn't have to sell myself and I never even touched any of them, but for some reason they liked me. They said they loved me. )

*Deep sigh*

(Why do these men always find me? The first stranger to give me a large sum of money was a wealthy Indian man who would always come to the bank I worked at. I would laugh and joke and put on my grown woman act when I came to work—I think he saw right through me. He saw the 16-year-old girl working at Washington Mutual with all her naiveté and resilience.)

## BANK PATRON

That is a beautiful ring. May I see it.

*Lizbett sticks her hand out for the man to inspect*

## LIZBETT

*Pause.* So what can I do for you today?

## BANK PATRON

Just a deposit today. You know, you have such a bright and sunny disposition. I love coming to see you.

## LIZBETT

Why thank you. If anything, I at least try to smile.

## BANK PATRON

And you are so good at it. You know, you deserve something that matches that beautiful smile.

## LIZBETT

Oh? Are you really saying I need braces?

BANK PATRON *laughs*

No, no, no. I'm saying you don't need to wear that fake cubic zirconia. You deserve a diamond, a real diamond to outlast your own bright and sparkling light.

## LIZBETT

Well, I'm not too picky. I'm not a huge diamonds, flowers, chocolates girl. But you are too kind, thank you again.

## BANK PATRON

Yes, my smiling beauty. I will see you again soon.

## LIZBETT

Okay, take care and see you soon then.

(I would wear that fake cubic zirconia band on my wedding finger, partly because I was left-handed and partly because it kept inquiring men away. It only seemed to attract this one even more. The next week, he stopped by my station and dropped off a gift bag. We exchanged no words and I quickly hid the bag in my cash drawer.)

*Lizbett pantomimes looking through the bag and curiously studying its contents.*

(When I looked inside the bag he had left me a signed picture of himself along with three mini liquor bottles of Grey Goose, Patron, and Captain Morgan's and a blue jewelry box. As I opened the box, to my surprise there was a ring. It had a simple, smooth, silver band and a princess cut diamond set at the middle.)

(Now why the fuck would this stranger buy me a diamond? Why would he lace the gift bag with alcohol and leave an autographed portrait of his old self in this bag? Was I supposed to get drunk, look at his photo, yearn for his cold hard cash and touch myself until I was shaking in pleasure for him?)

(Not too long after, quit WAMU and took a job as a hostess at a restaurant. I befriended the dishwasher, the cooks, and all the servers with ease. There was one cook who interested me, he was quite a bit older than me, but he was funny and oddly handsome. I don't remember how our eight year pretend relationship really started, but a couple of months into my tenure at the restaurant, Alvaro told me wanted my number and so, for whatever reason—I gave it to him.)

## ALVARO

Ok lady, give me your number and maybe sometime we hang out.

## LIZBETT

Really? Ok, I guess.

*Pantomimes writing the number on a piece of paper and gives it to Alvaro*

LIZBETT

Here.

ALVARO

Wow. You really giving it to me, huh? Ok, I take you out. Wherever you want to go, you let me know.

LIZBETT

What do you mean? Take me where?

ALVARO

Wherever you want to go. This weekend es el Dia de San Valentin, so I will meet you somewhere and you can have a gift.

LIZBETT

Okay, I have to take the bus so I'll just meet you downtown.

(We met downtown the following day and Alvaro insisted that he buy me a gift for the holiday.)

ALVARO

Buy whatever you want. Let's go where you want mi princesa. Get something, buy something beautiful.

LIZBETT

O, yeah? Um. Okay. Let's go this way.

ALVARO

Lo que quieras, mi amor. You can have whatever you want, te prometo.

LIZBETT

(What? I had never been told to buy whatever I wanted. I never had money to just pick something and buy it. Was he offering me this because he expected something in return? Could he sense that I never had genuine love from someone or that I wanted things because I never had any? Did I accept his proposition because my mother had always seemed happiest when men showed interest in her and I was raised to value the same? Was it Alvaro that could fill the void that so loudly screamed "HEY, LOOK AT ME, I'M WORTHY. I'M WAITING TO SHARE MY LOVE. I HAVE SOMETHING TO OFFER"?)

\*\*\*\*\*

LIZBETT

(In first grade, my teacher, Mrs. Odom, would set aside a corner of her chalk board and label it “the dog house” complete with drawings of a dog composed of three circles with two teeth and a match box looking house. When you were bad, Mrs. Odom would write your name under that dog house and you would be publicly shamed for the entirety of the day. Mrs. Odom put me in the dog house when I wouldn’t comport myself.)

*Wildly scratches her head*

Mrs. Odom, uggghhh! Look, now I can’t do anything!

MRS. ODOM

Lizbett! Please sit down and wait patiently as I finish with Jaylene.

LIZBETT

Make it stop! What’s wrong? Come help me.

MRS. ODOM

Are you dying?

LIZBETT *unsure*

No.

MRS. ODOM

That’ll be enough then!

LIZBETT

It itches so bad and I can’t think or do anything, Mrs. Odom. It won’t stop.

MRS. ODOM

That’s it; you’re going in the dog house!

LIZBETT

(she drew my name below the paws of the dangerous dog and I could picture its bite puncturing my skin.)

No, something is wrong.

MRS. ODOM

It sure is. Now you go on to the nurse and tell them I suspect you have lice.

LIZBETT

(Not only did she put me in the dog house, but she humiliated me by sending me to the nurse's office and publicly announcing I had lice. In those next twenty minutes I learned I was dirty, unclean, stupid, and that I couldn't come in contact with another person for fear of spreading my social degeneration to others. The fat bugs feeding off my scalp and populating my hair were emblematic of the life my mother created for me.)

*Lizbett becomes reflective*

\*\*\*\*\*

LIZBETT

(A mother's love is supposed to be sacred, untouchable and true through and through. She relinquishes full ownership of her body so that you may have lease to it. She endures as her body grows and morphs and her needs shift to include your burgeoning being. All of this is supposed to equate to love, a bond more powerful and profound than any other sensation.)

(I don't think I love my mother. I am not sure if I ever have. She surely made it clear that she loved me. She smothered me. She fetishized me. She made my life the focal point of her existence. Each of her conversations somehow implicated my existence, all of her fantasies and delusions were somehow linked to me and her men. Yvonne always wanted kisses and hugs and for me to tell her I loved her. I think she knew I thought she was ill, so she pretended even more to be normal. Her normal was schizophrenic and bipolar. She had multiple personalities and even they all made me the center of attention. I would hear how much I meant to her, how precious my life was, but I could never feel it. Somehow her words fell flat. How in the world she ever achieved such an all-consuming yet detached relationship is beyond me.)

(We were close. She would have us be too close. A mother and daughter are never supposed to be that close.)

YVONNE

Let's go. We have to go. We are going to buy you something beautiful. YEAH.

LIZBETT

Yeah, mom. I want to have something beautiful.

(My mother and I walked into town and went to the Vietnamese shop where she had seen beautiful jade bracelets, pearl necklaces, and gold rings. She made it clear she would buy me

## LIZBETT CONT'D

whatever I wanted inside that store. More than anything, I wanted what she promised, something beautiful. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of inferiority that accosted me as I entered that jewelry shop. I was unworthy. Oh how I longed to have something beautiful while all around me life was so ugly. At five years old I still slept in her bed because I was afraid of what lay in the shadows. There was nothing more frightening than the dark.)

(She was in her early 30s and still didn't know how to drive and never held a job. There were a lot of things she never taught me. I never learned to ride a bike or skateboard. I couldn't roller-skate or do a cartwheel. I confused my right from my left and had no knowledge of any sports. I lacked the ability to swim and we never had a TV at our place. What I did have mastery over though, were words, numbers, and concepts. I was artistic and pliable. I could adapt myself to any situation and act accordingly. But, I did long for something beautiful. I couldn't fake beauty.)

\*\*\*\*\*

## LIZBETT

(Baby,

I understand that this decision does not come lightly. It is Sunday, December 20, 2009 and tomorrow I am going to terminate you. I know this comes with heavy thought and deep consideration for the circumstances at hand and I don't want you or me to feel any remorse for the actions and events that are about to occur. The situation is not one that's ideal for any party involved. Your father is Luis Jimenez. Luis is not capable of having a child, he is immature, does not know how to communicate, is abusive towards me, doesn't know how to love, has a horrible relationship among his own family, and is a habitual liar. Perhaps some of these things I can tolerate and deal with, perhaps even forgive, but I can't forgive a lazy—educationless—unmotivated—emotionally cut off person. Luis cannot communicate his feelings or thoughts and lacks emotional depth and critical reasoning skills. He feels having you would make him a better person and force him to change his ways. Unfortunately, this is not the way the world works. He doesn't understand this. I by all means could do this myself, but due to my own parental circumstances I want to provide you with every opportunity possible. This includes having two parents who get along, respect one another, and are on mutual grounds about their children. — this is really important to me. Luis treats me like shit and constantly disappoints me and I can't handle that and neither should you. I am a junior in college and I have to finish school. Absolutely have to. I have a free ride and am doing so well. Grad school would be 10,000 times harder, travelling and living would just become a strain especially because I am afraid of the problems you would likely encounter. I want your father to be clean, sober, intelligent, and caring...)

## LIZBETT CONT'D

(It's not like I knew how the world worked; I just knew I wasn't ready. I couldn't do it. How could I possibly learn to love this child on my own? I needed so much help and I was so raw, cut-off, and emotionless. I would go to class each day thinking to myself if anyone knew I was pregnant or if anyone else in the room was going through the same thing I was. Luis had broken and beat me and I hated him for it. He was just like my mom, but I know he didn't really love me. He just loved the sex and the fact that I was smart, but I was too smart. I was smart enough to know that I lacked understanding of my upbringing and its effects on me and how that would play a significant role in my child's life. Whatever love my mother felt for her children, I felt nothing. I wanted whatever was inside of me to be gone. I wrote that letter because I was genuinely afraid I would regret the decision to abort. What if this was the first person who was capable of loving me? That fact alone makes me feel less of a woman for being selfish and valuing my life over anyone else's.)

*Lizbett sits on the stool.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## LIZBETT

(They beat her bloody. I never saw it, but my grandma told me about it. I told my cousin, she didn't believe me. The police beat and battered my mom. They went at her with night sticks and pepper spray and even the rubber bullets. I'm telling you, she's a hard woman to stop. Once you're marked, she's coming after you and she won't stop until she has your head. She would always hear things incorrectly and I would suffer the consequences. She took me to the bank with her so that I could withdraw some money on her behalf. At four years old I acted as her payee and guardian.)

*LIZBETT to imaginary teller*

We would like to withdraw forty-five dollars.

*YVONNE whispers*

Now what did you tell her? You think she is better than me?

## LIZBETT

No, shhhh. Mom, hang on, just get the money and we can go.

## YVONNE

Not until you apologize to me, I am your mother and I brought you into this world. YEAH! How dare you tell some other woman she is better than me. Did she feed you? Did she die for you?

LIZBETT

No. Mom, stop you are embarrassing me.

*To imaginary teller.*

Ok, thank you. You can give the cash to my mom now. We have to go.

*Backing away from the nightstand*

YVONNE

Tell me you love me.

LIZBETT

I do. I love you. I'm sorry. Let's go.

YVONNE

What? You loathe me?

LIZBETT

No. Shhh. Quiet, let's go, okay?

(We left the bank and my mom remained silent all the way home. She was breathing deep, hard, and fast. I knew her mind was racing and she was out for blood. Her face changed and I knew it was over. Her eyebrows melted into her nose and her lips grew thin and taut. She approached me.)

YVONNE

Pull down your pants.

LIZBETT

(In the middle of the living room I slowly undressed myself and stood bare assed before her. She went to the kitchen as I began to weep.)

YVONNE

I love you, but you have to learn.

LIZBETT

(She grabbed a metal spatula and hit me across the back of the thighs. I cried out in fear. I jumped and tried to run away, she grabbed me and threw me against the wall. Her hot and heavy breath pervaded my senses and she blasted me over the ass with the spatula.)

YVONNE

*Angrily, with all her might she pantomimes beating Lizbett.*

ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, EIGHT.

