

GIRL Shakes Loose

Music and Lyrics by Imani Uzuri

Book and Lyrics by Zakiyyah Alexander

Poetry by Sonia Sanchez

Directed by May Adrales

A Penumbra Theatre Company production

April 18 through May 14, 2017

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

Educational Tools
Penumbra Theatre Study Guide

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

Penumbra Theatre Company occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An Exploratory Essay by Sarah Bellamy

The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or “mediums,” to communicate meaning. The artist’s effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist’s “voice.” Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist’s perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as “artistic commentary.” It conveys the artist’s intent, or impetus for creating something.

The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will “read” (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

Summary

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the African roots of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was The African Grove Theater in New York City. It was founded by William Henry Brown and James Hewlett, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where storytelling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.¹

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel. These racist depictions would be

¹ For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, William Wells Brown, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. Minstrelsy was very popular in the 19th Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in blackface would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, Jim Crow, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as The Harlem Renaissance. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by Willis Richardson.² Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and parody it for audiences. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were particularly

² *Ibid.*, 165.

concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes' famous poem "Notes on Commercial Theater":

You've taken my blues and gone --
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones
All kinds of Swing Mikados
And in everything but what's about me --
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me --
Black and beautiful --
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.³

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Harold Cruse, Ray Durem, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry's famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (Lloyd Richards) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was Penumbra Theatre Company in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director Lou Bellamy, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30

³ Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright August Wilson said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style an eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.⁴

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike

⁴ August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

GIRL – at the beginning of it all. Late 20's-30s. Hard shell which needs to crumble.

CHORUS will play a variety of roles, including:

ELLA – Beautiful, wants a marriage, mature in spirit.

VERONICA – hippie, artistic, Brooklyn chic.

JAMES – sassy, a little flip.

INTERVIEWER #1, #2, and #3

AUNT LUCILLE – older, Southern, doesn't take any bullshit/old school.

BARRY – smooth talker; been around the block more than once.

EDDIE – GIRL's ex-boyfriend, Southern, sexy/alpha male.

MAMA – tired and weary; has been disappointed.

JANEY/MARCY – GIRL's childhood best friends.

PASTOR – Southern orator.

LUC – genderqueer, former dancer, an unexpected character.

MARTIKA, BO, KYLE, GINA – non-conforming San Francisco roommates

SYNOPSIS

Why is it so hard to grow up? GIRL is a good girl: smart, beautiful, a little rebellious, or, as her family would say, “hard-headed.” For the most part, she has played by the rules, finishing college and then graduate school. She is perfectly poised for success, but something is in her way. Floundering in love, life, and career, GIRL goes on a journey to discover what she’s missing, but wherever she goes, there she is. Eventually, GIRL learns that what she’s seeking is herself: powerful, grounded, and so much stronger than she thought. A groundbreaking new musical by Zakiyyah Alexander and Imani Uzuri, *GIRL Shakes Loose Her Skin* is the soulful story of one woman’s search for herself. Based on the lush poetry of Sonia Sanchez and featuring a stirring original score, you won’t want to miss this world premiere. Brimming with hope, humor, and headstrong passion, you’ll cheer GIRL on, remembering your own journey along the way.

SETTING (as written by the playwright)

Present Day

Act One: New York City

Act Two: Outside Atlanta

Act Three: San Francisco/Bay Area

About the Writers...



Harrison David Rivers' plays have been performed and developed at The Public Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, Lincoln Center, LAByrinth Theatre Company, The Drama League, The Movement Theatre Company, Diversionary (San Diego), About Face (Chicago), TheatreLAB (Richmond), Theatre Latte Da (Minneapolis) and The American Airlines Theatre on Broadway. Awards include the McKnight Fellowship for Playwrights, the Many Voices Jerome Fellowship, New Dramatists' Van Lier Fellowship, New York Theatre Workshop's Emerging Artist of Color Fellowship, Aurora Theatre's Global Age Project Prize, New York Stage and Film's Founders Award and a GLAAD Media Award for best Off-Off Broadway play. Harrison is an alum of the Public Theater's Emerging Writers' Group, Interstate 73, NAMT, The Lincoln Center Directors' Lab and he was the

2016 Playwright-in-Residence at the Williamstown Theatre Festival. He is currently a Core Writer, and a member of the Board, at the Playwrights' Center. BA: Kenyon College; MFA: Columbia School of the Arts.



Sarah Bellamy is Artistic Director for Penumbra Theatre Company. She has designed several programs that engage patrons in critical thinking, dialogue, and action around issues of race and social justice. Select programs include Penumbra's RACE Workshop and the Summer Institute, a leadership development program for teens to practice art for social change. A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, Ms. Bellamy also holds an M.A. in the Humanities from The University of Chicago. She teaches at Macalester College, The University of Minnesota and is currently the Visiting Professor of Theatre and Culture at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She serves as a board member for Theatre

Communications Group. She is a 2015 Bush Fellow.

GIRL SHAKES LOOSE

An essay by Harrison David Rivers

1.

“You can make me be myself be myself / I wanna shake loose my skin!”
-Alexander and Uzuri, *Girl Shakes Loose*⁵

Girl Shakes Loose is a new American musical with book and lyrics by Zakiyyah Alexander, music and lyrics by Imani Uzuri, and featuring the poetry of Black Arts Movement luminary Sonia Sanchez.

Descended from such female-authored musicals as *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope* (1971) by Micki Grant⁶, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) by Ntozake Shange⁷, *I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road* (1978) by Nancy Ford and Gretchen Cryer⁸, *The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin* (2000) by Kirsten Childs⁹ and *Miss You Like Hell* (2016) by Quiara Hudes and Erin McKeown¹⁰, *Girl Shakes Loose*, according to its creators, isn't a big story.

“It's a specific character journey,” explains Alexander. “It isn't about everything in the world. It's about one girl's journey of growing up. How does a girl become a woman, and how

⁵ Alexander, Zakiyyah, Imani Uzuri, and Sonia Sanchez. *Girl Shakes Loose*. Penumbra Theatre, Minneapolis, 71.

⁶ Grant's *Don't Bother Me...* had its first staging at [Ford's Theatre](#) in [Washington, D.C.](#) in 1971. It opened on Broadway on April 19, 1972 at the [Playhouse Theatre](#). It ran for 1,065 performances.

⁷ Shange's *for colored girls...* opened at the Public Theater in June 1976. It transferred to Broadway's Booth Theatre in September where it ran for two years. It was only the second play by a black woman to reach Broadway, preceded by Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

⁸ Ford and Cryer's *I'm Getting My Act Together...* opened at the Public Theater in June 1978. It ran for 1,165 performances.

⁹ Childs' *The Bubbly Black Girl...* opened at Playwrights Horizons in 2000.

¹⁰ Hudes and McKeown's *Miss You Like Hell* opened at La Jolla Playhouse in 2016.

does a girl become an independent woman who isn't needing relationships, work or something else ... to define her?"¹¹

Set in the present day, the musical follows *Girl* as she travels to three different geographic locations – Oakland, New York City and Elberton, a small black community on the outskirts of Georgia – in search of herself.

Alexander and Uzuri began work on *Girl Shakes Loose* in 2011 with support from a Creativity Fund Grant from New Dramatists (ND).¹² “I [had] always planned to write a musical before I finished my fellowship at ND,” Alexander says. “I had bounced ideas around with another possible collaborator, but then Imani mentioned wanting to do something with Sonia Sanchez’s texts, and I agreed on the condition that it be an actual full-length musical.”¹³ Uzuri reached out to Sanchez and was immediately granted permission to use her poetry. Sanchez’s only request was that they use poems from her full body of work rather than from a single volume. Alexander and Uzuri agreed.

The collaborators identified a number of Sanchez’s poems that resonated with them and began piecing them together into a narrative. “Sonia has lived such a vibrant life,” says Uzuri. “She is a traveler. She is an overqualified black girl (echoing a line from the musical). She’s an activist. She’s one of the founders of black studies in this country. She was in the black arts movement. She’s played a pretty important role in helping to shape and frame culturally

¹¹ Dorsey, Kristina. “*Girl Shakes Loose* is featured at the O’Neill Music Theater Conference.” *The Day*, 1 July 2016, <http://www.theday.com/article/20160701/ENT10/160709959>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

¹² *Girl Shakes Loose* has also received developmental support from The Lark, the O’Neill National Music Conference, The Rockefeller Brothers’ Fund and Joe’s Pub at the Public Theater.

