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Class of 2024

Majors: Economics and Theatre

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Black Playwriting (Carrying the Torch of the Black Arts Movement)

10 Week Project

(This project will take place on campus)

Statement of Interest

Hello, my name is Quentin Andrews and I am a sophomore at Bucknell University seeking to do research with the support of the Program for Undergraduate Research! I want to use this research program to write a *black* play. By this I mean, a play that focuses on revealing the dynamic identities, trials and tribulations, and rich culture of those who identify as African Americans. Over the past year, I have been fostering a great interest in the arts, and specifically, the theatre and the humanities. Last semester, I had the privilege of being involved with two different Bucknell productions: *Crumbs From the Table of Joy* by Lynn Nottage and *Appropriate* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. But before encountering these plays, I spent a great deal of time reading and dissecting the themes and inner workings of five plays last summer, while researching the Civil Rights, Black Arts, and Black Power Movements with English Professor Meenakshi Ponnuswami. I was awarded an Emerging Scholars Creativity Research Scholarship and I was able to learn a great deal about the racial climate and politics spanning the Jim Crow era to the Vietnam War. I discovered an internal desire to learn more about black plays. I was most enthralled by dramatic works such as *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, among others. These dramatic works from the Black Arts Movement are so complex, and I want to discover more about their authors and their inceptions. Theatre is a medium capable of encapsulating cultural and societal norms, and of displaying a myriad of problems and solutions; I wish to follow in the footsteps of my creative predecessors by using theatre to demonstrate and apply my artistic and analytical expression.

In my previous research, one of the questions I formulated was “Does the world need a new Black Power Movement?” Perhaps I should have asked this question long ago, because I now understand that the answer is “Yes!” There are still social problems and complex issues regarding daily life that have continuously plagued America’s peoples. Black people share the collective understanding of living on the edge, unsure of what danger they may face based upon their existence. The microaggressions stemming from racial antagonisms and cultural appropriation are rampant. For example, there are various YouTube videos that go viral where there is a white person who, without having any background information or reasonable suspicion, obstructs a black or brown person when they try to do normal things like entering a building or interacting with other white people. This denies black people their autonomy and, more specifically, their humanity. There is much to be learned about this by those who are not Black and who do not have to justify their presence any place. It should not have to be a privilege for one to be able to mind their business and not have an unrelated person expect the worst of them.

I will never forget the eye-opening 2013 movie, *Fruitvale Station*, which shed light on what really goes on in underserved Black neighborhoods that are pointedly targeted by police for the maintenance of a system of discrimination and subservience. The fact that the murder of George Floyd occurred less than 2 years ago points to why we must continue to write, draw, sing, dance, rap, and create more representations of the reality of Black¹ life to illuminate the black condition.

¹ “Black” Referring to the racial, cultural, and ethnic identity of African Americans

There is a world of difference that is out of sight to many. Despite *Fruitvale Station* being a film, it inspired me to use dramatic storytelling to show how these antagonistic encounters impact Black life within our society. We must reveal, and possibly even shock, those who profit from implicit biases without making an effort to understand them. There is a lack of humanity in our society and, to spur the growth of equality amongst the races, we must continue to sketch the bigger picture within smaller contexts. The reality of black conditions such as: legal injustice, state sanctioned violence, perpetual socioeconomic disadvantages, the prevalence of Black self-hatred, and the inability for Black people to claim an identity that is not complicated by history and these conditions must be illuminated. These are just a few of the issues that preoccupy Black perspective and experience. This work is meant to tackle the obliviousness to this reality altogether. In other words, white privilege can foster obliviousness to these issues. There are stark differences between how people come to identify themselves, and to assume the rights and privileges they are either aware of and/or presume themselves to be entitled to. I wish to showcase these differences by writing a play with which I can bring life to multiple perspectives despite the story being localized to a single theatre space; and to a cast of characters that is not so large that anyone's story is lost or forgotten. I wish to depict characters confronting a range of perspectives that I wish to deploy in the pursuit of finding common understanding amidst glaring differences. For example: Is it even possible for a black family to use economic knowledge to ascend in social class? This is an open-ended question that forces people to explain and argue their beliefs on morals, ethics, politics, religion, and more, despite being focused on economics the way Lorraine Hansberry's characters argue these issues in order to illustrate why what they're arguing about with each other is beyond their control (the way Lorraine Hansberry's characters argue these issues in order to illustrate why what they're arguing about with each other is beyond their control). These research questions will pervade my work and will drive my desire to illustrate Black consciousness and intelligence; my thesis being that the Black mind strives to find mutual understanding, despite drastic differences between "the world," as Ta Nehisi Coates suggests, and Black people.