LIZBETT

(I was sobbing in terror on the ground unsure if she would ever stop.)

YVONNE

NINE, TEN, ELEVEN, TWELVE.

LIZBETT

Just take me away! I'm sorry for everything!

(It hurt so bad. My butt and thighs were raw and tender.)

*YVONNE breathing heavily*

THIRTEEN. FOURTEEN.

LIZBETT

(I think that's it. God she looks so tired. Let her be tired, please.)

YVONNE

There. *Beat.* I'm sorry I had to be so mean, Lizbitt. Look at you. Come here.

LIZBETT

(Of course I went to her. It hurt so bad. I didn't want to make her unhappy. I needed her, I needed her love. It never paid to argue with her. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. That's how it was.)

\*\*\*\*\*

LIZBETT

She did love me...every week...the only way she knew how. She made a mark in the world. She found a way to exist in this world despite her illness. No one could take her space and rob her of herself.

LIZBETT *To Yvonne*

Can I have a banana, please?

YVONNE

You can have one, but bring it with you over here.

LIZBETT

Okay. Thank you.

YVONNE

Bring it here. Let me open it for you.

LIZBETT

(I hesitantly brought the banana forward to my fat, naked mother perched atop our severely bent queen sized bed. Why was she being nice? She was never this nice. It was only when she wanted something...)

YVONNE *tenderly*

Now, Lizbitt, my daughter, I love you and you have to love me back.

LIZBETT

I do. Thank you for the banana, mom. It looks so good.

YVONNE

YEAH. Do you love me?

LIZBETT *fearful*

Yes. I said I do.

(I was fearful in that moment because I knew if I said love she would hear something else or twist my words and hurt me. I had to care for her, or at least pretend I did, because no one else would.)

YVONNE

Here I'll open it for you.

LIZBETT

(she peeled the banana and kept it for herself, studying its length and subtle curve. She caressed my hair with her heavy olive hand.)

YVONNE

On your knees—

LIZBETT

(I got on my knees before my naked mother. She swung her leg around me, positioning me between her thighs with my head staring squarely at her privates. She handed me the banana.)

YVONNE

Love me like all my men love me.

LIZBETT

But I said I do, mom.

YVONNE

Now you have to show me, YEAH.

\*\*\*\*\*

LIZBETT

(The hardest thing about my mother was that she didn't understand she was sick. She could never take responsibility for her actions or ever provide me any closure. If only she was just coherent enough to understand my pain.)

How do I have a family? You never gave me anything. I can't do anything and I feel like I will never belong because I don't know who I am.

YVONNE

You're Lizbitt Jorgene Monyae Benge. You're my daughter. I made you. You came from me.

LIZBETT

But's that just it. Fuck you. I came from you but not you alone. Where's my father? Damn it, just a name. A photo. I swear—can't I just see the two halves so I can be whole.

YVONNE

He's Clark. He had a trailer in Everett. I told you.

LIZBETT

No—you say the same thing every time and that's not him! He doesn't exist. He's probably some Joe Blow from the mental health center. Why do I feel so crazy? I don't want to be you.

YVONNE

I'm not crazy. *Sternly* you watch your mouth. You are a liar. I know your grandmother told you to say those things to me.

LIZBETT

I say it because I think it. I'm resentful and ashamed of you. I hurt because no one ever listened to me and gave me what I needed because they were too busy caring for you!

YVONNE

I gave you everything!

LIZBETT *Exasperated*

You gave me everything wrong. I defended you to my brothers and sisters and cousins. I told them you never hurt anyone and that you weren't a bad person—but you did. You hurt me, and you know what, I suspect you hurt them too.

YVONNE

I never hurt you. Those men hurt you...they raped and molested you. They always wanted to steal my children from me. They got all of them. They took all eight of my babies from me.

LIZBETT

Why? Why eight. You created these people but they exist in a vacuum. We want nothing to do with one another and it hurts. I can't have a single healthy and fulfilling relationship.

YVONNE

You have me, I am your mother.

LIZBETT

Yes. I know. I know.

YVONNE

How dare you talk about me.

LIZBETT

You're right. I don't want to. I want you to go away. I hate you and what you've done to me but I can't just wish you away because you live in me and you are a part of me—and that frightens me.

YVONNE

*beat to take in confession as if she understands*

LIZBETT

I can't. I never say I can't, but I can't take back what you did to me and the how, why, when, and where, but I can leave you in the here and now and go somewhere where people see me for me.

YVONNE *angrily*

You are always my daughter.

*END*

## Writing Process

Originally, I invested myself in exploring the work of Black feminist bloggers and their role within the cyberfeminist movement in creating a black feminist narrative. Unfortunately, after sharing my potential thesis topic with myriad professors on campus and off, all urged me to move in a different direction. After sharing this rather disheartening experience with a colleague, I joked that I was just going to write my thesis about me because no one was interested in helping me write about those whom I cared about. All joking aside, the idea stuck and I became interested in exploring my upbringing and my discomfort in identifying as white.

Initially, I thought it best to write a traditional thesis since I was applying for doctoral programs. However, it occurred to me that a project was better suited for what and how I wanted to explore this topic. Through mid to end of Fall 2013 I focused on composing a whiteness studies literature review and creating a one woman show combining poetry, song, spoken word, memoir, and interactive theatre that communicated my personal, academic, and filial search for authenticity and belonging. I wanted this hypothetical show and the project defense to serve as a call to action for practitioners, including: teachers, employers, doctors, social workers and those who deal with diverse populations regularly. I wanted to change the conversation surrounding whiteness, multiracial, and multiethnic identity to include those of us who do not quite fit these parameters. I sought to grapple with the questions: What does it look like to assimilate to a multicultural version of America versus a white America? How does this impact race relations and cultural affinity groups?

I thought I would write a play that focused on my upbringing in foster care and how being placed in transracial foster care placements really changed the way I saw myself and how I identified racially and culturally. To complicate matters further, the identity of my father is

unbeknownst to my mother, and everyone from my family of origin has always told me that I am “something else” whether it be an exotic beauty, mix raced, deviant, or that my physical features were somehow “different.” What this ultimately meant was that I could not be easily placed in their black/white dichotomous thinking. This has troubled me my whole life. I do not feel any particular sense of belonging to any community. I do not feel as though I have strong allegiances to any identity except that of a woman. I wanted my play to be about the idea that I know I am white due to the fact that my mother is (at least partially—my mother is rumored to be a quarter Native American) but that I have no idea what, if anything, the “rest” of me is. Even the previous statement shows how I have internalized the mind frame that white is stale, empty, nothing, and invisible. “I have no idea what, if anything, the rest of me is;” and so what is that “anything” that I refer to? If the rest of me is solely white, is it nothing? No.

In December 2013 I enrolled in the course, Writing for Social Change. During my initial meeting with the instructor of the course, Dr. Elena Hartwell, she asked me what the through-line of my play would be. My daughter accompanied me to the meeting, and as I stared at her, it became clear to me that motherhood would function as the connective tissue throughout the play. I thought that I would create vignettes of all the women who raised me, and at the end of the show I would portray my own mentally ill, abusive, impoverished mother. In this way, people would gather that my own identity is shaped by all of these black and brown women in whose images I have been created. However, I soon realized that it is far more difficult to do these women justice on the page and stage than I previously thought. Rapidly the story shifted to how my own mother and grandmother sowed the seeds of self-hatred deep within me through their abusive behavior, assault, and delusions. I finally settled on the idea that I would write about my

birthmother and the period of my life where my grandmother took custody of me. I needed to show how in my own parenting I actively resisted becoming a version of these women.

Writing for Social Change and professor Hartwell both served a tremendous function in the completion of this play. This process has been more therapeutic than anything else I had imagined. Knowing that theatre is my artistic strength and that I have a compelling story to tell, this journey has been one of healing and self-discovery. What follows are entries from the journal I kept throughout the Writing for Social Change course. These entries show the progression of my ideas and the overall process for creating the play, *ILL*.

**1/8/14:**

Elena asked me to think about how theatre can illuminate, educate, or shed light on issues of social injustice. She asked “Whose voices are heard?” Voice. Here is a reoccurring theme for me, voice, identity, and representation. I had to create characters with whom the audience could empathize.

I already had in mind that I wanted to share my experience and I wanted this to be a solo performance. This was about putting my talents, skills, and passion to work in order to create a piece of art and obtain my degree. I trust in myself as a performer and a writer, and thus, it made sense for me to think of myself as occupying all these roles. Part of me felt the need to go so far away from my original idea and entertain an epic theatre project that would span years, involve multiple locations, and introduce numerous characters. I allowed myself to explore this idea in Elena’s class by creating an epic way to present my story based on the work of Bertolt Brecht.

To create an epic play out of my story, it would involve many moms, different schools, neighborhoods, work places, and homes. I would follow my journey through eight different

elementaries and five different foster homes and introduce Lisa, Yvonne, Grandma, Mrs. Anonuevo, Chavelle, Mrs. Chesak, Mrs. Noren and end with my life in college and the influence of Dr. Jennifer Smith, Dr. Giovanna Urdangarain, Denise, and Luis' mother. I envisioned tracing my steps from the ages of five to twenty-five and examining me coming into my own and the role that these women, these "mothers," have played in my life.

As I writer I want to: learn more words, show command of language, evoke thought, be meaningful, impact others, explore myself through others, do something interesting, be creative, be satisfied, show my voice, present my point of view, create cultural artifacts of those from foster care, be present, share a story, beat the next person, do good, get published, have my work read and appreciated, perform, be intelligent and grow, be able to reflect thoughtfully and critically, share the stories not often heard. Feminist, screw the cannon, write big, create community, have a following, be inspired, do more than be a writer—see and hear my work. Be respected. Leave something behind.

Playwrights always work in three ways, they portray and actual event, write based on an event, or imagine an event. In writing for social change, the goal of a playwright is to employ the above tactics to illuminate injustice, evoke change, or provide an outlet for a community.

Injustice I saw or that happened to me: sexual abuse, assault by my brother and mother. Aspect of society I am interested in: dismantling white supremacy and eliminating anti-Black sentiment—this interests me because race/ism is so salient and I care deeply about my partner and daughter, both of whom are people of color.

Communities I belong to: peers at UWT, MAIS students, struggling academics, those aged out of foster care system, interracial relationships, mom, artist, those who are mature for their age, low income persons. Can I separate my role in the community—I am unsure. Can I

Speak for my community? No! I can only speak about my own self and experience and can never speak for my community. I want to write about: me.

### **1/13/14**

Play structure: play structure is composed of 1) the world before 2) world in change 3) and world after or 1) the world as it is 2) upheaval and change 3) the new world order. This structure can apply to a character changing, the world changing around the character, or the relationship to an event changes.

Within the structure of a play there are several key elements including a hook. A hook is a device that draws the audience in and it could be absolutely anything; a word, a prop, an event, a song, or a theme can all be a hook. Following the hook is the inciting incident which is the event that launches the rest of the story, followed by the rising action, climax, and denouement, or resolution.

### **1/15/14**

Central characters are those who: have the power, they normally have the bulk of dialogue, they begin and end the play, and everything though out the play impacts this person. My central character is myself. These are the personality traits of my central character: Intelligent, witty, funny, fits in anywhere, culturally versed, confident but not overly so, independent, huge laugh, social, hard worker, attitude, sassy, weakness for anyone who actually pays attention to her, lacks stability, tries to control everything, imperfect, popular among friends, runs in small circles, easily trusts others, doesn't handle conflict well, communicator, leader, brings people together, lover of the process, creative, likes nice things, hates looking like she tried too hard, likes food, caring, role model, confused/searching—need more back story like

where does she live, physical appearance, how does she speak, how's this person perceived, how are they emotionally, what's their socioeconomic status?

Backstory: She's a young woman who was taken away from her mother at birth but was placed back in her custody and remained there for several years. Mom suffered from schizophrenia, manic depression, multiple personalities, and bipolar disorder. At age 6, she calls her grandma and leaves a message about how scared and hungry she is. Her grandmother calls the police and the girl is taken away again and lives with her grandmother. Grandma is divorced, takes care of ex-husband, but still takes care of girl's mom. While with grandma, girl is introduced to opera, art, and theatre. Grandma has very hands off approach to parenting but still strict on girl when it comes to friends.