¹³ Alexander, Zakiyyah. Personal interview. 15 March 2017.

what we know in this country."¹⁴ Being granted access to Sanchez's full body of work allowed Alexander and Uzuri to see her growth as a writer over time. "We were able," Alexander reflects, "to pick and choose poems from Sanchez's journey from girlhood to womanhood and [then] to think about how those poetic moments could connect with our protagonist's journey."¹⁵

The result of their efforts is a poetic and uniquely personal musical about one black woman's attempts to figure out her life. Featuring an eclectic score whose sound ranges from blues to gospel to 90s R&B and lyrics that speak directly to the soul, *Girl Shakes Loose* is both a tribute to the revolutionary black artists and thinkers of the last century who fought for equality of representation and a bold declaration to today's world that the work is far from done.

2.

"...it was ... a period when we began to say that we had to move beyond cussing out white folk, and start to do the work that we needed to do for our survival."
-Sonia Sanchez¹⁶

Sonia Sanchez was born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham, Alabama on September 9, 1934 to Wilson L. Driver and Lena (Jones) Driver.

They put an 'ia' on it, "Wilonia," and I think the most significant thing in Wilsonia is "will." In fact, the sisters named me. They expected a boy, and so they had no name for me. The only name my father had for me was Wilson, since he wanted a boy, and so the sisters said that's alright, they made up a name for me, and so they named me Wilsonia Benita.¹⁷

¹⁴ Uzuri, Imani. Personal interview. 15 March 2017.

¹⁵ Alexander, Zakiyyah. Personal interview. 23 March 2017.

¹⁶ Highsmith-Taylor, Zala. "Interview with Sonia Sanchez." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 22.

¹⁷ Finch, Annie. "Form and Spirit: A Conversation with Sonia Sanchez." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 42.

After her mother died “giving birth to twins when she was one year old,” Sanchez went to live with her paternal grandmother and other relatives for several years. “She [my grandmother] came and got my sister and me because she had decided to raise us “correctly!” as members in good-standing of the A.M.E. Zion Church where she was a deaconess.

I remember that Mama used to have the “Sisters” (church women) over to her house each Saturday to talk, to cook for the Sunday dinners, to heal each other, etc. And these sessions were really important to me. I knew that those women were transmitting knowledge to me... wisdom to me that I would keep all my life. And I can remember looking at them and thinking that I want to be just like them. I wanted to be like them because I saw and heard power there. I heard an awareness there. I heard a people very much assured.¹⁸

“Mama” raised Sanchez and her sister Pauline with a firm but gentle hand. Sanchez recalls, “I played hard as a child—usually with boys. I would come in the house real ragged from my hard playing, and people would cluck their tongues, shake their heads and say, “You know, this girl just ain’t gon’ be!” But Mama would always respond, “Just let her be! Just let her be!”¹⁹

Early on, it was made clear to Sanchez that her sister Pauline was the beautiful one and that she was the smart one. In an interview with David Reich she commented that, “It’s amazing how your family will tell you at a young age what you will do in life. You pick up on it and do it. And so I spent the rest of my life being smart, whatever that means. And I guess my sister spent the rest of her life being beautiful.”²⁰

Sanchez cites her grandmother’s particular way of speaking – her “Black dialect” – as the beginnings of her interest in poetry. “She would say things in a certain way, and I would repeat

¹⁸ Highsmith-Taylor, 17-18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Reich, David. “As Poets, As Activists: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez.” *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 83.

it. And she'd look up at me. I would kind of do it again, smile, go off in a corner someplace, and go on saying it. Some people felt I was mocking her. I was not. It was just that something in my ear told me it was a brilliant way of saying it. So I would repeat it."²¹

When her grandmother died in 1940, the six-year-old was bereft. "The response to my grandmother's death made me tongue-tied, and after that I stuttered."²² "I would go, 'Det-det-det-uhm'; I would go 'Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah—I.' I was a very introspective kind of child as a consequence of that, and I started to write these little things on paper, and someone finally told me, 'That's a poem,' and I said 'Oh!'"²³

In 1943, Sanchez moved to Harlem to live with her father, sister and her stepmother. Sanchez continued to write, though she didn't show her work to anyone.

"My first real poem," Sanchez has noted, "if you can call a ten-year-old's scribbles poems, was about my grandmother, memories of her that began to come back in a very sharp fashion in New York." The catalyst for the composition was the family's new surroundings. "We were not accustomed to living in a small apartment, or to a bedroom window that faced a blank wall... The poem was about Mama and how she let me run; I ran with the boys instead of playing with dolls. She allowed that. I could come home with my dresses torn and she'd say, 'Don't put those on her, she's not a fancy girl.'"²⁴

²¹ Johnson-Bailey, Juanita. "Sonia Sanchez: Telling What We Must Hear." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 71.

²² Ibid.

²³ Melhem, D.H. *Heroism in the New Black Poetry: Introductions and Interviews*. University Press of Kentucky, 2015, p. 148.

²⁴ Leibowitz, Herbert. "Sonia Sanchez: An Interview." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, vols. 12 and 13, nos. 2 and 1, 1985, pp. 357-68.

Sanchez's creative life remained a secret until one day when her stepmother called her into the kitchen.

You know how children wash dishes sometimes. I mean the dishes aren't clean, and she had, the way mothers do, she had decided to fill up that sink with hot water again, and she proceeded to put the dishes—all the dishes—back into the sink. She said they were greasy; what a terrible job I had done. And so when I heard her call, I ran, because the kind of call she actually sent into that bedroom was like, "You'd better get here in one minute, Sonia." So, I was writing a poem, and I left the poem on the bed, something I never did... And I ran in there and I said, "Just a minute." She says, "Right now, young lady." So I was—sort of like I had to do it at that point. Well, while I was washing dishes, out comes my sister with the poem in her hand, and I reached for it with my soapy hands, and she pulled away, and the whole family was in the kitchen, and she started to read this poem that I had written.²⁵

Sanchez was mortified. "They all laughed," she has said. "I don't really remember it as cruel laughter, but I was a very sensitive little girl. So I was very much upset, and after that I began hiding my poems."²⁶ In order to avoid her family's judgment, Sanchez would pursue her literary interests in the middle of the night. "I would... get up and go to the bathroom when I was supposed to be... sleeping, and sit on the toilet and read. I used to keep books underneath the bathtubs, old-fashioned bathtubs—they had a lot of space underneath... So I'd come into the bathroom and read from about three until six in the morning, or write, and keep my little book."²⁷

Sanchez remembers being exposed to the poems of Phyllis Wheatley at about this time. "I used to go into the library every day—every day! There was a black woman who was a librarian at the library I went to at 145th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway who gave

²⁵ Melhem, 148.

²⁶ Cornwell, Anita. "Attuned to the Energy: Sonia Sanchez." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, pp. 3-4.

²⁷ Melhem, 149.

me one of the major anthologies of African American poetry to read. And she gave me a book of poetry by Alexander Pushkin which I was fascinated by.”²⁸ That same librarian was also the first to introduce Sanchez to the poems of Langston Hughes.

Though an avid reader, writer and strong student, Sanchez continued to stutter until she was sixteen. She recalled:

We were in a speech class, and the most miserable time for me was to get up and give a speech, or to open my mouth and say anything. I just seldom talked to anyone, period... So when I got up to give my speech... I took my nails and literally dug my nails into my hand like this [*Gestures*] And when I finished, I saw blood. And every time I heard a stutter begin, I would just go—[*Gestures again*].²⁹

“The difficult part about being a stutterer,” she has said, “is that he or she always hears the stutters, you see, in the back of the head. So for years, even though I didn’t stutter, I always heard the stuttering... It’s almost ironical that I decided to go into something which required talk, speech, whatever. I don’t know why I chose that.”³⁰

Sanchez took a single Creative Writing course while enrolled at Hunter College, from which she graduated with a degree in Political Science in 1955. “I took a writing class and I was wiped out by this man who was concerned about the work that I was writing.”³¹ “I remember one of the stories was about my father and some of the trials he had gone through. The professor wrote on it, ‘Things are not that terrible.’ And he gave me a C+. So I wrote this story about the mirror beginning to talk to me. Don’t you know the professor wrote on it, ‘I’m mighty

²⁸ Kelly, Susan and Sonia Sanchez. “Discipline and Craft: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez.” *African American Review*, vol. 34, no. 4 (Winter, 2000), pp. 680-681.

