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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses a multi-sited ethnographic methodology based on interviews conducted in Syracuse, New York to examine the multiracial identity and living conditions of persons of African descent. The theorization in this project utilizes the Black Arts Movement and African Conscious theater frameworks to create an analytical play in which the black community becomes aware of itself through artistic expression that centers on what Larry Neal once described as the “black aesthetic.” Moreover, it examines identity within the black community – identity that is not the product of mainstream societal conceptions of race and color, but is the result of personal experiences and familial circles. At the center of my thesis are black people in Syracuse, whose population has increased dramatically over the past 65 years (since 1950), creating a more diverse cultural environment. Syracuse is a racially tense environment and examination of the constraints placed upon Black Syracusans can play a role in easing the tensions. Included in this equation are African Americans effectively addressing their constraints and becoming self-actualized and self-determined people. At the center of this process is the theatrical play “Meeting at Mom’s,” which is designed to give the black people interviewed a voice for a larger discussion of issues that are important to them and to the Syracuse public.

Meeting at Mom's: The Crisis of Identity within the Black Community in Syracuse, New York  
Ethnography and Narrative Play

by

Anne-Margaret Childress

B.S., Niagara University, 2000

A.S., Onondaga Community College, 2003

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Pan African Studies.

Syracuse University

June 2015

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Syracuse University

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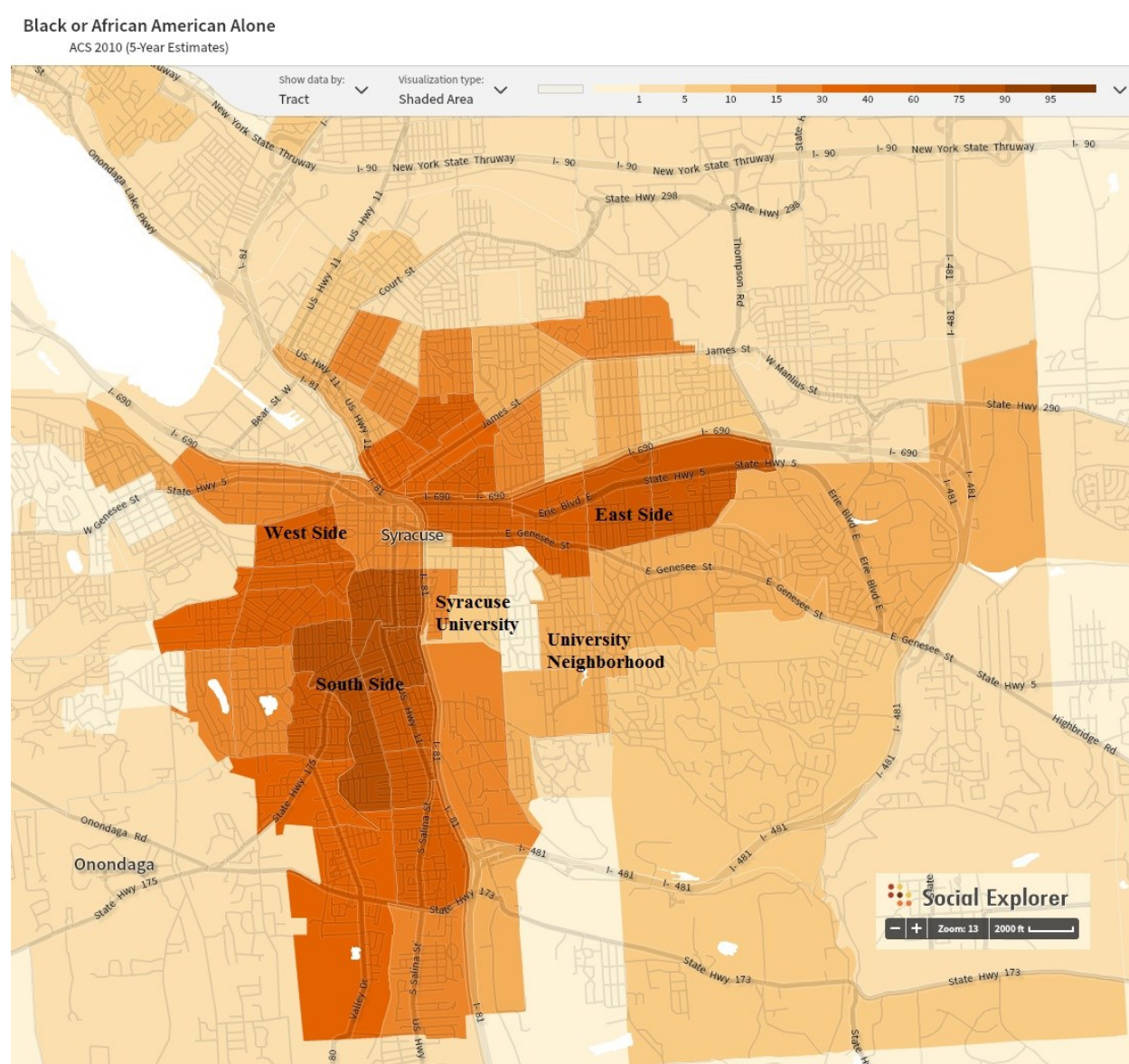
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**Statement of the Problem: Backstory**