Pick a flaw: She is detached from traumatic events in the past and while she can suppress them, she hasn't engaged with them emotionally and they crop up in her everyday life. There is a disconnect between girl and her feelings. Positive: positive trait would be their ability to navigate multiple spheres of influence and their knack for picking up acceptable behaviors, social cues and code switching. Similarities to me: She is me. But maybe I make her different enough that I can grow from her existence and really indulge myself to explore my weaknesses and flaws. She's a hyperbole of me, more animated but more solemn. I could also make her just like me? Differences from me: Make her seem out of grips with reality. Could make her more erratic. How impacted by social injustice: She never feels genuine love and is searching for a validation that does not exist.

What's the "world before:" Adoption agency, no recollection of people or place, nor quality of care or if family visited—sort of an imaginary world only made real through a photo of a girl as a baby with the words "new hope adoption center" scrolled across the bottom. World

is already chaotic as five previous brothers and sisters were taken away. Mom is mentally ill, though not as bad as later years. Grandma is still catering to mom and mom lives in the projects. Not terribly violent world, but lots of alcohol and depression. Mom in Western State during pregnancy.

One moment of rising action: Taken away by police—trailer park early evening. Girl outside and mom inside separated by police and they try and work out circumstances that led to phone call. Girl does not want to eat what mom has prepared and yells at her in front of police. They tell her to go in the car and she does—they take her to her aunt's house and she plays with her cousin. The officers spend a long time with the aunt and the cousins are making him a card. He already left.

World After: In this world the girl no longer talks to or sees her own mother or grandmother. She divorces herself entirely from her family of origin as she becomes a mother herself. Life is less complicated and while she thinks of these figures, they do not stir any emotions. She only feels bad for not living up to societies' ideals about loving your parents or caring about them and having a "family." Changes: Could be huge event and small change or small event and medium change—an indicator of future behavior is past behavior. Evidence to have hope. "Realistically" fundamental small change.

Hook: My voice? Letter I wrote to myself during abortion. Set at adoption agency. Describe single photo with adoption agency written on it. My mom's kids taken away and allegations against her. Inciting incident: (usually event) informs rest of play; mom regains custody of me through the help of my grandma as a baby. Climactic scene (point of no return/changes character); getting pregnant and all skeletons come out of closet, becoming a

mom or leaving my grandma's house, sexual abuse, law suit. What are the impacts for the future? Stakes must be high.

**1/22/14**

As a part of exercise III, the class was asked to write the opening of their play, this included: title, heading, stage directions, and the opening scene. This exercise helped me to feel as though I were writing a coherent play. I came up with the title *ILL* because it is descriptive both of the events taking place within the play and also my mother's mental and physical state. The class concluded exercise III by writing the final moment of their play. The original final moment to the play read "after bearing eight children, each one of us more fucked up than the next, my mother's illness seemed to lay dormant. My anger scares me. How is this me? Do I want Rhaya to know her? I don't love my mom. How do I be a mom?"

I went home later this night and typed up my free write and spent about two hours finding my abortion letter and typing it up for the play. I sent the draft to Elena (about 7 pages) and asked her for any initial thoughts.

**2/3/14**

Elena shared the strategy of visual mapping with us. She said that I would probably benefit most from utilizing this organizational technique. Visual mapping is the process of dividing a play into small scenes and naming them. Then, one would write the scene name onto a 3x5 notecard and put the card on the wall and visually look at the layout of the piece.

After class I spoke with Elena who was really excited about the draft I had turned in. She made a comment about how moving and touching it was to read the parts about wanting pretty things—this, she felt, was the connective tissue I had been searching for. As Elena told me that, I felt myself well up inside because it was true, I spent all of my childhood and adolescence

searching for the beauty in life—and in me. That being said, I began the task of writing the banana scene.

### **2/5/14**

The topic for today's class was showing versus telling. The most important information from this day pertains to making a story active and learning about character and story arc. In order to keep the story active, there has to be a protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist is the main character, meaning they have the majority of the dialogue or all the action affects this particular person. The antagonist is the person who pushes the protagonist to action. There are three types of conflict which fuel a story: woman versus woman, woman versus nature, and woman versus self. Character/story arc deals with starting in one position and ending in another. Maybe one does not need to show change, but the possibility or potential for change.

As it relates to my play, I find that I want to find love, stability, and protection in the story but my mother stands in the way of that. From this realization, I created the confession between myself and my mother that forms the end of my play. At this same time I also wrote the beginning of the scene where Mrs. Odom puts me in the dog house for having lice.

### **2/10/14**

Cold reads. There were four of us this day and we did feedback in a way where we first addressed the positive aspects of the play; secondly, the writer has a chance to ask questions to the group; and lastly, the audience gives constructive criticism. We were told to never, ever explain, justify, defend, or excuse our play. (See performance process and audience reactions section for more).

**2/12/14**

From my cold reading I learned: it got muddled and confusing as to who was speaking and where we were. I can voice a lot of the transitions and stage directions versus leaving it as a direction. I need to make the script more active. I also learned I have a good play that is powerful and moving and this is something I need to continue to work with. I am much more comfortable sharing my story now than I was previously, especially because one might be able to feel where I am coming from as opposed to sharing detached and empty stories.

**2/15/14**

I decided to table my script for the next week and a half in order to digest the comments made during class and to give myself time to rest emotionally. Elena gave back hard copies of our drafts with comments.

**2/21/14**

Performance during SW PCA/ACA Conference. (See performance process and audience reactions section for more).

**2/24/14**

For a brief period of time I became obsessed with examining the cultural production of those who have aged out of the foster care system. I began centering my research on those who have aged out and how they make meaning in their lives. This idea began to derail my writing process and made me ponder the direction that I wanted this work to take. I journaled quite a bit about my experience leaving my grandmother's household and the role that education played in my life.

I spent this week revising my script based on Elena's notes and the feedback I received

from the class and from the audience members at the SW PCA/ACA annual conference. The majority of revisions had to do with creating associations between the chains of events. Using repetition, word association, symbolism, and examining the chronology of the play helped me tighten up some loose ends and find the connective tissue amongst the scenes.

**2/26/14**

I had a long talk with Elena this day about the future and direction of my play. Most of what I created thus far deals only with my mother and our strange relationship. The ending of *ILL* signals the entrapment of relationship between my mother and me, and while the ending works for the piece, it is not the end of the story. I feel a strong pull toward creating two more pieces that pick up where *ILL* leaves off. It is not enough just to tell about isolated instances of abuse my mother inflicted upon me, but it is an important part of my growth to be able to show how my grandmother was complicit in these acts, and that this has profound effects on my own parenting.

**4/28/14**

After letting this play simmer on the backburner for a bit, I think I am now ready to begin incorporating a lot of the feedback I received after the March 12 performance. Coming to the play with fresh eyes is helping me to see how I still have work to do in order to tighten the sequence of events and make the interactions more dynamic. I think the areas I will focus on for major revisions will be the scene about getting gifts from men and the abortion letter. These two scenes have incredible potential but are too disconnected and lack my own emotion and reflection. I can really see now what this play is about. This play is about my relationship to my mother and how it impacts me in the here and now. I have been caught up by thinking that I can

flesh this entire idea out in the next play, but I need to focus on *ILL* and writing it so that it functions as a standalone play. While the next two plays in the trilogy will pick up where this play leaves off, I will be focusing on making edits to make a single, streamlined story with *ILL*.

**5/9/14**

With my final performance just days away I have been rearranging portions of the play based on idea that I am conveying the relationship between my mother and I and how that effects who I am today. I cut a major portion of the show and tell scene and decided to use it as my opening. Elena shared that the more dynamic portions of the play were those that involved dialogue amongst the characters. Keeping this in mind, I created the character of Bank Patron, the wealthy Indian man who bought me my first gift. I also added a little bit more dialogue between my grandmother and I. Inserting these exchanges really helped to show and not tell the audience about these important events. I also went back through the script and explained things more explicitly and with emotion. I cut pieces of the abortion letter and ended with my very personal thoughts and feelings that were not a part of the letter. By making these changes, it is my hope that the audience will not feel sorry for me, but can begin to see a fleshed out, three dimensional character who is grappling with how to make her mark in the world.

### **Performance Process and Audience Reactions**

Feedback is a significant piece of the process in creating theatre. It carries such weight because it lets one know how their work is being received and if the author met their intended goals. It is difficult to be self-aware without feedback, thus one might be too congratulatory or too critical about themselves and/or their work. In creating theatre for social change, it was paramount that I capture a multitude of voices in the feedback process in order to gauge the

impact and efficacy of *ILL*. Furthermore, I am not a playwright by training, so soliciting feedback helped me elevate my piece and better understand the conventions of theatre.

Comments and criticisms were absolutely integral to the success of my play. I especially benefitted from the feedback that was constructive yet critical of my writing, style, and word choices. There are multiple iterations of *ILL* for which feedback from Dr. Hartwell only exists as a “track changes” function of my word processing program. These suggestions and questions that Elena proposed were an invaluable part of creating good theatre, working through my emotional hang-ups, and gaining confidence in my ability to write and perform moving and powerful work. Harnessing the power of personal narrative to move people and the ability for art to transform them has been a large part of my journey. I measured *ILL*'s efficacy by the degree to which it did move or transform others. Sharing the feedback I received during this process does the work of communicating that this work is important not only to myself, but to others, and it is a way to assess the merits of theatre and the particular work I have done to earn a Master's degree. Thank you to everyone who participated in this activity.

*Students and others are referred to by acronyms to protect their privacy; those whose names appear here have consented to its use.*

### **Cold Reads February 10, 2014**

In the Writing for Social Change course we workshopped one another's plays. Part of this process included doing a cold read of our rough drafts during week five of the quarter. We were cast in one another's plays in order to give the authors a chance to hear their work aloud and gain some much needed distance from the pieces. Student T. read my play.

Student T. wound up in tears during the “I’m sorry I had to be so mean” line. Elena took over and finished reading the ending of the play. Student V. found the play to be triggering during the counting scene where my mom is whipping me with a spatula. Both women felt that the play was raw and it gave the audience permission to talk about their own experiences.

I was taken aback because the girls reacted to the scene where my mother beat me, but showed no emotion throughout the banana scene. Did I not write it effectively? Was it not clear what was happening? When Student T. cried towards the end of the play I immediately started crying. Since she allowed herself to be vulnerable in the classroom, I let go of everything I was feeling and cried with her.

Student M. shared that for him, the monologues back and forth worked well and provided clarity in how the characters unfolded. I asked the group about how they experienced the relationship between my mother and I. They answered that they found our relationship to be confusing and fractured. This was affirming for me. The class felt like I was stuck in the relationship with my mom and the web she created. They also recognized that she is a part of me and I want to love her, but I also want to hate her.

In terms of constructive criticism, the class felt that I had the potential to verbally set up scenes in the form of a direct address. Student V. felt like I jumped around too much. She wanted to know the connection between each scene and why I had them in that particular order. What was prompting the next one?

In my journal I wrote, “I don’t feel like I’m done, but I don’t know what more to do. I think I need to write a separate play about my grandma interspersed with my mother’s presence. Yep. I get the overwhelming feeling I’m not done because I have let my grandma off the hook for this and that’s unacceptable. I need to write the continuation wherein I grapple with my

feelings toward my grandma and her role in enabling my mother and not being brave enough to stop the cycle of abuse and trauma.”

### **Conference Performance February 21, 2014**

I did a dramatic reading of *ILL* at 8:00AM this day for the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPCA/ACA) annual conference at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I was the only presenter on the panel since two presenters had failed to show. This gave me enough time to present the play in its entirety. About seven people showed up to my presentation, a fact which helped to ease my nerves. I was nervous to perform this play in an academic setting such as a conference because it did not fit the bill for material typically presented at the SWPCA/ACA conference.