²⁹ Melhem, 149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

³¹ Finch, 38.

pleased. This is what I'm talking about! I got an A minus on it."³² "Of course, that wasn't my reality. I dropped the course"³³

Sanchez went searching outside of Hunter for a suitable writing course. It proved harder than she anticipated. "I would go into these classes," she has said. "And these men were all teaching classes, no women were teaching, and they just walked all over you like you weren't really supposed to be there... and I knew they didn't want me there. The men didn't want me there, the other students didn't want me there, so after a couple of sessions I would leave." Sanchez didn't formally resume her artistic studies until, while enrolled in a graduate program at New York University, she came across a listing in the course catalogue for a poetry class taught by Louise Bogan. "I knew [her] work, because we had to read it in college in these anthologies, and so I actually went and sat by the door, because I figured this would be the same old thing. But the first night I read some of my work, and she asked me to hand it to her, and she commented on what was incorrect, and she thanked me for it, and I went and registered for the class and stayed there, and studied with her."³⁴

Sanchez learned three invaluable lessons from Bogan. The first was to learn how to read your poetry aloud, "because you must train that ear, because the ear will tell you when something is right or wrong."³⁵ Sanchez recounted the story of her first Bogan poetry critique:

I had written this poem, and it was my time to come up and read it, up in front of the class. Well, when I started to read the poem, my ear actually did tell me; I went "oops," because I heard some things that were wrong; I went "oops, oops," but to myself. But I looked at the students looking at me... and they heard it also, and they looked at me, thinking, "I'm glad it's you and not me," because Bogan

³² Ibid., 39.

³³ Cornwell, 4.

³⁴ Finch, 40.

³⁵ Ibid.

said, “oh, may I see that please,” in her very formal voice. I handed it to her and she said, “Did you read this poem aloud?” I finally said, “No, I didn’t...” So she said, “Well, if you had read it aloud, you would have heard the following...” And she dissected that little sucker left and right. And that was the last time I did that. It was a hard lesson, but from then on I read everything aloud.³⁶

Bogan’s second lesson was to “read every poet who is walking on the planet Earth, period.” And the third, “keep a notebook for sending work out... She [Bogan] said something like, if you keep doing it regularly, every few months you send to the journals, they’ll get to know your name.” Bogan was right on all three counts. “She taught us to train the ear, to read a lot of poetry, and she taught us how to send the work out too. And that was important, a simple thing like that. And she made some of us send some work out. I was just as frightened as could be, I was so nervous. But I did that in her class; I started sending the work out, and it paid off.”³⁷ Sanchez published her first poem while in Bogan’s class.

While still a student at New York University, Sanchez was invited to join an exclusive writers’ workshop run by Fred Stern. “We met in the Village for three years, every Wednesday night, and the only requirement was that you had to bring a poem,” Sanchez recalled. One fortuitous night after workshop, the writers bumped into LeJoi Jones (who, after 1967, was known as Amiri Baraka) at the Five Spot. “He says, ‘Hey, Sanchez, someone said you’re a poet. I’m editing an anthology coming out of Paris, France; would you send me some of your work?’ And that was the first time I was called a poet. From that time on I began to say, ‘Maybe I am this poet.’”³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., 41.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 42.

It was during this time that Sanchez also became aware of the Schomburg Library at 135th and Lenox Avenue. "Inside to the right was this glass area where Jean Hutson, the curator at the time, sat. I went over, gestured to her, and she came out. I asked, 'What kind of library is this?' And she said, 'This library contains all books by and about Black folks.' And I said, in my sharp, acerbic fashion, 'Must not be many books in here, then.'"³⁹ Ms. Hutson sat Sanchez down and said, "I'm going to bring you some books." And she brought three: W.E.B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folks*, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.⁴⁰ Sanchez picked *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and started reading. "I read maybe a third of it. I went [back to] Ms. Hutson and said, 'How can I be an educated woman and not have read these books?' and she said 'Yes, dear. Now go back and read.'"⁴¹

She went back to The Schomburg every day for the rest of the week. And every day Ms. Hutson fed her books. "She asked, 'Is there anything you like to read?' When I said gently, 'Poetry,' she sent me all the poets she knew. On the last day I said to her, 'I have to go and look for a job. But one day my books will be in here.'"⁴²

Sanchez met Malcolm X for the first time at a CORE rally in Harlem in the early 1960s.

Well, one day we, we were doing a huge demonstration in Harlem. Right in front of the old Hotel Theresa... And Malcolm had sent out a directive to all of the

³⁹ Johnson-Bailey, 72.

⁴⁰ Feinstein, Sascha. "An Interview with Sonia Sanchez." *Conversations with Sonia Sanchez*, edited by Joyce A. Joyce, University Press of Mississippi, 2007, p. 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁴² Johnson-Bailey, 73.

organizations most especially the civil rights organizations that you cannot have a demonstration in Harlem unless... you invite me to speak. So in our office at 125th Street, we moaned and groaned and said, "Who is that man? Imagine that man saying such a thing. Who does he think he is?" And of course we had to say, "Yes." So we went to this big demonstration. Malcolm came with his bodyguards. I shall never forget that day... I looked up and around determined not to look at him, determined not to listen. But he started to talk. And I found myself more and more listening to him. And I began to nod my head and say "Yeah that's right. That makes sense. That's logical. Mm hm, whatever." And the audience was like, "Yeah, Malcolm, yeah man, mm hm Malcolm. Amen. Yes, mm hm, right on, yes brother, mm hm, whatever."⁴³

When Malcolm finished speaking, Sanchez walked up to him and extended her hand. She said to him, "I liked some of what you said. I didn't agree with what all that you said, but I liked some of what you said." And he looked at me, held my hand in a very gentle fashion and says, 'One day you will, sister.'⁴⁴

After that encounter, Sanchez has said that "every time Malcolm was speaking in New York City" she was there. She also noted that everybody else was there, too. Baraka was doing it. The poets were doing it. The musicians were doing it. The teachers were doing it. The nurses were doing it. Everybody who was an intellectual was coming out to hear what this man had to say." Sanchez believed that people flocked to Malcolm because the moment he came into an audience, he told them exactly what he intended to do.

He always had some information for you... Malcolm knew how to curse you out, in a sense, and make you love him at the same time for doing it. He knew how to, in a very real sense, to open your eyes as to the kind of oppression that you were experiencing... [He] began to make us understand how we had been denied the history of African-American people in this country. So I began to go up to the Schomburg.⁴⁵ And when he'd mention a name I'd go search the name out at the

⁴³ Hampton, Henry & Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. Random House Publishing Group, 2011, p. 253.

⁴⁴ Hampton, Henry & Steve Fayer, 254.

⁴⁵ The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is a research library of the New York Public Library and an archive repository for information on people of African descent worldwide.

Schomburg. When he'd mention a time I would go and search out in the Schomburg what that period was. So Malcolm sent us back all to the history books... He sent us back to the libraries of America.⁴⁶

As Malcolm educated his black audiences about themselves, a new sense of pride began to emerge. Malcolm “took on America for us,” Sanchez has said. “He made us feel holy and he made us feel whole.” “He made women feel like they were queens of the universe. It was a queen not that sat on a throne and did nothing. It was a queen that worked. A queen that talked. A queen that led. A queen that was very much involved in the movement. He made us feel like we were worth something on this planet earth. Finally, we had some worth.”⁴⁷

3.

“To have discovered oneself in the 1960s... was almost like being reborn.”
-Sonia Sanchez⁴⁸

“It could have been church,” Larry Neal wrote in his 1970 essay “New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties,” describing the scene at The Audubon Ballroom on the afternoon of February 21, 1965.⁴⁹ A crowd of four hundred or so of “the faithful and the curious” had gathered, just north of Harlem, to hear Malcolm X speak at a rally of his fledgling Organization of Afro-American Unity.⁵⁰ “There was such a very diverse grouping of black

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁸ Highsmith-Taylor, 21.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Neal (September 5, 1937 – January 6, 1981) was a scholar of African-American theatre, as well as a poet, dramatist, essayist and activist. He is well known for his contributions to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He penned many of the movement’s most passionate position papers. Neal was posthumously dubbed the “spiritual leader” of the Black Arts Movement by Amiri Baraka.

