

her own things

Self-love is necessary for survival.

Survival is a rebellious act.

As an undergrad in art school, I struggled to tell my story. I couldn't find a safe space to speak up for myself. I felt like I was being a nuisance, singing the same song of oppression and violent acts against black women throughout history. I assumed that no one would want to hear it, or at the very least no one would care.

I discovered bell hooks, *for colored girls*, and myself, all at once.

I was introduced to the writings bell hooks, an African American feminist and cultural critic, in an African-American Studies class. Her teachings on the oppositional gaze and the necessity of self-love taught me the power of challenging the constructs of black female identity in America, that self-love is a powerful way to confront internalized oppression and as such, is a political act.

When I was introduced to Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls who have considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*, it gave voice to how I was feeling at the time. I was a black girl at a pre-dominantly white university in a studio art program where I was the only...the only African-American, the only African-American female. I spent a lot of time trying to find my voice within context of what was going on around me and it was impossible. Then I saw a performance of *for colored girls*.

As I watched the performance, I was simply delighted and inspired until *somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff* was performed. It changed me. In the poem the lady in green claims that someone has taken all of her "stuff", the things that defined her identity – her laugh, her love, her toes, her chewed up fingernails, her rhythms, her voice. She repeatedly asks for her stuff back while contemplating how it was taken – did she give it up or was it stolen. This exchange was between her and a male lover...for me, there was no lover who had taken my stuff. There was only a history that had defined what it was to be black and female in America. A history that taught us that we were less than, incapable, made for service over thought, much like Shange's character, "a simple bitch with a bad attitude". But I knew better. I needed to figure out what parts of my identity had been stolen. I needed to acknowledge what parts of my identity I had given away. I wanted my own things back.

Shange's, *for colored girls*, is also significant because she disregards hegemonic discourse by writing "as a woman for women trying to find a woman's voice". More specifically she is a black woman writing to black women. This is where I found the solution to my problem. As an artist, I was speaking to the wrong audience. I needed to be talking to myself and to other women who looked like me. I needed to look back at my own reflection. I needed to stare back at the representations of black women in the media, socio-political constructs, and in our day to day lives. I needed to have a conversation with black women.

her own things... is a conversation between black women.