As a whole the performance went how I expected. It was early, I was sick and had not been sleeping well, and so I had a bit of trouble differentiating my voice enough to play the various characters. I also cried during the last scene of the play where I am confronting my mother. The tears made it difficult to read the last few lines of the play and took me out of the performance aspect into a more personal zone. Despite these hiccups, the content was moving and I believe the audience was engaged.

During the question and answer period, a student studying theatre at Central Washington University offered the suggestion of having multiple versions of my play. She felt as though it could benefit from being either a one woman show or a cast of multiple characters. By using bodies and props, the student felt as though one could really invoke an emotional response from the audience that does not exist in this iteration of the play. I had not previously given thought to

creating multiple versions of *ILL*, but it is an idea that I like and is definitely worth consideration. I also received feedback from one of the conference attendees via email.

*Feedback from conference attendee via email 2/25/2014*

Hi Lizbett,

We met at the SWPCA conference. I was the presenter who did the nerd burlesque paper on Lynn's panel. I just wanted to reach out and let you know that I've been thinking a lot about your play reading. It has really stuck with and profoundly affected me.

The banana scene, the kittens at show & tell, and the prison visitation have been running around in my head for the last few days. I think you are really on to something special and your piece has so much potential. I am excited to hear what you will do with it next. Thank you so much again for sharing it with us at the conference.

### **Staged Reading March 12, 2014**

As part of the final project for Writing for Social Change, Elena arranged for professional actors to come to UWT and do a staged reading of our plays. Elena assigned parts to actors based on her knowledge of their talents and arranged for a performance on Wednesday, March 12, 2014, at 7:00PM in William Philip Hall. I emailed my script to Marilyn Bennett, the actress performing my play, about two weeks before the date of the reading so that she had extra time to work with the challenging material.

The five of us in the course invited our friends, families, and peers to come to the readings. My play opened the show and was followed by a play about a girl contemplating robbing her boss for money due to her incarcerated father's absence. After the second play we took a five minute break and resumed with a play following a day in the life of a boy caught in

the war in Somalia, and a play about police brutality and the wrongful death of a deaf individual. We ended the night with Student T.'s witty comedy that tracked the gender indiscretions of a woman and a metrosexual male by way of a reality TV courtroom drama.

I walked away very satisfied with what I created. Admittedly, Marilyn's portrayal of the characters changed the way I saw my work. I come to the discipline of theatre not as a playwright but as an actor. So, to see someone act out characters that are so personal to me was difficult. Marilyn portrayed my mother too suggestively. She touched herself a great deal, writhed in her chair, and made the "yeah" too sensual. These actions deterred from the text itself and I found myself being taken out of the story because I was too focused on Marilyn the actress not Yvonne the character.

In the beginning *Daya*, the actress reading the stage directions, pronounced WIC wrong. Immediately I made a note to myself to write "pronounced like wick" in the script and to spell out for the audience that WIC stood for Women, Infants, Children. A second acronym that I am familiar with but may be lost on the audience is DSHS. I will have to first mention DSHS as the Department of Social and Health Services before I use the acronym in the script. *Daya* also mispronounced Alvaro's name, so I made an additional note to add a pronunciation guide for his name. I made the mistake of using Alvaro's nickname, Alex, in the abortion letter and then referring to him as Alvaro throughout the rest of the play. I need to change Alex to Alvaro.

The more I hear the story about gifts from men and knowing one's role and how to perform well, I realize that section needs editing and maybe some cuts altogether. I need to cut the line "I've played that role..." it sounds as if it is an innuendo or masking some sexual undertones that do not exist. "You are dismissed" read too cliché and is another line that I will be

cutting from the script. I found the beating scene to be more impactful with the pantomiming of the whooping and slow, staccato yelling of the numbers. This is something to keep in mind as I prepare to perform this scene in May.

Of the parts that elicited an emotion, the line referencing wanting to have something beautiful because life is so ugly really encapsulates my thinking as an adolescent and young adult. It is something that many can relate with. I became sad during the abortion letter because my friends were all present and listening. I was afraid they would somehow judge me or look at me as a bad mother. In my heart I know they would never judge me negatively for that, but fear began to creep in because I never talk about such personal matters. The banana scene made me cry. I was too embarrassed of my own tears to look around and gauge the audience reaction, but from what I could tell everyone was quiet and focused, a sign that they were engaged.

My friends hugged me and were quick to tell me that they loved the play. I appreciated their support; I also knew they still needed some time to process everything. What follows is a list of feedback I received from friends, colleagues, and actors present at the reading on March 12, 2014.

*Feedback from Student T2 via text message 3/12/2014*

I was floored in many ways. I'm honored to have seen that, I mean it. You should be so proud. You have an amazing talent with words—everything was so dynamic and powerful. And it took a lot of courage. I would be ecstatic to hear more.

*Feedback from Student A. via text message 3/12/2014*

Lizbett that was amazing and heavy. We had to duck out and discuss and reflect. I hope to talk with you soon... Student R. really liked your writing "it was tight" Student K. was I think a

little wiped out Student T2 was distraught and related to the content, I agreed with all—I really like the correlations between scenes—the man saying to buy you what you want, to your ma taking you to the bauble store 4 example. Student T2 was crying loud during. I imagine it was terrifying + exhilarating + cathartic? That’s what I would feel. Your hard work was evident to us all! I imagine it’s an experience to see someone read your lines. Congratulations and thanks for inviting.

*Feedback from Student R. via email 3/12/2014*

Hey Lizbett,

Just wanted to say: Well written! The material was difficult to take in, but it was a success for that reason. When you are able to write a piece that has such an impact on an audience then you have exceeded in your task. Thank you. I think the play is going to be good, it already is...also, it takes tremendous courage to write your story, and not everyone is willing to. In telling your story, however, you might encourage others to come to terms with their own troubled pasts, and in the end that is a good thing.

*Feedback from Marilyn Bennett (actress) via email 3/15/2014*

Hello Lizbett: Thank you again for entrusting your extraordinary play and personal story with me for the reading last week. It was an exhausting and enriching experience, and I am so moved by your courage, transparency, and articulate writing. All are welcome elements to an actor, as you know.

Elena suggested you might be interested to hear some thoughts from an actor's perspective, and I am happy to offer a few observations/experiences from reading your script. I

hope these may be useful for you when you prepare to perform it, but please don't take anything I write as prescriptive or a judgment of your work.

Overall, this is a very exciting and challenging piece to read. Elements I particularly love, are the character exchanges, moving from person to person quickly and within emotional extremes. Very difficult to do fully and truthfully--must not be pushed or created technically--but I felt the arc of those moments, especially the final two encounters--banana and final passages--provide the actor a rich challenge and an excellent rising action.

The most difficult passages to "structure" as an actor were those that had a lot of narrative, less dialogue, and a less defined payoff or conclusion. Particular among these for me were the story about men buying you gifts, the set-up for the shopping spree with Alvaro, shopping with your mom, and particularly, the kitten story. Somehow, while these stories are illustrative of important aspects of your experience and contain great descriptive moments and compelling dialogue, they don't seem to offer the arc of the other stories; the end points feel a bit flat and don't quite carry the stories to a strong moment of revelation/illustration of the aspect of your relationship with your mother that you are addressing/sharing. To me, concluding with bold dialogue, a pointed, dramatic moment, is stronger for an actor than a descriptive piece of narrative.

The other element that was a bit of a challenge was the order of some scenes. Toggling from father stories to Alvaro made sense to me, but harder was going back to elementary school for two scenes, then to the baby letter. I didn't feel I came up with a very strong thread among those, so approached them purely as individual elements; mini-plays, in a sense. While the ending scenes were also individual, distinct moments, the trajectory of specific, increasingly invasive abuses gave me a good rising action and emotional escalation to carry to the end.

I hope these might be helpful as you continue to refine and develop this remarkable work. And it would truly be a gift to see you perform this in the future. Best luck with this series of incredibly personal plays, your continuing education, and as you raise your beautiful daughter.

*Feedback from Elena Hartwell via email 3/20/14*

Hey Lizbett, Such great work. I'm excited for you to keep working on it.

Some overall impressions: I agree with Marilyn on her note about the longer less "dialogue" sections being something you might want to look at. In performance, I felt the switching between characters was the most dramatic and kept me most engaged. The tricky part with a one woman show is there isn't any inter-character dialogue, so those moments are the closest that we get to that, and it makes for more dynamic theater. You might consider either changing the longer passages (shortening) or adding in other characters into them, to show us more of the "dialogue" between characters.

As we've talked about before, I definitely recommend working out the bread crumbs that you use to link each moment together. I think this is part of what Marilyn referred to with the order of the scenes. I think if you make yourself a map (I totally recommend index cards taped to a wall so you can move them around and look at them at one time) of each scene, and figure out how they link to each other, you will find the best flow for the story.

Every single moment in the play must connect to the larger story, otherwise cut it. So, with the example of the kitten scene—how does that story further the larger story of the play? I think you are still working out what that is as well. Is this about your relationship with your mother? Or how she impacts who you are now? Or how she shaped your childhood? Any one of these as a larger story would impact what stories you do or do not tell. For example, if it's about

your relationship with your mother, then the kitten story doesn't further that, because the story is more about your relationship with your peers in class.

I would spend some time debating about what you want to show us with the play, and define the larger question, then figure out how each moment relates. If you take my model of, the opening of a play asks a question, the body of the play answers it, and the end asks a new question, how does your play fit this? I think if your initial question is clearer, you will find the bread crumbs that lead us through the play.

For your question about the trilogy of plays. One thing you might consider is doing three shorter plays, so you may not be adding a lot of material in time-wise, but you would structure each short play to be as dynamic as possible, and focus on 1 thing. Then put the three together. So, for example, the first play could be your early years with your mother, the second your middle years, and the third you as an adult. Or the good things from your mother, followed by the abuse, followed by your getting out of the situation. There are a lot of ways that you could go with setting up that trilogy. It wouldn't be too much, because the total running time might be close to what you have now, but it would be a way to hone in on a more concise overall story for each one, rather than the slightly muddy version you have now. You could take a look at everything that really worked in the script during the reading (there was a lot!) and write those scenes onto cards, then put them into piles about what question they answer (i.e. abuse you endured, impact on your relationships etc.). If you come up with distinct piles, those scenes might work in their own short play. I think it would be really exciting to write three short plays, each of which could stand on their own, but that can also be performed together as a longer "play." It would give you a lot of possibilities.

Lastly - I still think you can show or tell us more about your specific emotional reactions to events, on occasion (like the letter) it feels factual, but not emotional. A letter to an unborn child you are going to abort has the potential to be incredibly moving, but right now it feels disconnected. If you're going to keep the letter in, I would find a way to show us some sense of loss you might feel or are you worried about regretting it? Or are you scared of the abortion? Or do you think this could be someone you could really love and you're getting rid of it, etc., etc. There are a lot of ways to include in emotional ties to that experience. I think sprinkling a little more of how you felt would be really helpful in gaining empathy from your audience. It's fine that people will feel "sorry" for you given the situation—but I think what will really make this play amazing is if we also go on that emotional roller coaster with you.

#### **Classroom Performance March 18, 2014**

Dr. Griesse invited me to share my work with her Women's Voices: Third World Testimonials class because my thesis project fit within the realm of women's testimonial literature, and she trusted me to share my expertise with the class. I read/performed eleven pages of *ILL*. After the reading, it became apparent that I needed to revisit this material and revise it with fresh eyes.

Following the staged reading of *ILL* the students took a ten minute break. As they returned from break, I opened up the classroom for discussion regarding the performance process, writing, graduate school, and literature used to contextualize my work. The class remarked that my writing was very descriptive, but as a whole, they responded differently to certain aspects of the play than previous audiences had. They asked me why I thought I attracted "these types" of men—the kind that want to buy you gifts and rescue you from your jobs in order to have you serve as a house maiden. I responded that I have no idea. I cannot begin to explain

the behavior of another person who acts in ways completely out of my control. I think the part about having a pretend eight year relationship with Alvaro was lost on those who asked the question.