⁵⁰ Newsweek Staff. “‘Death of a Desperado’: Malcolm X Was Assassinated 50 Years Ago.” *Newsweek*, 21 February 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/death-desperado-malcolm-x-was-assassinated-50-years-ago-today-308253>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

people; some of the women were matronly, but tricked up real fine in their Sunday clothes. There were many young children there,⁵¹ including three of Malcolm's own.

After some time Malcolm was introduced and he stepped to the flimsy plywood lectern at the front of the hall. He had only said a few words – Neal recalled hearing him give the traditional greeting, “As salaam alaikum (Peace be unto you),” and the audience answer, “Walaikum salaam (And unto you, peace)” – when “he was interrupted by two men in the center of the ballroom, who rose and, arguing with each other, moved forward.” Numerous witnesses recall hearing Malcolm attempt to assuage the men, saying, “Now, now, brothers, break it up. Be cool, be calm.”⁵²

It was then that a fusillade rang out, the force of the bullets knocking Malcolm over backward. “Pandemonium broke out,” wrote New York Times reporter Peter Kihss, “men, women and children ducked under tables and flattened themselves on the floor, as more shots were fired. Some witnesses said thirty shots had been fired.”⁵³ Malcolm's pregnant wife, Betty, rushed on stage screaming, “They're killing my husband! They're killing my husband!” Malcolm's retainers fired wildly through the crowd at the fleeing killers. Four assailants made it to side doors and disappeared.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Woodard, Komozi. *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1999, p. 19.

⁵² “How the Language Really Works: The Fundamentals of Critical Reading and Effective Writing.” *criticareading.com*, 2000, <http://www.criticalreading.com/malcolm.htm>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

⁵³ Kihiss, “Malcolm X Shot to Death at Rally Here,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1965, pp. 1, 10.

⁵⁴ Newsweek Staff. “‘Death of a Desperado’: Malcolm X Was Assassinated 50 Years Ago.” *Newsweek*, 21 February 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/death-desperado-malcolm-x-was-assassinated-50-years-ago-today-308253>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

Neal remarked that in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, “the whole room was a wailing woman. Men cried openly.”⁵⁵ Minutes after the news of Malcolm X’s death was broadcast in Harlem, supporters, many wearing the fur astrakhan hats that Malcolm favored, began to gather on the southwest corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue near the Theresa Hotel.

They stood on the corner... look[ing] blankly at one another, saying little... Their sorrow was private and tightly controlled. “We’re not answering no questions,” said one, “nothin’ at all.” Another, trying to rub the wetness out of his eyes, said, “we are so confused we don’t know what we’re going to do.”⁵⁶

Paul Montgomery, a reporter for the New York Times, overheard a woman say: “Something’s got to be done. It’s too cold to start anything tonight but something’s got to be done.”⁵⁷

In the wake of Malcolm’s assassination the question on many lips was “what next?” Malcolm’s message of self-determination, self-respect, self-defense, and his unwavering belief that organized power should be challenged, disrupted and dismantled had struck a chord with the people. He had called for revolution, “bloody, hostile, uncompromising” revolution and now he was gone.⁵⁸

What would come of his efforts? Who would step up and lead in his place?

LeRoi Jones emerged as Malcolm X’s ideological successor.

⁵⁵ Woodard, 20.

⁵⁶ Montgomery, Paul. “Harlem is Quiet as News Spreads.” *New York Times*, 22 February 1965, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Little, Malcolm. “Message to the Grass Roots.” Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference, 10 November 1963, King Solomon Baptist Church, Detroit, Michigan. Keynote Address.

Jones, a successful poet and playwright, had become somewhat radicalized after he was accused of being a "cowardly bourgeois individualist – more interested in building his own reputation than in working to end oppression" while on a trip to Cuba in 1960. He returned to the United States "shaken more deeply" than he had realized, noting in his *Autobiography* that he had come to the conclusion that "it was not enough just to write, to feel, to think, one must act! One *could* act!" Malcolm X's death catalyzed Jones' commitment to following in his path. In February 1965 he left his wife and children in Greenwich Village and moved to Harlem to start the revolution.

Jones' incendiary "A Poem for Black Hearts," penned in April 1965 (though not published until September in the *Negro Digest*), was a tribute to Malcolm, though it also, perhaps more significantly, announced the arrival of a militant black-nationalist leader unafraid to use his words to incite his audience to action.

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke
the face of some dumb white man, For
Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
all black and strong in his image
of ourselves, For Malcolm's words
fire darts, the victor's tireless
thrusts, words hung above the world
change as it may, he said it, and
for this he was killed, for saying,
and feeling, and being/change, all
collected hot in his heart, For Malcolm's
heart, raising us above our filthy cities,
for his stride, and his beat, and his address
to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's
pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life,
black man, for the filling of your minds
with righteousness, For all of him dead and
gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
clings to our speech black god of our time.

For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
black man, quit stuttering and shuffling, look up,
black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him,
For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us rest
until we avenge ourselves for his death.⁵⁹

Later that same year, Jones released his poem "Black Art," which quickly became a manifesto of the Black Arts literary movement – a paean to its aesthetic and socio-political objectives. Jones recorded himself reading the piece backed by a group of jazz artists – Sonny Murray on drums, Albert Ayler on tenor saxophone, Don Cherry on trumpet, and Lewis Worrell and Henry Grimes on bass. The poem appeared on Murray's 1965 album *Sonny's Time Now* prior to its print debut in the January 1966 issue of *Liberator*. In the piece Jones makes the case that "poems are bullshit unless they are" functional and tangible. He writes:

We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
Guns.⁶⁰

For the new Jones, the black poem – and, truly, black art – had to be an active agent, not a vehicle of escape to "another world." Poetry is not, he asserted, an art form separate from the violent struggles of the people; it is and must be a weapon in that struggle.

We want live
Words of the hip world live flesh &
Coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire.

Poems must be fists, daggers, and poison gas. They are the weapons of the warriors who will accomplish that destruction which will usher in a new world.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Baraka, Amiri. *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*. New York: Morrow, 1979, p. 104.

⁶⁰ Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 106.

⁶¹ Parini, Jay. "The Black Arts Poets." *The Columbia History of American Poetry*. Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 688.

“Black Art” is militant, boisterous, angry, proud, demanding, and no holds-barred. “We want a black poem,” it reads. “And a Black world.”

Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD⁶²

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton states that, “the aesthetic, one might argue, is... the very paradigm of the ideological.”⁶³ During the Black Arts Movement, the inseparability of the ideological and the aesthetic was considered intuitive and self-evident. The founders understood that ideology and style were the same thing.

In his 1966 essay, “One Year Eight Months Later,” Jones asserts that “the concept of Black Power is natural after Malcolm.” Malcolm’s legacy, he believed, “was the concept and will toward political power in the world for the black man”; the notion that blacks must “build their own society,” one that reflects their distinctive worldview. Literary critic Addison Gayle embraced this same nationalist impulse in the introduction to his collection of essays: “The Black Aesthetic...is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism.”⁶⁴

“We [African Americans],” raged the poet Haki Madhubuti, “must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil.” He believed that any literature that normalized whiteness – seemingly innocuous or not – was a tool of black oppression. Eldridge Knight, another poet, took this idea a step further, writing that “the motive behind the Black aesthetic

⁶² Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 107.

⁶³ Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 93-94.