Black Syracuse has an identity crisis in that the black community, which is separated by space, attitudes and culture, has been without a singular geographic location within the city since the 1960s. Syracuse's black community exists in three locations: South Side, West Side, and University Neighborhood. In the post-civil rights era (1970-2015), this separation has led to a separate black identity for each location. In general, working poor blacks live in Syracuse's South Side, Afro-Latinos/as live in the city's West Side, and middle-class blacks live in the city's University Neighborhood that is in Southeast Syracuse near Syracuse University (see Table 1). Association with each location has resulted in different realities for each black group mentioned. For example, in Syracuse, the worse inequities in housing, education, environment, and police treatment exist in the city's segregated South and West Sides. These barriers trace back to 1937, when older areas near downtown Syracuse and on the South Side were originally redlined and identified as undesirable (Syracuse Then and Now, 2014).

In the late 1950s, downtown areas, especially a downtown area called the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward, and the people living within the areas were further victimized by urban renewal and slum clearance policies, which destabilized and displaced much of the black community with Highway 81 and hospitals bordering the highway and Syracuse University (Stamps, 2008). The black movement into the city's University Neighborhood is a relatively new phenomenon that traces back to the 1980s, with the noticeable growth of black professionals migrating into Central New York, especially to work at Syracuse University. As for the city's West Side, even though housing is the most inexpensive here of the three regions, many non-Spanish speaking blacks will not move there, because they do not speak Spanish or identify with Afro-Latinos/as. Combined, the geographic divisions mentioned have created identification problems within the black





**Table 1. Blacks in Syracuse, New York (Social Explorer, 2015)**

community. As a result, cultural fragmentation has been driven by intraracial segregation, which in turn has been driven by cultural, linguistic, educational, and employment differences.

The following research is based primarily on qualitative information but does use some statistical quantitative information to supplement the qualitative information. For example, most interviewees were highly critical of the low opportunities for quality employment that Syracuse

had to offer to persons of African heritage. This is supported by research data that shows unemployment in Syracuse rose from 4.6 percent in 1990 to 8.6 percent in 2010 (Zip Atlas, 2013). However, this research relies on the information provided by interview because it allows emphasis to be placed on the individual experience in order to allow the play audience and readers to have empathy for the interviewees. The thesis emphasis on the individual is only one element in the attempt to improve their individual and collective lives. The author, acknowledging that this focus makes it difficult to make generalizations about the black experience, intends to research other self-improvement elements such as the larger black freedom struggle for political-economic freedom and collective self-determination as human and people rights in future scholarship and artistic expression.

The microcosm known as “Meeting at Mom’s” challenges white mainstream notions of black identity, which views all blacks as possessing one racialized identity fixed by the traumatic experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery and Jim Crow (legal racial discrimination). For the purpose of this work, the black identity that “Meeting at Mom’s” will interrogate is defined in relation to the “one drop rule”: that historically, any person with one drop of African blood has been seen as a black person prone to be athletic, criminal, irresponsible, lazy, musical, savage, sexually promiscuous, shiftless, servile, and of low intelligence (Zack, *American Mixed Race*, 1995). Therefore, in the mainstream’s popular conception of blackness—one that many persons of African descent have also adopted—a person of African heritage is “black” based on the “one drop rule,” regardless of their education, life experiences, physical traits, and upbringing. And thus, regardless of countless difference among them, traditionally blacks have been stereotyped, pathologized and type-cast as having an identical experience and persona.