A few women chimed in about their own experiences with these types of men and that it is about not falling for their empty promises but learning to resist. Some felt that this happened because these types of men are “trollers” and “prowlers” who feed off of women susceptible to this behavior. Their analysis of the situation and what I perceived to be a flawed reading of the text makes me a bit uncomfortable. I do not wish to appear weak, foolish, or as if I am the type to wait for a man to rescue me from my situation. I did, however, want people to recognize that Alvaro helped me economically but I had no idea how to create and maintain a normal, healthy relationship. This feeling of discomfort is productive though. I now realize that I have to write clearly and with a certain vision in mind, but ultimately the audience will take what they will regardless of my craftsmanship.

An older student asked me if I can forgive my mother. I am left thinking “for what?.” I did not share the abuse or molestation scene, so I am wondering if they think I am somehow at odds with my mother for being poor and mentally ill. I replied that I am unsure if I can forgive my mom, but I can and do recognize her humanity. The woman replied that not being embarrassed by my mother’s appearance is a place to start on my path to forgiving her. I am left thinking, “that is not even the tip of the iceberg.” When I was younger I was concerned with that, but now I am more concerned with my mother perpetuating violence and abuse.

On the topic of my mother and her presence in my life, one student inquired as to how I parent my own daughter and her relationship with my mother. I quickly responded to her that my mother has nothing to do with my daughter’s life and it is going to remain that way. I felt that I

had to defend my choice to keep my daughter away from my family of origin, but I know that I am justified in shielding Rhaya from them because I am not going to implicate my daughter in that system of harm and abuse. After that I saw some silent clapping from a few of the students and the discussion shifted toward motherhood and how it might be closer to reality to envision that maybe women do not love their mothers or do not have good relationships with them. We discussed this idea for a while and talked about the work of mothering as opposed to the identification as a mother and how some women value the work but not the role.

At the end of class, a student came up to me and told me that “even though I am a male, you are very inspirational. You have been through hardships and you are super intelligent. You make me want to take school more seriously.” I hugged him afterward, and invited him to see the rest of the show. I told him to ask anything of me that he needed in order to continue being successful. This person’s willingness to come up to me after class and validate the work I am doing made me feel joyful, proud, and honored.

Overall I find that engaging in a talkback process was beneficial in pointing out areas that I can tie more concretely to my intent for writing this play. If the intent is to explore my relationship with my mother in order to uncover how it currently affects my life, then I need to tie each piece of the play back to that premise. With some careful edits and rehearsals aloud I know that I will be ready come performance time to put my best foot forward as I share my life with the UWT community.

### **Final Performance May 13, 2014**

On this date I performed *Voices Made (M)other* as a whole to the University of Washington Tacoma community. I performed in William Philip Hall at 6:30PM in front of an audience of seventy-five. In attendance were friends, students from various Ethnic, Gender,

Labor Studies courses, co-workers, UWT alumni, staff members, professors, and members of the community. Myself and a cast of three other women performed *Momologues*, followed by my solo, staged reading of *ILL*.

I am positive that my performance went wonderfully. I did two full run-throughs of *ILL* prior to Tuesday's performance, and I am all too familiar with the content. All of this led to a very honest, emotive, and committed performance of the play. The physicality of my mother and the shifts between voice and character of the men and women in the play really helped bring each person to life. At the end of the show the audience rewarded me with a standing ovation. The reading was followed by a talkback where audience members proceeded to ask me questions about the writing process, my academic program, and more personal questions dealing with the material presented throughout the play. To top things off, I set up giant sheets of butcher paper on two tables in the back of the room where people could share their thoughts with me in an anonymous or less intimidating way.

I was struck by the reactions I got from complete strangers. I thought that those who already knew me would have the strongest reactions to the play, but a group of younger girls came up to me asking for pictures and autographs and showered me with praise. They even wanted to know when and where they could buy a recording of the show. This experience along with the hugs and kisses from strangers cements the fact that personal narratives have the power to move people, art can transform, and I am worthy of the love and praise I have sought my entire life. What follows are the comments from those in attendance this Tuesday evening in May.

*Feedback from Student F. via butcher paper 5/13/14*

The power of personal stories stretches far. I applaud your bravery to be so open and vulnerable with so many strangers. I feel like I know you so well and we have only met once. I look forward to future conversations.

*Feedback from B.D. via butcher paper 5/13/14*

Lizbett, what an honor and a privilege to hear your stories and to share, for even a brief time, in your life experiences. You are an inspiration to me, and I look forward to seeing you more frequently in the future. I hope to meet your lucky daughter someday. Until then, all my love and admiration.

*Feedback from A. via butcher paper 5/13/14*

Liz, I cried. When you made me cry it's cuz it impacted my life.

*Feedback from Anonymous via butcher paper 5/13/14*

Courage and beauty surrounded this piece. May you model this for years to come.

*Feedback from Student P. via text message 5/13/14*

Thank you dearly. I hope your expectations were met this evening and that it was helpful for you. Your honesty was none other than brave and courageous. Best wishes!

*Feedback from B.D. via personal communication 5/13/14*

I don't have any questions for you, but what you did was amazing. I was more interested in what you didn't say. I love that. People had so many questions for you because you did a wonderful job giving them just enough. I am a fan of letting others fill in the gaps, and this play lends itself to that just perfectly. The vignette style makes for a work full of heart and soul and we can see your progression though time. Absolutely wonderful.

*Feedback from Dr. Ed Chamberlain via email 5/13/14*

Hi Lizbett, Just wanted to send a brief note and say congrats on completing this part of the process. It was a great turn-out tonight, and I think the audience was moved by your performance. I could see that people were really listening and intrigued. Nice work!

*Feedback from J.S. via text message 5/14/14*

Seriously, I don't think I've ever been more proud or inspired. You're a total and absolute badass and I'm lucky to have you in my life.

*Feedback from Student T. via email 5/16/14*

Lizbett, sorry I didn't do this sooner but I just wanted to say your show was great! Really a wonderful experience, I'm so glad I got to be a part of it. Also, your performance of "III" was much better than the overly sexualized one we saw before...but that's just between you and I! Haha. Thanks again for giving us ladies a voice :).

*Feedback from Beverly Naidus via email 5/28/14*

Some thoughts about your performance:

Your reading was contextualized in a very compelling way. We were prepared by hearing the stories of many women discussing their relationships with their mothers. I was struck by the many ways I could identify with each story. I thought about how common feelings of pain, abuse, disconnection and more are in our current society. It made me reflect upon how damaged we are in this iteration of human society.

Your own story animated by the reading brought into the world of your mother's mental illness, the world you had to navigate, how you found your grounding and your sense of neutrality, in a very charged and vulnerable space. The grief of not having a mother who was

present to your own journey is what was most palpable to me. I felt pulled by that thread throughout the reading, partly because that was the place where I identified the most.

Your voice was clear and compelling. I felt honored to witness the strength and intelligence of a woman who has transformed her pain into art. Since mental illness is more rampant than ever in our society, I can imagine that we will have more art works that negotiate those spaces of being torn asunder.

*Personal reflection 5/17/14*

Audience members were warm, supportive, and even if they felt uncomfortable, it hardly showed. I am thrilled that the performance went off without a hitch and that I did not encounter any pushback from the audience. I do recognize that I am lucky there were so many in attendance who already knew me and/or my project, and so I was able to freely express myself without fear or worry of harassment, censure, or attacks on my credibility. The outcome was close to ideal. If I could exercise full control of *ILL*, the following section describes what that would look like, including the ideal conditions for performance.

**Ideal conditions for performance.** Two distinct performance situations exist for this play, one in which I myself am actor, director and producer, and a second scenario involving production companies and actors outside of myself. If I were to tour this piece as a single marketable entity, I would prefer performing in small, intimate venues or theatre in found space. Due to the fact that I am sharing myself and a piece of my story, I prefer smaller venues because I can engage in talkbacks with audience members and create a dialogue about the process, content, and performance of the piece. Ideally I would perform in more progressive, diverse areas that welcome challenging and raw material.

A great performance venue for this piece would be at an accessible, working class, local theatre. One does not need special lighting, props, or even a specific type of space to mount *ILL*. Because *ILL* is a solo performance show, it would function well at a venue in found space. The more popularized and big the event becomes, I feel like it takes away from the intimacy and raw edge that the piece has. The focus of the show is the actress and her transformation between characters. Every aspect of the show should reinforce the centrality of actress on stage. I envision myself or any actress in an all-black ensemble that is representative of current fashion trends and very minimal jewelry and subtle makeup. Hair should be worn down. The night stand and stool props listed in the play should be a dark cherry or matte black finish. The night stand should be on wheels, hip height, with at least one small top drawer. As far as other aspects of the performance are concerned, if the space and/or lighting permits, it would be a very effective device to use a red/green wash on the lights and to activate this during the times when Yvonne speaks. In this way, there is not only a physical and vocal shift, but there is a visual shift associated with danger, anger, and overall suspiciousness.

My audience would be fourteen and older, working class, ethnically diverse, and inclusive of all genders, ideological stances, and religious beliefs. I say fourteen and older because I think that a freshman in high school is at a point in their development where they might not understand the importance or impacts of the content expressed in the show, but they possess enough emotional maturity to begin that process. However, the most ideal audience would be those who have been a part of my life, supported me, and grown up with me. I would not want anyone from my family of origin outside of my aunt Theresa and cousin Alaysa to attend. My friends, colleagues, professors, and other students are exactly the types of people I want present at my show. I draw energy and fulfillment from learning, feeling, and creating. To

share such an experience with those who have been a part of my socialization and growth would be an absolute pleasure. While I am very much about structural change and creating large scale movements, I connect more deeply with microlevel interactions and individual acts of solidarity and resistance. I prioritize relationships over discourse and to build stronger links and create new ones with individuals who connect with me and my work is idyllic.

I would also enjoy performing at institutions of higher learning because I feel as though the climate is conducive to change, addressing social injustice, and laying truths bare. School is also the place that most closely resembles “home” and so to broadcast my story and my art in a school setting feels most comfortable. Based on my current experience of performing *ILL* in class, at an academic conference, and then for a limited group of colleagues and friends, I find that it has been well received within academic settings.

Ideal performance conditions would be doing the play for a small sum during a two-week run. There would be evening performances from seven to eight-thirty on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays with a talkback following each of the performances. I would enjoy having Beverly Naidus, Dr. Elena Hartwell, and Dr. Jennifer Smith serve on a panel with me after some of the local area performances. Beverly brings such expertise to the field of community based arts practices, Elena is local and one of the few female playwrights getting produced, and Jennifer heads a women’s center with ample access to community resources. Having these women as part of the talkback process would help shed light on women’s issues in the arts and also help people connect to women doing powerful work on behalf of other women.

Given the ideal settings explored above, I actually have far fewer expectations for a theatre company or various other entities wishing to produce *ILL*. Ideally much of my own preferences would be followed for the performing of my play but I would definitely allow more

freedom for costume choice, hair, and prop use. The theatre company must retain the dialogue as is, but in the industry, one does not have to follow stage directions. I would allow whoever produced the show that freedom to experiment with set, lighting, and props. Once I remove myself from the process, I really want the audience to begin to know Lizbett and Yvonne as characters more so than as a part of myself. It is important that these women can stand alone and communicate life and take the forms of other women that the audience can identify with. As long as the integrity of my script is kept, I am open and flexible to new possibilities for *ILL*.

In being so elastic about my expectations for *ILL*, I have neglected to mention the less than ideal situations that may arise in performing this play. I think there are definitely markets that would censor *ILL*. I intentionally left the incestuous scene between my mother and I vague enough that the audience is forced to fill in the blanks. This gray area allows for a less provocative reading of the play, should one wish to present it. One way to deal with difficult people is to provide a way for their opinions to be heard. By having a comment, suggestion, or notes to the director box, people might funnel their discomfort to the appropriate channels as opposed to bashing the actress or damning the play. One of the main motivations for me to have a talkback in my own performance is because I think *ILL* raises far more questions than it does answers, and by having a space where people can openly voice their interpretation of the play and learn the context in which it exists, there is room for us all to grow. If it is an option during a run of the show to have a talkback after each performance, or at least set aside ten to fifteen minutes for feedback, difficult persons would become less difficult. The key is to allow people to be frustrated or angry and give voice to their emotions so that they feel their experience is valid and they can move on.