⁶⁴ Gayle, Addison. “The Black Aesthetic” *Black World*, vol XXIV, no. 2, December 1974, p. 44.

is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.”⁶⁵

Not only did the Black Arts Movement propose a “radical re-ordering of the western cultural aesthetic... a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology,” but the creation of a new movement-generated and sanctioned language. In his “On Black Art,” Ron Karenga asserts that black art is both form and feeling, but that in order to express that feeling, black artists need “to break the linguistic straight jacket of their master, who taught them his language, so [that] he could understand them, although [blacks] could hardly understand themselves.”⁶⁶

Baraka also recognized the need for linguistic experimentation:

Sometimes I try to work out of a purely emotional language that sometimes doesn't even have much to do with English. It has to do with sounds, and silences, and emphasis, and using rhythms in certain ways. I've been doing this in poetry... We have to get to a language that expresses the thing that we need to have expressed... I think it is going to move beyond this language. I think it's going to be a combination of what we understand as being Black language—the rhythms—but making reference to ideas that might not be completely known to us right now... The most important language that I'm developing is the language of the Black man as a conqueror.⁶⁷

At the heart of the Black Arts Movement was the insistence on a need for new forms and new values, new songs, a new history, new symbols, new myths and new legends. A need for “an art,” wrote Larry Neal, “that makes us understand our condition and each other in a

⁶⁵ Neal, Larry. “The Black Arts Movement.” *Drama Review*, Summer 1968.

⁶⁶ Karenga, Ron. “On Black Art.” *Black Theatre* 4, 1969, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Marvin X. “Interview with Amiri Baraka” *Black Theatre* 1, 1968, pp. 20-21.

more profound manner; that unites us; exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally; an art that posits for us the vision of a liberated future.”⁶⁸

The success of the Movement [and later Black Power] was predicated on the idea of hope. Neal insisted in his “Vision of a Liberated Future” that, “Liberation is *impossible* if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms. For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressor’s ideas and values—ideas and values that finally attack the very core of our existence.” He stressed that “therefore, we [black Americans] must see the world in terms of our own realities.” The leaders of the Black Arts Movement encouraged black Americans to work to define the world in their own terms. They warned that it would not be easy – that hundreds of years of injustice would not be easily reversed, that they would face great opposition, even violence – but that change, revolutionary change, was possible.

This radical philosophy, fueled by Malcolm X’s assassination and inspired by his life and legacy, led to the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School of Harlem and signaled the beginning of the Black Arts Movement.

In his poem “S.O.S.,” Jones wrote:

Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling
You, calling all black people
Calling all black people, come in, black people, come
on in.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Douglas, Sr., Robert. *Resistance, Insurgence and Identity: The Art of Mari Evans, Nelson Stevens and the Black Arts Movement*. Africa World Press, 2008, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 105.

Had he written these words in 1965, they could very well have served as the rallying call for the formation of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) in Harlem.

On February 22, 1965, LeRoi Jones held a press conference to announce plans to establish the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) in Harlem. He envisioned the Theater/School as a black cultural institution – responsive to the black community, attached to the militant politics of the Black Power movement, and rooted in the same urban landscape as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Jones stated that the school would offer “both practical and theoretical” training in all areas of drama: “acting, writing, directing, set design, production, [and] management.” While the program was particularly aimed at black youth, the Black Arts also wished to provide a place for professional artists to create and perform.

Jones had mailed letters to New York-based musicians, actors, poets, playwrights and teachers calling on them to come and do the work of social uplift in Harlem.⁷⁰ He urged them to “come help me continue Malcolm’s work.” Sonia Sanchez received such a letter. “The late, great Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones] came out of the village,” she has said, “[and] up out of Harlem to start the Black Arts Repertory Theater, which *we all* belonged to.”⁷¹

The Theater/School was built “in the shell of an abandoned brownstone off Lenox Avenue. Refurbishing run-down rooms and styles to reoccupy ground zero of the Harlem Renaissance, the core cadre of the Larry Neal-christened Black Arts movement regarded Afro-America’s immediate cultural past as something to ‘be radicalized or destroyed,’ block by inner-

⁷⁰ It is important to note that the artists and intellectuals who joined BARTS did not adhere to a single political ideology. While this lent a considerable air of excitement and possibility to the endeavor, the lack of coherence also created internal tension that in the end proved insurmountable.

⁷¹ Dickerson, Penny. “Sonia Sanchez Speaks Truth to Power, Poetically.” *Ebony Magazine*, 25 April 2014.

city block.”⁷² Jones wrote that, “We set up shop and cleaned and swept and painted. We got a flag, White designed, the ‘Greek’ theater masks of comedy and tragedy, rendered Afro style, like a shield, with spear behind, all in black and gold.”⁷³

They had little money, but the mortgage on the brownstone was only about \$100 a month and the building was in generally good condition. Baraka was the main source of funds. “I had a couple of plays running downtown at St. Marks Theater, and we had put on a benefit just before we left, doing *The Toilet*; Charles Patterson’s *Black Ice*; another play of mine, which I directed, *Experimental Death Unit #1*; and a play by Nat White called *The Black Tramp*.”⁷⁴ They charged the mostly white audience \$20 a ticket. The proceeds were used to pay the mortgage on the brownstone and help put the building in some shape.

In April 1965, BARTS opened its doors. Jones recalls that the organization’s first official action was to parade across 125th Street.

With Sun-Ra and his Myth-Science Arkestra leading it... and with Albert [Ayler] and his brother Don blowing and Milford [Graves] wailing his drums [w]e marched down the street holding William White’s newly designed Black Arts flag... A small group of sometimes comically arrogant black people daring to raise the question of art and politics and revolution, black revolution!”⁷⁵

The Theater/School drew young writers and artists into an experiment that combined literary pursuits and community activism. Prefiguring black studies programs and Black Power liberation schools, BARTS offered classes in playwriting, music, painting, martial arts, taught by a young black poet named Ojijiko, and ‘Afro-American Cultural Philosophy,’ taught by noted

⁷² Maxwell, William J. *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*. Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 108.

⁷³ Baraka, Amiri. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1984, p. 296.

⁷⁴ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 299.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

scholar Harold Cruse. Askia Touré and Max Stanford came on as cultural and political advisors, Sonia Sanchez and Larry Neal read and wrote poetry and Sun-Ra, Albert Ayler and Milford Graves provided regular jazz performances.⁷⁶

BARTS made its programming available to the broader Harlem community. It sponsored outdoor painting exhibitions. It set up improvised stages and performed plays. It held street-corner poetry readings, shuttling the poets in vans from location to location. Jones noted that, “we performed in projects, parks, the streets, alleys, playgrounds. Each night a different location, five nights, sometimes six, a week... Each night throughout that summer we flooded Harlem streets with new music, new poetry, new dance, new paintings...” He took great pride in the fact that “the sweep of the Black Arts Movement [in Harlem] had recycled itself back to the people.”⁷⁷

Three months after BARTS opened, the Harlem Youth Opportunity Unlimited, a department of the Office of Economic Opportunity that had provided programming funds, discovered that the Theater/School was holding lectures that called for armed revolution against the government. It, predictably, withdrew funding. Straining under the weight of “ideological, aesthetic and monetary crises” and the pressures created by government influence and group infighting - the nadir, perhaps, was the shooting of Larry Neal in early 1966 and threats of violence against Askia Touré and Sonia Sanchez - the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School closed.

⁷⁶ Rickford, Russell, *We Are an African People: Black Power and Independent Education from the 1960s to the Present*. Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 134.

⁷⁷ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, 307-308.

BARTS was tremendously inspirational as the first major black nationalist art institution of the 1960s. Amidst bullets and flames, artists around the country began to found institutions modeled after the Theater/School – blending Black Arts and Black Power – in an effort to transform their cities of unrest into sites of regenerative creativity. Some of these institutions include: The Free Southern Theater in New Orleans led by Kalaamu ya Salaam; the Concept East Theater and Broadsides Press in Detroit led by Dudley Randall; The New Lafayette and the National Black Theater in Harlem under the direction of Barbara Ann Teer; and the Afro-Arts Theater and the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago led by Gwendolyn Brooks and Haki Madhubuti.

The black aesthetic of this period was a bold re-envisioning of life itself as a work of art dedicated to the advancement of black people. As Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford posit in their book, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*:

This type of art *engagé* defined beauty as “black,” hence the power of the words that became so much more than a slogan—“Black is Beautiful.” Blackness emerged as a veritable liberation theology: to be free one had to love one’s blackness. Black self-love was publicly expressed during this period with an unprecedented loudness akin to James Brown’s mantra, “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.”