Project Model and Research Questions

This project is designed to develop my understanding and practice of the craft of playwriting and its potential to address the issues I have discussed above. My project will consist of doing research and readings, while simultaneously working on writing a play. This joint endeavor will encompass and further my engagement with and understanding of Black intellectualism and how Black people interpret the applications of fields like economics, philosophy, psychology, and history. Black intellectualism is approaching scholarship from a political and historical point of view that looks for the positive use of a discipline for Black people. The play will be the culminating integration of the research I have done. The playwriting process will take place through regular consults with professor [Jaye Austin Williams](#), who will serve as my mentor/adviser on the project. The sessions focusing on playwriting craft will help me develop and clarify the theme, structure and characters necessary for me to write the most impactful play I can.

I will refer to the notes from my previous research, which have several thematic questions that will challenge my writing and help me locate the story I want to tell with the play I write. The research I did last summer constituted filling three journals of writing with poems, responses to historical items on a class syllabus, and notes for a play, respectively. The majority of my notes I will be referencing involve the journal I kept with notes for writing a play. This is a living google document of play notes that I continuously add to, and it stresses authenticity and

breaking down the complex nature of this kind of play. Some of the various questions I have to answer are: “How do I accurately and explicitly express systems of oppression?” “How do I keep characters with such varying and diametrically opposed opinions in the same place, continuing to talk to each other?” The other section of my notes that I will reference regularly is the journal of poems in which I contemplate difficult Black struggles like “feeling American” or defining “justice.” I am currently taking a playwriting class with professor cfrancis blackchild. The class is helping me form an understanding of the fundamentals of the craft, history and philosophy of playwriting, and does not focus specifically on writing plays with black themes. This is all the more reason why an opportunity to focus in this way next summer would be so welcome.

Logistics

I will complete this research and playwriting within the span of 10 weeks, and will meet with professor Williams on a bi-weekly basis. In between these meetings, I will be held accountable for completing critical reading materials we agree upon for the following session, and for producing the number of play script pages we agree upon in each session. This will be determined by my pace and progress as I reflect upon the reading and how I want to incorporate it. I will also revise what I have written according to our discussion about the play content and what we determine needs to be addressed. The goal will be to revise the play script to be as clear and compelling as possible. During these meetings, I will bring my most recent work and whatever questions or concerns I have regarding the process for conversation. I will also use my own poems from my research from last summer, along with my personal library, to further elaborate my previous and current thinking across this journey as an emerging scholar and playwright. This will serve as an important and effective tool for learning the art of playwriting from an experienced professional playwright who understands how to apply the skills I am learning to my interest in writing a play that focuses on Black political, intellectual and cultural themes, and that also tells a clear, well-structured story.

Project Model Intrinsic Value

Theatre as an art form is something countless others before me have used to reveal both explicit and implicit messages for an audience. I respect many different creatives and their beliefs about what ideas or movements are best to bring change and racial equality. But I find it imperative that the concerns and aims of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) be reflected and expressed through the work we continue to do today. The BAM must remain strong! Remaining strong represents the protection and continuation of this flame of hope. I would like to use this opportunity to not only have an advanced training camp for learning playwriting, but also to pay homage to the BAM and the artists who were a part of it whom I find so inspiring.

Final Product

The final product will be a play script draft that has been inspired by my reading and writing processes. I would also like to present a staged reading of the play shortly after students return to campus at the beginning of the fall semester. This reading would require the securing of a space, a casting process and minimal rehearsal time, all of which would serve to augment the culminating experience of writing the play. I would also like to continue moving forward with my research and understanding of theatre by writing an honors thesis in my senior year.