There are obviously those who would become agitated by the multiple examples of abortions, sexual assault, and the less than perfect relationships between women. Having outspoken allies in the audience would help ease any tension arising from any ideological differences, but I am a firm believer in putting forth my story as but an example of larger social trends and that nothing that happened to me is unique in any way shape or form. In making a conscious effort to not put myself on a pedestal use my story as an example of how one should be in this world, people are less likely to take issue with something so raw and personal. Sometimes, there is nothing one can do but validate the experience, feelings, and beliefs of another and politely agree to disagree.

### **Reflection**

What I am doing in my thesis work is relevant in many ways to many people in many places. I am spearheading the discussion of mother daughter incest from the standpoint of a survivor and mother. This work can be used in the field of social work to help clients who experienced maternal sexual abuse or are living with a mentally ill parent. My story is a story of resilience, survival, and success. These elements oftentimes go unnoticed and unappreciated in social and human services. Psychology can benefit from this work because it maps my behavior, social functions and the therapeutic process of writing, critiquing, and performing an autobiographical play.

Because of the interdisciplinary focus of my work I am creating a fuller, more robust picture of motherhood, womanhood, and femininity that is rarely discussed in academic or community circles. Sociology, feminist studies, motherhood studies, and whiteness studies can all gain a more refined picture of the complex intersections between gender, sexuality, ability status, and familial composition. In the whole of academia there appears to be a lack of work on

women, by women, for women (Visweswaran, 1994). I want to continue doing interdisciplinary work that critiques patriarchy, family as a basic social institution, addresses violence against women, and centers the experiences of a diverse range of women. The work of performing testimonies of trauma is powerful and helps shape our historical narrative. I am focusing on women's relationships to other women and the power differentials between them in order to illustrate the lack of institutional support for mothers.

*ILL* is relevant in the arena of performance art and theatre because it blurs genres and does much of the same conceptual work that both disciplines employ. That being said, my comprehension in the field of art is somewhat lacking compared to my familiarity with feminist thought and motherhood studies. Without art I do not think I could function. Art shaped me into who I am today because it guides my personal journey for authenticity, meaning, and agency. Creating is the most powerful thing one can do. One can create a voice, a vision, a collective history, and a narrative that engages the mind, body, and soul.

Theatre in particular is a powerful tool because it combines the Cartesian mind/body split to create something new. My work across the disciplines of theatre, whiteness studies, and motherhood studies combines academic knowledge and the intersection of the mind and body in a way that is informed by and informing back to the larger theoretical conversation. My performance returns knowledge to the body where nontraditional ways of thinking can be experienced as legitimate knowledge. One must ask themselves what is gained from this act.

Feedback from Anonymous via Diversity Resource Center (DRC) participant survey 5/13/14

*Personal stories have the power to inspire and create social change. Our voices are strong and sharing our stories empowers others.*

Feedback from Anonymous via DRC participant survey 5/13/14

*From today's program I took away the fact that voice is something that's truly powerful.*

These comments reaffirm that something important is achieved through my work. I know I have succeeded when my work makes people feel, it makes them start conversations, confront their own demons, and want to create change. I am sharing a long-buried secret with the intent of bringing private problems to the public sphere. Accordingly, when people see my work I would like them to examine their own relationships with those they love, especially the women in their lives.

Feedback from Dr. Ed Chamberlain via personal communication 5/27/14

*From your performance the idea of voice really resonated with me. I was struck by the way voices influence us and how we sometimes struggle to find our own. Your play is one that gets people thinking reflectively about their own experiences and own family relationship. Family is a crucible for us as a society and you make the point that sometimes families are traumatizing. We must evaluate our own experiences and the web of power and privilege we inhabit.*

Feedback from Anonymous via DRC participant survey 5/13/14

*Sharing the difficult experiences of the everyday are important and part of creating social change by taking the secrecy and shame away.*

This play is about a transformation and expanding our vocabulary of motherhood, childhood, and sexuality. This is not just an individual burden. Part of middle class bourgeois propriety is re-traumatizing people who are victims and perpetuating false images of family life

which can prove absolutely torturous for people. This play serves as an outlet for those who are trying to find liberatory paths in the world.

Feedback from Anonymous via DRC participant survey 5/13/14

*Stereotypes surrounding motherhood are wrong and hurtful for the mothers and the children. They seriously impair the children's lens of expectations of the act.*

Feedback from Anonymous via DRC participant survey 5/13/14

*Motherhood has many traumatic experiences which women can grow, cope, and recover from with the help of surrogates.*

My goals and aspirations are to educate, uplift, and have people realize their own power, importance, and strength. People are still scared to talk about the content of my play and life—to admit that my mother raped and molested me and forced me to perform sex acts on her. Justice, for me, has been having this act acknowledged and validated as a result of doing this work. I am ashamed that no one helped me as a child. These acts were almost inconceivable to most because they violated the societal expectation that women are somehow more nurturing and mothering precisely because of their womanness. But this particular moment, this piece of activism, *ILL* is about learning to help myself find voice so that I may effectively help others do the same. Based upon my own reflection and the feedback I received over the course of three performances, my work is helping me to help others.

Selfishly, I want to continue the story of my motherline via theatre by creating a full, true, complete picture of my mother, grandmother, myself, and my daughter. I envision this as a trilogy of plays examining our interlocking relationships and the attendant power play. Although

this line of inquiry is meaningful to myself and others, I wish to relinquish my power by engaging in this process collaboratively with many authors and through the telling of many stories. What is next is really a continuation of *Momologues* (see Appendix A). *Momologues* is a theatrical project I started in early April 2014. Because of the last minute desire and drive to create *Momologues*, they are not formally a part of my thesis work as it pertains to this project defense. However, it is important that they appear here because of the function and purpose they serve.

For the purpose of gaining more context and insight into maternity I set out to interview women on campus. The goal was to investigate their relationship to the patriarchal institution of motherhood and for me to find out how other women experienced family, life, sexuality, gender, and other women. I created a series of monologues based upon the information from these interviews. These *Momologues* were performed as part of *Voices Made (M)other* on May 13, 2014. In the act of talking to women and creating characters from their experience I found an even greater sense of purpose and fulfillment than from writing about myself. I will continue this project even after I receive my degree.

Based on this project I want to start a writing and performance group for women where through the creation and performance of their own monologues, stories, or plays, they can learn to heal from injustice and fashion new ways of being. This work does not have to be dark, sad, and traumatic, but it needs to be honest, reflective, dialectical, and authentic. If done appropriately with intentionality and care the work I would like to do would be situated within the realm of applied theatre. I do not want this work to just be about my experience because the lack of institutional support for mothers and silence surrounding maternal abuse and mental illness extends far beyond me. I know this now after experiencing this scholarship process

wherein I read the literature, talked to women, and aired my own account of survival. I want to write and perform, but most of all, I want to *do*, change, listen, assist, and learn.

## References

- Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: New Press; Distributed by Perseus Distribution.
- Allen, B. J. (2010). *Difference matters: Communicating social identity* (2nd edition.). Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press Inc.
- Arendell, T. (2000). Conceiving and investigating motherhood: the decade's scholarship. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1192–1207.
- Benders-Hadi, N., Barber, M., & Alexander, M.J. (2012). Motherhood in women with serious mental illness. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 84, 65-72.
- Broude, N., Garrard, M. D., & Brodsky, J. K. (1994). *The power of feminist art: The american movement of the 1970s, history and impact*. New York, NY: H.N. Abrams.
- Carver, M. H. (1998). Review essay; Staging the self: feminist performance art and autobiographical performance. *Text & Performance Quarterly*, 18(4), 394.
- Conley, D. (2001). Universal freckle, or how I learned to be white. In B. Rasmussen, E. Klinenberg, I. Nexica & M. Wray (Eds.), *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (pp. 25-42). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Davis, A. Y. (2005). *Abolition democracy: beyond empire, prisons, and torture*. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.
- Davis, E. (1999). The daughter aka the adoptee. *Journal for the Association for Research on Mothering*, 1(1), 114-120.

- Deans, J. R. (2001). "Natural birth": An adoptee becomes a mother. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 3(1), 48-54.
- De Pisan, C. (1982). *The book of the city of ladies*. New York, NY: Persea Books.
- Feagin, J., Elias, S. (2012). Rethinking racial formation theory: A systemic racism critique. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(6), 932-960.
- Fields, J. (2012). Frontiers in feminist art history. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 33(2), 1-21.
- Fisher, A.S. (2009). Bearing witness: The position of theatre makers in the telling of trauma. In T. Prentki & S. Preston (Eds.), *The Applied Theatre Reader* (pp. 108-116). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Floyd, J. K. (2008). *Former foster care individual's experiences of racial/ethnic socialization and identity development: An exploratory study*. (Doctoral dissertation). Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey.
- Ford, S.C. (2008). My daughter, how do I teach you what I haven't learned?: A personal view of the impact of child abuse on mothering. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 10(2), 82-89.
- Fox, O. (2010). Once more with Feeling: An abbreviated history of feminist performance art. *Feminist Review*, (96), 107-121.
- Frankenberg, R. (2001). The mirage of an unmarked whiteness. In B. Rasmussen, E. Klinenberg, I. Nexica & M. Wray (Eds.), *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (pp. 72-96). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Fryd, V. G. (2007). Suzanne lacy's three weeks in may: Feminist activist performance art as "expanded public pedagogy." *NWSA Journal*, 19(1), 23–38.
- Gallagher, C. (1997). White racial formation: Into the twenty-first century. In R. Delgado, J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (pp. 6-11). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Goodman, L. (2000). *Mythic women/real women: Plays and performance pieces by women*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Gormley, L. (2007). The experiences of mothers of children of mixed heritage: The theme of the "body physical." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 9(2), 49-59.
- Green, F.J. (2008). Matroreform: Feminist mothers and their daughters creating feminist motherlines. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 10(2), 11-21.
- Grillo, T., Wildman, S. M. (1997). Obscuring the importance of race: The implications of making comparisons between racism and sexism (or other isms). In R. Delgado, J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (pp. 619-626). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Haney-López, I. (1996). *White by law: The legal construction of race*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Helms, J.E. (1990). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hughey, M. W. (2010). The (dis)similarities of white racial identities: The conceptual framework of "hegemonic whiteness." *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 33(8), 1289–1309.
- Hurford, D.K. M. (2001). *Running through the devil's club: A theatrical exploration in healing*. Edmonton, Alta.: River Books.

- Juno, A., & Vale, V. (1991). *Angry women*. San Francisco, Calif.: RE/Search Publications.
- Kawash, S. (2011). New directions in motherhood studies. *Signs*, 36(4), 969-1003.
- Kay, J. (1991). *The adoption papers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe.
- Kolchin, P. (2002). Whiteness studies: The new history of race in america. *The Journal of American History*, 89(1), 154–173.
- Landy, R. J., & Montgomery, D. T. (2012). *Theatre for change: Education, social action and therapy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lipsitz, G. (1998). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Lowinsky, N. (2000). Mothers of mothers and daughters: Reflections on the motherline. In A. O'Reilly, and S. Abby (Eds.), *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment and Transformation* (pp. 227-235). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Maatita, F. (2013). Creating a tapestry: Motherhood and womanhood across borders. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, 4(2), 34-46.
- MacKinnon, C. A. (1997). From practice to theory, or what is a white woman anyway?. In R. Delgado, J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (pp. 300-304). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Maher, J. (2011). Mothering in the twenty-first century: New pressures, old problems. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 26(70), 501–507.
- Martin, C. (1996). *A Sourcebook on Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Martinez, L. J. (2000). *Affective correlates of white racial identity development* (Dissertation). University of Washington, Seattle, WA.
- Mohanty, C. T., Riley, R. L., & Pratt. (2008). *Feminism and war: confronting US imperialism*. New York, NY: Zed Books.
- Moraga, C. (1997). La güera. In R. Delgado, J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (pp. 471-474). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (1983). *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of color*. New York, NY: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.
- Moravec, M. (2003) Mother art: Feminism, art and activism. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 5(1), 69-77.
- Nicholson, H. (2005). *Applied drama: The gift of theatre*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Reilly, A. (2006). Between baby and the bathwater: Some thoughts on a mother-centered theory and practice of feminist mothering. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 8(1,2), 323-330.
- Prentki, T., & Preston, S. (2009). *The applied theatre reader*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rich, A. (1986). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*. London: Virgo Press.
- Rosen, J., Lane, C. (1995) The sources of the bell curve. In R. Delgado, J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (pp. 528-529). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Rosenzweig, R. (2009) MotherArt and maternal health: Transformation from grief to compassion. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 11(1), 224-238.
- Striff, E. (1997). Bodies of evidence: Feminist performance art. *Critical Survey*, 9(1), 1-18.