The Black Arts Theater/School’s emphasis on cultural revolution against white racism, Black Power solidarity, and The Black Arts Movement aesthetic, developed and promoted by Baraka, made a powerful impression on Sanchez. During this period it became clear to her that the Movement’s commitment to self-determination, self-respect and self-defense and its insistence on community building, both as a physical and artistic act, required a writer to be more than a writer. [S]he had to be a teacher, a philosopher, and an orator. A poem (written under the aegis of the Movement) could not simply entertain. It had to uplift and educate and

inspire. It had to be everything. It had to contain everything. And it had to accomplish everything.

Some crucial Black Arts activists, such as Askia Touré, deny bitterly that the movement was particularly misogynist. He concedes that they were “influenced by homophobia and male supremacy and were often not nearly as sensitive to particular interests of black women as they should have been, but that that was true of almost every segment of American society.”⁷⁸

“People complain and say that Black Arts was sexist,” Sanchez has said, “I say to people, ‘America was sexist.’ All political organizations were sexist, so that was not just part of Black Arts.” Sanchez elaborated: “They weren’t sexist on stage. Baraka, Ed Bullins, Marvin X, Larry Neal—I was the only woman on stage with them, and they did not treat me differently. They didn’t make me go first, for example, which would have been the completely sexist thing to do.”⁷⁹

It is notable that many of the most active and influential national and regional figures of the movement were women. In New York, Lorraine Hansberry, Esther Cooper Jackson, Rosa Guy, Sarah Wright, Abby Lincoln, Barbara Ann Teer and Sanchez all made large contributions to the development of the Black Arts infrastructure. Elsewhere, Jayne Cortez in Los Angeles; Sarah Webster Fabio and Sanchez in the Bay Area; Margaret Burroughs, Val Gray Ward, Gwendolyn Brooks, Carolyn Rodgers, and Johari Amini in Chicago; Melba Joyce Boyd in Detroit; and Elma

⁷⁸ Smethurst, James. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, pp. 84-85.

⁷⁹ Feinstein, 166-167.

Lewis in Boston all played central roles in their various communities, and often contested, from the inside, expressions of misogyny and male supremacy within the movement.⁸⁰

Sanchez's womanist worldview distinguished her poems from her male counterparts and colored her artistic and political intentions.

What I attempted to do, and I think all the other black arts poets attempted to do, is that we were about putting the African American and African back on the world stage. Our enslavement had taken us off of the world stage. It was our purpose, and our movement on this Earth was to put us back on the world stage. It said, "We're human like everybody else. We breathe, we eat, we love like everybody else. We write, we see like everybody else."⁸¹

In his book *Jazz Griots*, Jean-Philippe Marcoux writes that one central value of Sanchez's poetry is its insistence that black women develop self-love – a theme especially significant in the 1960s. Black women, Sanchez believes, must reclaim their identities and bodies; they must learn to repudiate the ascribed images of the black female body as a site of violence and socially corruptive behaviors. The de-programming of the black female mindset wherein her body is objectified is essential to new black paradigms, whether they are social, racial or gendered.⁸² Sanchez speaks to this in her poem "A Blk/Woman/Speaks" from her collection, *We*

A BaddDDD People:

i am a blk/wooOOOoMAN
my face.
my brown
bamboo/colored
blk/berry/face
will spread itself over
this western hemisphere and
be remembered.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁸¹ McEwan, Lauren. "A Q & A with poet laureate Sonia Sanchez." *Washington Post*. 24 October 2012.

⁸² Marcoux, Jean-Philippe. *Jazz Griots: Music as History in the 1960s African American Poem*. Lexington Books, 2012, p. 119.

be sunnnnnNNGG.
for I will be called
QUEEN. &
walk/move in
blk/queenly ways.
and the world
shaken by
my blkness
will channnnNNGGGEEE
colors. and be
reborn
blk. again.

In this poem, Sanchez riffs on patriarchal and masculinist perceptions of black women as a way to reclaim the body as a site of celebrated aestheticism as well as of revolutionary agency.

Sanchez reappropriates negative representations of black female pigmentation and regenerates its potential as revolutionary, thereby destroying long-held Western stereotypes of beauty. Not only is the body no longer the historical site of violence, it is now capable of overtaking the world (“spread itself over / the western hemisphere”) of the oppressor.⁸³

The assertion of the black female voice marks an important political stance and is but another example of what Sanchez means when she sloganizes that the “personal is political.” That is, the reclamation of the individual voice of the black woman represents her revolutionary potential and her desire to partake, on equal footing, in the struggle for liberation. By claiming a role for black women in the struggles, Sanchez follows the trajectory of artists like Nina Simone, who re-conceptualized the function of their art to respond to the demands of the new paradigms of blackness during the civil rights era.⁸⁴

I am the continuation of black women who have gone before and who will come after me. I am Harriet Tubman, Fannie Lou Hamer, Queen Mother Moore,

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 121.

Margaret Walker, Assata Shakur, Gwendolyn Brooks, and all the unsung black women who have worked in America's kitchens. I am the sister who has been abused by men and loved by men. I am my stepmother, a Southern woman who was taught her place and as a consequence was never able to fulfill herself as a human being.⁸⁵

Sanchez took Larry Neal's pronouncement that black people must define the world in their own terms and amended it, asserting – in much the same way that we today assert that “black lives matter” – that black women must define the world in their own terms. Sanchez inspired future female artists to do the same.

4.

“It's 2017. How can something so normal be revolutionary in 2017?”
-Zakiyyah Alexander⁸⁶

“We knew a number of things going into the process,” notes Alexander. “We knew that we wanted a black female to be the lead. We wanted the journey to be about growing up, and somehow not being grown. We wanted a main character who was educated and loved, and yet, still keeps messing up her life.”⁸⁷

From the outset it was important to both writers that *Girl Shakes Loose* provide narrative space for a black woman to simply be a black woman; a seemingly simple proposition that they felt the American Musical had not addressed. “The heroic, struggling archetype is a very familiar character,” says Alexander. “I've seen that character on stage, but rarely have I seen a black woman embody that role. I have actually never seen an overeducated, loved black woman who still has trouble getting it right. I've rarely seen this in 'straight' plays, to say

⁸⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁶ Alexander, Zakiyyah. Personal interview. 23 March 2017.

⁸⁷ Alexander, Zakiyyah. “Mover and shaker: Zakiyyah Alexander.” *The Pickwyck*. 29 July 2015, <http://www.pickwyck.com/blog/mover-and-shaker-zakiyyah-alexander>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

nothing of in a musical. Having a self-deprecating black anti-hero who is both a woman and queer (and fine with it) is revolutionary simply because it doesn't exist on the stage.”⁸⁸

Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy saw in *Girl Shakes Loose* the same revolutionary spirit that prompted Penumbra’s founding 40 years ago. “For me,” Bellamy says, “the piece takes the fundamental elements of the Black Arts Movement and demonstrates the relevance of that work today. Penumbra was one of the theatres founded out of that artistic moment and to find a contemporary musical that pays homage to that era, and simultaneously allows for a full expansiveness of a modern, black female identity, is very special.”⁸⁹

Bellamy invested in the musical’s development and committed to the world premiere production even before Alexander and Uzuri had completed a final draft. “This musical represents the first of its kind – a coming of age story of an intellectual, bisexual, African American woman,” Bellamy has said. “It draws upon the work of... Sonia Sanchez in all of its personal and political dimensions to connect past and present experiences of women of color. It is an American narrative ready to take center stage.”⁹⁰

In an interview with Minnesota Playlist in 2015, Bellamy responded to a question about Penumbra’s perceived masculinity and its long history of producing plays by and featuring black men:

I think it’s important that people understand that Penumbra has produced more work by black women than any other company in the Twin Cities and most in the country. A lot of that work has been brand new; they’ve never had a stage for it before, and they found that here. We’ve had different seasons here, not in the sense of a year of plays, but in the larger sense. When Rebecca Rice was here,

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Sarah Bellamy. Personal interview. 2 April 2017.