Verbian, Channa (2006). White birth mothers of black/white biracial children: Addressing racialized discourses in feminist and multicultural literature. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 8(1,2), 213-222.

Visweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of feminist ethnography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Wong-Wylie, G. (2006). Images and echoes in matroreform: A cultural feminist perspective. *Journal for the Association for Research on Mothering*, 8(1,2), 135-146.

Woolf, V. (1989). *A room of one's own*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Appendix A- *Momologues*  
*Oil and Water*

She's always there for her grandchildren. They play lovingly—enchanted by their grandmother's smile, a warm embrace, and the faintest of whispering of "I love you." Animated and attentive to their needs, she's everything they need her to be.

Deep down I'm puzzled. I'm proud my stepmother has become that mothering figure that she could never be for me. It's as if something turned on inside of her as she saw her children's children before her.

My mother left my father and I at the age of two. It was difficult for my father and so he remarried when I was four. The woman he married, my stepmom, didn't have the capacity to deal with a step child. She was particularly curt with me because my grandparents spoiled me and they hated her. I see her now, only very briefly, and realize that she is to her grandchildren what my father's parents were to me.

For me, motherhood is about raising your children in a healthy way; a mother helps her kids to be happy, healthy and successful. A mother doesn't have to be blood or your "mom"—but she helps you develop, shows you affection, and shows you love.

I'm told the opposite of love is indifference. At least if someone hates you, there's an emotion there—there's a display of some discerning quality that sparks a reaction. I can begin to understand hate and its motivations, but indifference; I cannot understand my stepmother's indifference.

There was never any communication between us, and she could never relate to me, to any of us. Her and my father had three more children together. With the coming of each of my new sibling, she was less and less the parent she needed to be. I never felt love from her, hugging her was like hugging a cardboard cutout. Our most intimate of moments were the times she would have me curl her hair. That's the closest I ever felt to her—when I made her up.

But, now that I'm older and with children of my own, I don't place the blame entirely on my stepmom. She was somehow stunted, limited by her own demons, and sadly, unable to do anything about it. I have learned that she had her own secrets, trauma, and limitations. I understand that she did the best she could; she just couldn't pull herself together to be the mom I needed.

Thankfully, I had my mother from the time I was six onward to provide a refuge from my father and his wife. I'm lucky to have such an amazing support system that met my needs growing up, and I truly have to be understanding of the situation.

My stepmom is troubled, but she has found enough warmth inside herself to become an amazing grandparent and I see that as her gift to us children.

*Piss in a Cup*

*It was a routine check up  
I followed directions and pissed in the cup  
He wrote some questions, wrote something down  
And asked my mother to please come around  
My mind began to wander—what did this all mean?  
You're pregnant—about four weeks.*

Smiling, giggling, and excited

I can't believe the news

Everything I've ever wanted

has finally come true.

I peed on the stick

Waiting for something blue

About a minute later two lines appeared

Telling me it's you!

*I'm in utter shock—how could this be?  
It was just one time, he was a rebound, there's a mistake obviously  
I left the room to join my mom now waiting in the car,  
I broke down crying, fearful of punishment by far the worst I'll ever receive*

I might still be young, 17 no less;

But I'm happy and have been blessed

To be chosen to carry this life inside of me

Luckily I have support and the love of family

To guide me as I welcome my baby into this world.

*My mom stayed silent and finally muttered an “O shit”*

*Yep. I’m pregnant.*

*My heart sunk as it crossed my mind*

*How I must seem so unfit to parent, to make a good choice*

*To take my life into my own hands now.*

*She asked if I wanted to tell my dad*

*I didn’t know how he would react.*

I’ll have to start making preparations

Scheduling appointments and trying to avoid unnecessary complications

No lunchmeat, caffeine, or fish with high mercury levels

I must be diligent though because my body is a vessel

For this surprise that awaits in the next nine months

Wow. It really couldn’t come soon enough.

*I was surprised by her silent support*

*She never told me “keep it, adoption, think about abortion”*

*But I could feel it; it was making weird things happen*

*I was sick in the mornings and my body started to fatten*

*Things were already changing and I needed a concrete plan*

*I felt hopeless, young, scared, as if I were less than*

I found out some great news

my friend, she’s pregnant too!

I think we are both about eleven weeks along

Can you believe it?

We’ll be moms before too long.

*This isn't my plan for life*

*You deserve so much more*

*Than I can give to you*

*That's for sure*

You are finally here!

I won't let anything happen to you my dear

I promise myself to you from this day on

To give you the world—because I am your mom

*Goodbye.*

Hello.

*Like a Wild Horse*

I was adopted, beaten, abused, and taken for granted.

I was adopted at two to less than a perfect household.

I was shy at school, always trying to mask the blemishes rearing their ugly heads.

I was a good liar. I had to be. The teachers could never find out what was happening at home.

I was grateful for the two lunch ladies, Margie and Edna, for taking me under their wing.

I was burnt by my mom. Cigarette burns all up and down my legs. I couldn't stay with her.

I was holding it all in. I had to be perfect and strong. I couldn't cry because if I let her break my spirit, I felt like I would die.

I was a runaway. I left the house at fourteen and hitchhiked to my mom's friend's house. She fought for me and I was placed in foster care.

I was determined to go. I was in a group home at the time and decided that was it. I ran away at sixteen and found myself with a twenty-one year old man.

I was used to being abused. It only made sense that I ended up in these types of relationships.

I was seven months pregnant and he beat me. He punched and punched and kicked.

I was scared to death. At sixteen I didn't know anything. My stomach hurt, it ached so badly. I sat on the toilet and cried out in fear as a dark blue limb began to descend from my body.

I was screaming for help and no one was coming. I thought my insides were falling out. He hit me so hard; I knew I was going to die.

Finally the fire department came and helped deliver my son. He was so tiny. I followed him to the hospital where he died that following day. What a precious gift he was; I got to place my hand in his and feel the whole of his hand curl around my finger.

After that I became catatonic and a couple of months later I was expecting another. This time around I would be a single mom and nature would give me twenty five years, not hours, with my son.

I did everything I could for him, but he still ended up with the wrong crowd. He lost his life to drugs, and once more I laid my dear son to rest.

There are only so many things one can do to make loss more bearable. I would pray. I had to go on, there was no other choice. I had to be brave for myself because nobody else would be. I am compelled to help others because of the profound loss I endured. You just have to keep going.

I pictured myself at my own funeral. Who would be there? What would they say? Would I be buried in a box or burned into a tin can? I thought about it in the deep recesses of my mind, but my own death was never an option.

School saved me; education is the best thing I have ever done. I lived in a cemetery for nine days as I waited for my financial aid check to come. Even though it is hard, it is where I feel valued, appreciated, acknowledged, and alive.

I am funny, smart, dedicated, persevering, and I love to cook.

*It's Not a Phase*

A mom is any human being who takes sole responsibility of another living thing. They are nurturing and caring and don't take the attitude that this is something they HAVE to do.

Motherhood is acting selflessly for others; selfless out of care for other people.

I do think mothering is much unappreciated, there's not enough emphasis and appreciation for women who are mothers.

I don't ever want to have children.

My own mother loathed me for a long time. I thought she was amazing and strong when I was younger, but around twelve or thirteen I realized that wasn't the full picture. My mom was really depressed and took a lot of pills. She went to therapy and kept a journal. Being young and stupid I went through my mother's journal. I came across an entry where she wrote about how much she regretted ever having me.

My mom was in college when she had me. She had to give up everything. She always compares me to my older sister who she got pregnant with at thirteen. Since then my mom has been a jaded person.

My mom's second husband was extremely abusive towards me and my two younger brothers. He was just absolute shit. My junior year of high school Child Protective Services visited me at school and inquired about what was going on at home. I lied to them.

I grew up in that moment because I had to forgive my parents. Through it all, my mom deserves someone to love her. I can't walk around harboring that hatred towards her.

We have a sort of working relationship. We don't talk about things if she's not happy and we don't ever go in depth about things. I still can't talk about the abuse with my mother or her own past. So long as we abide by these rules, we can tolerate one another.

I expect something so much bigger and greater for myself. I am supposed to do great things with my life and children stifle that. I feel like it is the "easy" way to just have kids and live that stereotypical life. I have a bigger calling than just touching the lives of one or two kids. I want to change children's lives on a global scale. My passion is for all kids to have access to education in order to have the lives the dream of.

I just hope people can take me seriously and comprehend that just because a woman doesn't want kids, it doesn't make her any less of a woman or human being for that matter. It's not just a phase. It is who I am.

*Destiny*

Being a mom is the hardest thing I have ever done, especially without a role model. You have an idea of how to mother but you don't quite know the right path. It was my destiny to be my children's mother.

My mother was born April 6, 1950. My mother is one of thirteen children. Her family moved around from Arkansas, Alabama, and Oklahoma because they were sharecroppers. They lived in a sharecropper's shack while they picked cotton in the fields. The kids received a very sporadic education and my mother never made it past the eighth grade. They were all part of the second great migration and worked as migrant workers in the orchards of Arizona.

My grandfather locked three of his granddaughters, including my mother, in a room and sold them as prostitutes. At fifteen she was a stripper and at seventeen she met my father who had just gotten out of prison. My dad was a drug runner and it became a family business. They used fruit stands as a front for their operation.

My mother and father had the ideology of conspiracy. The whole family was always running. We all lived in complete and utter destitution. They taught us that doctors were vampires and killers, they practiced some twisted religion, and they tried to get all of us kids to do meth.

My relationship with my mother is tumultuous. Our family is rife with criminals, drug addicts, and sexual abusers. I love my mom and I don't blame her for all of this because she never had a chance for survival. I feel bad for her. She never physically abused the kids, did not speak to them in a derogatory fashion, she was very sweet, but she didn't protect us kids. It is not enough to love your children; you have to protect your kids.

Foster care gave me a chance. I never lived in a house before. I never ate at a restaurant. I never had a phone. I stopped talking for a year after I was placed in foster care because I thought people would think I'm a freak.

I had my daughter at nineteen almost twenty. I was terrified of making mistakes, what do you do? I was scared. I asked my mom for advice and she told me that I was supposed to be a mom and that if I loved my baby I would do what was right.

My second baby came at twenty four. At that time I wanted ten kids. I wasn't scared at all, but I was tired.

The third child came at twenty eight. After two, my only thought was "I got this."

My youngest son has cancer. At four we were told he only had eighteen months to live. My thought was, "how do I get all three kids through this?" I didn't want them to place the grief and blame on themselves. We had to get through this together.

At thirteen my daughter turned to drugs to soothe herself. What resources do I use to get through to someone at thirteen? What about people who don't want to be reached? But, I do believe it was my destiny to be my children's mother. Because of what I have been through, I am strong enough to support my children and give them the love and protection that they deserve.

My story could have gone the other way. I've made lots of bad choices but I am the happiest woman you will meet. I am so lucky because I got out.

*I Am Proud To Be My Mother*

I'm a part of the privileged middle class. My story is probably boring and rife with, you know, "stereotypical problems" but I would say that my relationship with my mom is very interesting and rather contentious.

She is an absolute perfectionist, very rigid, but sensitive. My mom had lots of expectations for us kids; she was the enforcer and disciplinarian.

She was the type of woman who would assume things and take things very personally—often the wrong way. With others she would often go out of her way to be helpful. She was patient and took the time to try and understand where the person was coming from.

She worked full time as an educator focused on special-ed. I never really saw her patience and compassion but it was most certainly there.

We always and I mean always, butt heads as a teen. From twelve to eighteen, it was incredibly difficult for us to get along with one another. It was really hard then because I always felt as though I couldn't do anything right.

After high school I won a one year solo rotary trip to France. During this time I was finally alone and realized how lucky I was to have such an excellent mom.

I was able to begin empathizing with my mom and I could see how overwhelmed she must have felt all that time as I was growing up. She was always there for my sister and I in every single way. My mom was always supportive of our decisions, even if they were the wrong ones. She never forgot any of our events, appointments or engagements, she was active in the community, and she even made us lunch every single day.

I hear all the time how I am so much like my mother. At sixteen I would have actively resisted the label of being like my mom, but now I wear being like my mom as a badge of honor. I can now fully see my mother for who she is—damn near a martyr—she really gives people *everything*.

I am proud to be my mother.

*Protector*

My mom has a good heart. She makes people feel comfortable and welcome. She's really loveable and loyal. So loyal that my mom and dad have been together since they were fourteen years old, but that's the type of woman she is.

But the story, the real story, the real story is my mom herself and how much she provides for us. My mom, she keeps everyone together, she's strong, kind, tender and protective.

She's always there for my brothers and I—she has a good heart and makes people feel comfortable and welcome.

I love her because she struggled for a long time but she made it look so effortless. She always cares for other people and still puts us first.

When she first came to the United States in the 1990s she worked factory jobs and had to put her three kids in daycare. I remember my younger brother would cry and scream and he hated it there. My mom decided to open her own daycare in order to take care of us and she opened her home to all the neighbor's kids too. She ran that place from '92 or '93 up until 2011. Now she's opened a new daycare center and continues to care for people and their children.

My mom plays an important role as a mediator between my dad and I. You know, in my culture they're big on purity and saving yourself for marriage, but that didn't happen. When my dad found out, he got angry and called me names and he threw things at me because he was disappointed in me. My mom took all the blows and put herself in between my father and I. She shielded me and I grew really close to her in that moment.

My mom is a protector through and through. I learned what motherhood is from her. It's about protecting your kids by all means; when your kids are in trouble, you support them, you're always there for them and you don't kick them out at age eighteen. You have to be able to give your kids love, show them responsibility, hug them, but be able to discipline them.

My brother was into meth and pills and my mom fought for him every step of the way. Three times she paid to send him to rehab, but she never kicked him out of the house. My mom was very supportive in trying to help him. She was there so he would never hit rock bottom by himself.

My mom takes care of my other brother's kids because two are autistic and my brother's girlfriend can't handle dealing with three kids. My mom doesn't want him to end up being alone so she does what she can to make the relationship easier for my brother and his girlfriend.

She's always doing whatever's necessary for us.

My mom even supported my father and his other daughter by not letting other talk bad about him for not being there for his daughter. He didn't even know he had another daughter. The lies

people would tell about my father and our family left my mom absolutely heartbroken, but she still supported each and every one of us.

She's a good woman with a good head on her shoulders. Our protector.

### *Twinning*

What if you were a single mom expecting your third child?

She tried to abort me but they said she was too far along.

*Not only does it scare me to be a parent, but I feel like kids get ruined so easy. What if I have a kid and they are kind of people that feel like they are entitled to something? I don't want that. I don't want kids that are broken. And I feel like I could break them very easy. The hurtful things my mother used to say like, she used to call my twin fat all the time. Those types of things ruin kids and I am scared that I could ruin them.*

*My mom told me that she would try to abort me as a child. I think that kind of damages people. It was like part of her story, like when you're a kid and you ask "how did you meet my father?," you know that kind of thing, it's like "Oh yeah, I tried to abort you." That's really fucked up to say to somebody.*

What if someone told you every day that they wanted to abort you? How would you feel?

Really though, she was pregnant with twins. It was my sister and I in there that she wanted to kill.

*Being a twin you develop that bond with someone that you don't have with anyone else.*

*You don't ever have a best friend growing up because the person that you are closest with or the person who knows the most about you is your twin. I fought that and so did she when we were growing up until we were about sixteen...seventeen...and we spent most of our time together and we developed a bond that is deeply profound. You sit down with both of us and we have the same mannerisms, we get the same jokes, it is just somebody who gets you completely.*

*My mom let us be who we were individually. She never dressed us alike or encouraged us to do the same things. But, you know, when she called us it was always "Hey, twins!" She still mixes up our names when she talks to us on the phone because it was always "twins" or "girls." My older sister, who is three years older than us, always felt left out, and because of that my mom sort of babied her. You could tell she played favorites on my older sister, she still does.*

What if the person who is supposed to devote themselves to you and your betterment can't move past themselves?

She has a way of recentering herself and her experiences in every single conversation.

*I was getting a scholarship from this hospital out in Forks because I was going to school for physical therapy at that time and my mom was like "oh yeah, you're getting a scholarship, let's go out there and spend the day, talk to the people, it'll be awesome." So I get out there and we start talking about the scholarship and what my plans are and then they get into this*

*conversation about my mom being a nurse and chemical dependency counselor and then she just brings it all back to herself. We sit there and talk about her for an hour after only talking about me for fifteen minutes. She does that sort of thing all the time.*

*My last birthday she came into my work, my husband was in Afghanistan, and my sister had booked a trip to Israel because my father is Jewish and we get a birthright trip, and she booked it the same week as our birthday. We never spent a birthday apart in twenty six years and I was upset so I decided I would go to work and my mom shows up and she's there to make me feel better about being at work on my birthday and having no one to celebrate it with. So she goes in, and I'm bartending and a girl from work comes up to her and goes "Oh, you're Serena's mom! You're here to celebrate her birthday?" And my mom goes "oh, no. It's my birthday" and I said "No, mom your birthday is in August, how do you forget that?!" and she replied "Well, it's like my birthday because I gave birth on this day."*

*And that's what I mean about she's selfish. She makes absolutely everything about her. It is as if she's the only person in the room. I really think she has to live her life through her kids and through other people because she didn't get to do the same things I did growing up. She didn't go to college and she didn't get married.*

What if the woman who birthed you never felt like your mom growing up?

*From the time I was twelve to about seventeen and a half she was in a long term relationship with this guy and she was at his house about 99% of the time and would only come home one weekend every month. She was just there to stock the fridge and then leave. My mom tried to come back into my life and boss me around and do things like "Oh, I'm your mother you're going to listen to me" and I said "well no bitch, you haven't been in my life....so no!"*

*I just don't have a good relationship with mothers. My mom never wanted me and my grandmother, she wasn't my real grandmother. My great grandma was crazy. She was in the bootlegging business and married about five or six times. She shot her first and second husbands. She was a wild one.*

*I'm thankful though, to have my twin, my sister, to go through everything with me and support me like nobody else ever could. We're forever in this together.*

*Confession*

Look, I know that your primary urges in this situation are to be a parent first and worry about the future of your child and what this situation implies...but I'm asking you to just consider where I am coming from for a second. I don't think you understand what happened between us. You heard his side of the story and I'm sure that that version does me no justice, but he had to learn that there are consequences for his actions. I knew no better way than to try and teach him that the hard way because I have been through this too many times to just sit back and let it happen again. He needs help. You need to understand that there was a great deal more that happened between us before you walked in. I had to, please understand where I am coming from, I respect you, and your family and this household; it is not my intention to cause more pain than necessary and to cause your family hardships, but I HAD TO call the police. I had to show him that there are consequences for his actions.

No, before you walked down the stairs he wasn't just yelling at me, but he had a pistol and he loaded it and was threatening me about this that and the other and waving it in my face and saying he was going to kill my whole family and my sister, and we don't know shit about bein' hard cause he is in a gang, and just all this really demeaning, threatening, evil, hateful stuff. That was the first time I have ever been confronted by your son in this manner. He has done crazy things and I have seen him get in fights and we've had our battles, but he has never disrespected me like that and threatened not only me but my family too. By the time you were coming down stairs he heard you and threw the pistol in his drawer. So when you walked in, you just heard us yelling about my sister and the things he said about my family, I wanted to just get in the car and leave with you so bad. I wanted to run away.

I have no idea what could have possessed your son to think that it was okay to say those things and, and, well and to wave a loaded pistol in my face and tell me how much he fuckin hates me. I was scared. I hope you understand that. Now you know, now you know that I faced the possibility he would have pulled the trigger, I just sat there as he got louder and louder and more reckless. But I can't just let that go...I love you and it's so hard for me to even be here because I feel like everyone hates me! I can't imagine what you really want to say to me for putting your son in jail and for causing you this stress, but please don't hate me, please don't, I just want him to get help. He is so depressed. I just can't live my life around that or around him anymore. He was my best friend, and I love him as a person, I love that side of him that is sweet, and funny, and caring...but then he goes completely 180 at the drop of a hat and becomes the best and worst person I have ever known.

So please give my regards to your family and understand that I do love you guys, I do care about Jon, but he had a gun, and he has never, and I mean NEVER, done some shit like that around me. I couldn't let that go.

*When my husband had pushed me to the ground, my sister had called the police. She thought she was doing the right thing. He went to jail. I had to refinance my house so I could pay his bail, and I am still working to put that money back in our pockets. You can tell me all of this, and you can tell me you were scared, but I still don't understand. You don't do that to someone you love who you have grown up with, you don't do this to us when you know we have so many problems. Please just leave us alone.*

*Grounded and Centered*

One can never know what self-sacrifice is going to feel like. My experience of motherhood has been exciting and scary. I never thought I could love someone as much as I love my daughter. Just watching her sleep and every time she says something I just stare at her. I'm amazed by her every single day.

My experience of motherhood has been—it just isn't what I expected it to be. I didn't expect it to be so hard at times. I guess I expected it to be like, you know, you have your kid; you love your little baby so much. You know that you are supposed to love your baby so much and they are supposed to come before you, but you don't know what it feels like until you have your kid.

The hardest parts are when I see my daughter become sad because her father is not there. The other hard stuff is when she doesn't listen. But what parents doesn't become frustrated when their child doesn't listen?


When it comes to her, I have to think outside myself. She's relying on me and I have to make sure I nurture a good little girl. I have to be mindful. Things as simple as being vegetarian and providing her a healthy and nutritious diet is about me being selfless and mindful. It is easy to just give her Cheetos or corndogs and send her to bed, but if I want to be a mindful parent, I don't want to do what's easy. Her mind is like a sponge; she's learning all the time.

In becoming a mother I was really able to actualize more of myself and think of myself in new ways. I think that in becoming a mother you have to be selfless, but you don't have to lose yourself. It is helping me find myself, because I have a kid now and I can't be lost forever. I have to know who I am so my daughter can know who I am and who she is. It has been helping me to find my grounding not only as a financially stable and independent adult, but as a person. I don't want her to see someone who is confused and all over the place but I want her to see someone that's put together and is coming to the place of knowing who she is.

I want to be the best I can be now, for her.

It is through her I stay grounded and centered.

## Artifacts



# Voices Made (M)other

**William Philip Hall**  
**May 13, 2014 6:30PM**

Join us in a staged reading of *ILL* and *Momologues*, two plays written and performed by Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies student Lizbett Bengé.

Themes addressed throughout these plays include: motherhood, mental illness, sexual and physical abuse, grief, and healing after loss.

contains mature content

DIVERSITY

Original image by: Fundora, Y. (Artist). (2012). Yemaya [Digital Art], Retrieved April, 5, 2014, from: <http://fineartamerica.com/featured/yemaya-yolanda-fundora.html>



Smith, L. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled* [Photograph].



Smith, L. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled* [Photograph].



Cox, A. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled*  
[Photograph].



Cox, A. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled*  
[Photograph].



Smith, L. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled*  
[Photograph].



Cox, A.  
(Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled*  
[Photograph].



Cox, A. (Photographer).  
(2014). *Untitled*  
[Photograph].



Cox, A. (Photographer). (2014).  
*Untitled* [Photograph].