⁹⁰ “Map Fund: Penumbra Theatre.” Multi-Arts Production Fund, 2016, http://mapfund.org/grant_884.html. Accessed 4 April 2017.

the kind of work we were doing, her *Waiting in Vain* – she was a wonderful woman, a special person. When Laurie Carlos was here a different kind of aesthetic and work started cropping up.⁹¹

She further asserted that her father, Lou Bellamy, who founded Penumbra in 1976 and until very recently was its Artistic Director, made space for woman artists and women’s narratives, but that she would be more intentional about it. “I believe deeply in equity for women,” Bellamy was quoted as saying in a Daily Planet article in 2014, “that will obviously impact our programming.”⁹²

Bellamy’s stated commitment to diversifying the representation of gender and sexual orientation on Penumbra’s stage was a determining factor in Alexander and Uzuri’s decision to collaborate with the institution. “What I knew about Penumbra,” Alexander says, “was that this musical was/is very different from their male penned, male protagonist stories of years past. I also knew that Sarah was making an effort to bring this theater into the future and so it seemed like a good fit, and more than anything the passion and desire existed.”⁹³

It is significant that *Girl Shakes Loose’s* primary creative team is made up entirely of women of color – Alexander, Uzuri, director May Adrales, and Bellamy. “That young women of color are investing in the representation of ourselves, our lives, how we love, and who we love with such tenderness, excellence, and ferocity is a remarkable thing. We are building upon an incredible legacy of art coming out of the BAM and Penumbra’s long history, to fashion a bold,

⁹¹ De Cordova, Paul. “Playlist profile: Sarah Bellamy.” *Minnesota Playlist*, 1 February 2015, <http://minnesotaplaylist.com/magazine/article/2015/playlist-profile-sarah-bellamy>. Accessed 4 April 2017.

⁹² Regan, Sheila. “Sarah Bellamy’s vision for Penumbra’s future.” *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, 25 January 2014, <https://www.tcdailyplanet.net/sarah-bellamys-vision-penumbra-future>. Accessed 4 April 2017.

⁹³ Alexander, Zakiyah. Personal interview. 4 April 2017.

new world that is fiercely authentic and centered in stories that don't get told. This truly is #blackgirlmagic!"⁹⁴

LeRoi Jones wrote in 1965 that, "Revolutionary Theater is shaped by the world, and moves to re-shape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us."⁹⁵ *Girl Shakes Loose* is a musical borne of this particular socio-political moment and inspired by the revolutionary artists and thinkers of the Black Arts Movement. The musical "moves to re-shape the world," to right the wrongs of tradition and history, and to carve out long overdue space for underrepresented people and their stories, on the American stage.

In their investigation *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice*, Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds provide a brief history of the types of roles traditionally embodied by women in musical theater:

Female characters have tended to be written as stock types: the virgin, the whore, the witch or the mother; and musical narratives have tended to perpetuate the boy-meets-girl trope, in which the pretty woman melts into the arms of a strong and dominant man before walking down the aisle to embrace happily married bliss.⁹⁶

The only power women have then is the sexual power of their body, a commodity that they use to seduce men. "Thus," Taylor and Symonds assert, "women are forever consigned to being supported by men or paid for sex, ideas that are prevalent in the territory of commercial

⁹⁴ Sarah Bellamy. Personal interview. 2 April 2017.

⁹⁵ Jones, LeRoi. "The Revolutionary Theatre." *Liberator*, July 1965.

⁹⁶ Taylor, Millie and Dominic Symonds. *Studying Musical Theatre: Theory and Practice*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 140.

Broadway.” Such stereotypes, the authors argue, form the backbone of the musical theater repertoire.⁹⁷

In her essay, “What if Musical Theatre Was Made for Women,” Harmony France poses the following questions, “Are women not allowed to tell difficult stories from a woman’s point of view? Is musical theatre not allowed to cover real-life topics? Do we have to leave that to the ‘serious’ male playwrights? Can musical theatre not have a message—and may women not be the purveyors of that message?”⁹⁸

Even the heroine’s narrative, the primary female narrative in a musical, exists traditionally only to support the narrative of the hero, a male. Her concerns and desires are secondary to his; and often, reductively, he is the focal point of both. France points out that, “Even some of the great iconic roles in the musical theatre cannon: Evita, Aldonza, and Mary Magdalene (in *Evita*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* respectively), are in shows where almost every other role is played by a man. Musicals that are heavily cast with women, like *Nine* or *Company*, may give a lot of female actors work, but the show is still all about the man.”⁹⁹

Taylor and Symonds comment that considering the long history of misogyny in musical theater, “Perhaps [it] was never a likely feminist vehicle.” However, they do conclude that, “although unlikely, the musical has offered a cultural area as rich as any for overturning and undermining patriarchal ideologies. The strategies for doing this are twofold: firstly, to deal

⁹⁷ Ibid., 140-141.

⁹⁸ France, Harmony. “What if Musical Theatre Was Made for Women?” *The Huffington Post Blog*, 5 May 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harmony-france/what-if-musical-theatre-was-made-for-women_b_9698202.html. Accessed 23 March 2017.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

with the texts, reclaiming “feminist” texts or rewriting texts as feminist; and, secondly, to work through criticism, exposing the patriarchy, subverting norms and re-reading texts from a feminist perspective.”¹⁰⁰ *Girl Shakes Loose* is feminist and intersectional in its storytelling.

The show centers on Girl, a queer black woman with a secondary degree, who, floundering in life – both in love and in her career – goes on a journey to discover what she’s missing. Girl is smart and self-possessed: yet, in the wake of her seeming failure(s), she is also scared. “I did all the right things,” she says “Went to all the right schools.”¹⁰¹ “I thought I had my whole life planned / But I think I’ve fucked it all up and now / There’s nowhere to run.”¹⁰² “I’m that girl that ran away,” she sings. “Thought I knew where I was going / But, I don’t / Thought I was ready for love / But, I’m not.”¹⁰³

This isn’t the first time that Girl has been on the run. Years before she snuck away from her mother’s house, to accept a place in a highly regarded graduate program, leaving only a note: ‘Headed to New York.’¹⁰⁴ This time she crept from her girlfriend’s bed: “No goodbyes, bought the ticket / Not answering my email or my phone / I’ve gone AWOL.”¹⁰⁵ Old habits. Old patterns. Repeating.

Girl hopes that the city will help her figure herself out. New York is a place, she admits, that was never really home even when she lived there before; a place that she’s only returned

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, Millie and Dominic Symonds, 147.

¹⁰¹ Alexander, Zakiyyah, Imani Uzuri and Sonia Sanchez, 11.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

to because it seemed easier to go to someplace she already knew than to start over somewhere else.¹⁰⁶

Girl speaks out, directly addressing the audience, as she does periodically throughout the musical. *Girl Shakes Loose* is her story. And she will tell it as she sees fit.

“I am what I am,” Girl sings. “Woman alone / midst all this noise.”¹⁰⁷ The melody is simple and the song is plaintive. It is a cry, but not a cry for help, nor a cry for salvation. Girl cries out in an attempt to articulate her present emotional state, to define herself in this moment. She cries out as if to say, “Here I am. I am here – now what?”

The noise, we come to understand, is both literal and figurative. It is the noise of Girl’s past; of the choices she’s made that continue to haunt her. The people she’s left behind. The hearts. And it’s also the noise of the city, the sound of traffic and construction, air-conditioning units and street performers. It is the sound of eight million strangers and the driving syncopated rhythms of New York City calling:

CHORUS:	You!
	Woman surrendring your arms to silk
	You!
	Coming among us luxurious with flesh
	You!
	Allow no frailty to accent your blood
	You!
	Swallowing the morning as you lean back on your eyes. ¹⁰⁸

The musical’s opening number presents as a cacophony of polyphonic wonder. Rhythmically complex, yet viscerally satisfying melodies intermingle to create a kind of sonic map of Girls’ inner state. She is a woman, possessing great beauty and power. She is a traveler,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Poem from “personal letter no. 2” by Sonia Sanchez.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5. Poem from “haiku woman (La mujer de los ojos)” by Sonia Sanchez.

adept at packing light and leaving at a moment's notice. She is alone, but the voices of her past accompany her wherever she goes.

To further illustrate this idea – the ever-presence [and fluidity] of memory – Alexander and Uzuri have chosen to utilize a chorus of 7-9 actors (depending on the production) who, over the course of the musical, embody various people from significant moments in Girl's life. This gives the piece a magical quality – characters appear and disappear, their entrances and exits triggered by the smallest of things, a pointed question (“What are you really doing here?”) or a sipped cocktail (“vodka soda with lime”). “The chorus,” says Uzuri, “is an extension of Girl. She feels like she's alone, she thinks she's alone, but there are all of these people who have been there with her the whole time.”¹⁰⁹ Girl re-lives her memories and re-visits her past all in service of moving forward, of finding herself.¹¹⁰

Girl Shakes Loose furthers its progressive agenda by queering its protagonist and presenting her queerness – the fact of it and the physical expression of it – as something wholly natural.

Girl has always known that she was different. “I never really fit in,” she says, “It was just too small of a place for me to be myself.”¹¹¹ When Girl goes home for her grandmother's funeral the past comes racing back. Her first boyfriend, “first everything,” Eddie, now “all grown up” and still as sexy as he was in high school, takes her on a trip down memory lane. He shows her the tree trunk he carved with their initials in the ninth grade, ruining his mother's good pair

¹⁰⁹ Uzuri, Imani. Personal interview. 27 March 2017.

¹¹⁰ It is worth noting that the actor playing the role of Girl is the only character in *Girl Shakes Loose* who only embodies one character.

¹¹¹ Alexander, Zakiyyah, Imani Uzuri and Sonia Sanchez, 27.

of scissors. They reminisce about cutting school and drinking Boone's and kissing behind the bleachers. Eddie and Girl sing, in the 90s R&B inflected "When We Were Young": "We fell in love / And we felt so high so high / And we were high so high / When we were young / We fell in love / There was you / There was me / There was possibility."¹¹²

"Who knows what might've happened if you didn't go running off to New York," Eddie says to Girl. "Don't you think about settling down?"¹¹³

GIRL: It's not exactly how I imagine the future.

EDDIE: Well, how do you imagine it?

GIRL: Guess... I'd like to figure out a way to be really happy.

EDDIE: Well, you happy right now? Hanging out with me?

GIRL: Yeah, I am.

EDDIE: Then maybe I'm the one who makes you happy. Maybe it's that simple.¹¹⁴

Eddie asks Girl, "Don't I ever cross your mind?" And she admits to him that she has. No doubt Girl has considered on numerous occasions over the years what her life might have been like if she had stayed in Elberton with Eddie. He would have eventually proposed, she would have gotten pregnant, they would have raised a family together: The heteronormative dream. Eddie asks Girl to stay with him and she considers his offer. She considers because she's grieving her grandmother's death and her high school friends are settled and *her* life is still so very up-in-the-air. Girl considers because she feels in the moment Eddie proposes a silent, omnipresent pressure to conform. And so they kiss. Girl gives in to the seeming simplicity of

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

GIRL: Yeah, but it's over... It's too late to fix it.

AUNT LUCILLE: How come people your age don't know how to fight?
You all think things should come easy. And, they don't;
nothing important does.¹¹⁷

Aunt Lucille begins to sing, a mournful bluesy-tune, earthy, elemental, as if the notes themselves were being drawn up from the dirt through her toes, her legs, her chest and finally out of her mouth. In the song, "Don't Never Give Up On Love," the lyrics of which are drawn from a Sanchez short story of the same name, Lucille recounts how she was transformed by love, "christened" with love, by her now deceased second husband, William. She urges Girl to be patient because, as she re-iterates numerous times, "it'll come":

AUNT LUCILLE: Like the rain fallin' from heaven.
It'll come
Just don't ever give up on love.¹¹⁸

As if by magic, the character Ella –who Girl has been thinking of – steps from the chorus and the narrative flashes back to Oakland four months into Ella and Girl's relationship.

ELLA: Let me be yo wilderness
Let me be your wind
Blowing you all the day
Sweet woman dancing
Your morning sails
I see your riverbound legs
Sweet woman dancing—¹¹⁹

"This is some real shit," she tells Girl in a memory. "You got me... saying your name under my breath."¹²⁰ Ella has fallen for Girl and she's fallen hard. "What I want from you can

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16. Poem from "Blues Haiku" by Sonia Sanchez.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

Sonia Sanchez once told a story about writer Zora Neale Hurston, who said that fear was the greatest emotion on the planet. “I say,” Sanchez recounted, “that fear will make us move to save our lives, to save our own skins. But love will make us also save our lives and our own skins, but will make us also save other peoples’ lives and skins. So love is primary at this particular point.”¹²⁶

Girl realizes in Oakland, standing on Ella’s front porch, that no one is going to save her. Not Ella. Not Eddie. Not Aunt Lucille. In the musical’s gospel-inspired 11 o’clock number, “Revelation,” Girl sings: “Can I save myself? / Will I free myself? / Will I be myself? / Can I be myself? / Can I love myself? / Will I love myself?”¹²⁷

Girl is finally asking the right questions.

¹²⁶ Sanchez, Sonia. “Put on the Sleeves of Love.” Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Ministry Days, 23 June 2009, Salt Lake City, UT. Keynote Address.

¹²⁷ Alexander, Zakiyyah, Imani Uzuri and Sonia Sanchez, 96.

5.

“...and my singing / becomes the only sound of a / blue/black/magical/woman. walking. / womb
ripe. walking. loud with mornings. walking. / making pilgrimage to herself. walking.”
-Sonia Sanchez¹²⁸

LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] loved his people. As Evie Shockley wrote in her essay “Amiri
Baraka, Politics and Tough Love:”

He loved us romantically, paternally, loyally, protectively, proudly, fiercely. This deep, intelligent love—uncompromising and impatient, sacrificial and bottomless—is the wellspring of all his poetry... It drove him to tell us what to do and what to think. It motivated all his cautions and dire predictions. Love fueled all his attacks and tirades, whether cursing out his people for not acting in what he saw as our own best interests or, on the other hand, eviscerating the justifications and defenses of his enemies—those whose actions endangered and diminished his people’s lives.¹²⁹

The Black Arts Movement was founded on love. From love. Black Power was founded on love. From love. Black Lives Matter was founded on love. From love. Revolutions big and small start with love. What is “being woke” except loving the world enough to actively engage with it, with his tragedies and injustices, its missteps and failings, in a way that brings about awareness, enlightenment and change? This is the kind of radical love at the heart of Alexander, Uzuri and Sanchez’s *Girl Shakes Loose*.

Their love for black people and, specifically, for black women, queer black women, and “overqualified” queer black women, is evident. As is their commitment to giving full and authentic voice to sections of the American population whose stories, more often than not, are

¹²⁸ Brandeis, Gayle. *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write*. Zondervan, 2009, p. 21.

¹²⁹ Shockley, Evie. “Amiri Baraka, Politics, and Tough Love: A Poet in Conversation with Coltrane and Monk.” *Literary Hub*, 20 April 2015. <http://lithub.com/politics-and-tough-love>. Accessed 23 March 2017.

forgotten, dismissed or ignored. *Girl Shakes Loose* puts blackness and queerness and womanism center stage. It puts black history, black struggle, black musicality and black perseverance center stage. It puts black rhythms and black poetry and black art center stage. And it does so boldly as if to say “I am here, here I am.”

Jones [Baraka] wrote in 1965 that the “Revolutionary Theatre should force change, it should be change.”¹³⁰ During the Black Arts Movement the perception of black Americans changed – for black Americans, first and foremost, but also for the broader American public. Sanchez has said that during the 1960s it became important that black Americans define themselves as black men and black women, “walking on planet Earth, doing what we need to do.” “The images that we gave in our poetry,” she has said, “were men and women who were very certain of what they were doing. Strong men and women. Complex, you know? Weaknesses yeah, okay, but not weaknesses that would destroy them.”¹³¹ *Girl Shakes Loose* builds on that representational change.

Alexander has said, “I never saw a story where somebody rode off into their own sunset. When we started this process I wondered: What if Girl does that? What if she drives off, single, and she still wins...?”¹³² Girl may be flawed. She may be floundering, but she is resilient. And she is loved by her family, by her friends, and, perhaps most importantly, by herself.

¹³⁰ Baraka, “The Revolutionary Theatre,” *Liberator*, July 1965.

¹³¹ Sanchez, Sonia. Interview by Blackside, Inc. *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads 1965 to 1985*, 7 March 1989.

<http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=san5427.0952.143>. Accessed 23 March 2017.

¹³² Alexander, Zakiyyah. Personal interview. 23 March 2017.