The “one drop rule” was established after the landmark U.S. Supreme Court verdict in *Plessy versus Ferguson* (1896) that ruled that Homer Plessy was a black man. The case involved Homer Plessy, an octoroon (or one-eighth black), who in Louisiana tried to ride a racially segregated train in the “whites only” car. He was arrested, fined, and he protested the arrest. In Plessy’s case, the Louisiana and the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states have the right to determine color classifications according to the laws of the state where the incident occurred. Ultimately, this case established racial identity based on mainstream white American social views on racial heritage and social association (Downing, Nichols, & Webster, 2005).

The precedents set by *Plessy* still affect racial identification and social attitudes. This still occurs despite the fact that many African descendants in Central New York have multicultural backgrounds that also include the intermingling of Asians/Europeans/Indigenous/Latin heritages. In “Meeting at Mom’s,” the play examines some of the effects of skin differences among African Americans, such as “Belinda” sadly recalling her upbringing in Syracuse during the 1950s and 1960s and being called “banana girl” because of her light skin (Belinda, Interview by the Author, 2012).

The crisis in racial identification and social attitudes mentioned were historically compounded in South Side Syracuse in the 1950s, when its core black community lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward. Prior to the 1960s, this downtown black community was vibrant with churches, shops and social activities (Kirst, 2010). Belinda was born prior to the 1960s and issues of black skin were not uncommon. It was noted in Sean Kirst’s interview of photographer Marjorie Wilkins, “She recalls how she was allowed to make a purchase in the old Schrafft's ice cream parlor, but only because she was born with light skin” (Kirst, 2010).

**Table 1. Population Growth in Syracuse, 1940-2010**

Year	Black Population	Percentage Increase	Total Population	Percentage Change
1940	2,082	NA	205,967	NA
1950	4,586	120.3	220,583	7.1
1960	11,210	144.4	216,038	-2.1
1970	21,383	90.7	197,291	-8.7
1980	26,716	25.2	170,105	-13.8
1990	33,320	24.7	163,860	-3.7
2000	37,336	12.1	147,346	-10.1
2012	42,770	14.6	145,170	-1.5

*Source:* U.S. Census Bureau, 1940-2012.

Despite institutional separation by skin color, there was a general sense of a black community in Syracuse identified as the 15th Ward. The dispersal of the black community throughout Syracuse occurred after the re-development of the downtown area during urban renewal in the late-1950s-early-1960s. Majorie Wilkins discussed the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward in the above interview with Kirst. The article stated, “Until the neighborhood was demolished in the 1960s, it was home to most of the city's black families” (Kirst, 2010). The breaking up of the black community by the removal of the 15th Ward created cultural rifts and left Black Syracuse with

an identity crisis because blacks were no longer one group within the city. “‘There is no neighborhood,’ Marjory said, at least not in the way that she once knew it” (Kirst, 2010). Wilkins was attempting to explain the lack of community togetherness and the increase in crime in Black Syracuse.

The Syracuse in which interviewees like Belinda lived was a place of dramatic separation between the mainstream white population and populations of color. This has resulted in most Black Syracusans being marginalized by racial discrimination and racial bigotry. In housing, since 1960, Syracuse has been listed as one of the most segregated cities in the United States. During this time thousands of blacks were racially steered into downtown Syracuse’s South Side and near West Side, just as tens-of-thousands of whites and manufacturing industries were moving out of Syracuse to nearby suburbs, some of which were Baldwinsville, Camillus, Dewitt, Fayetteville-Manlius, and Liverpool. In contemporary times (2010), Syracuse is the ninth most segregated city in the United States (Knauss, 2012). This has resulted in the oppression of many local blacks by customary racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment (Stamps, 2008).

After World War II African Americans who arrived in Syracuse sent their children to public schools that were segregated by location. Most white students attended public schools in the city’s far more affluent suburbs and received an education that was far superior to the education received by students attending inner city schools (Dowty, 2011, Weaver, 2012). Belinda grew up in the Syracuse area in the 1970s. Like a large number of Black Syracusans, she did not graduate from high school, although she later earned her GED. The graduation rate for black males attending high school in Syracuse was 47 percent in 2010, and for black females it was 52 percent (Education, 2015). For Belinda, factors that resulted in dropping out were:

growing up in a single parent household; being a second mother to her younger siblings; and education being ranked second to earning an income to supplement her family's income (Belinda, 2012). Belinda was just one of many poor black people trying to survive Syracuse's systematic divestment of its central city, a pattern that traces back to the beginning of urban renewal and the development of Highway 81 in the late-1950s.

Belinda's family dilemma, increasingly became commonplace among Black Syracusans after the civil rights actions of the 1960s. Many of the people addressed in "Meeting at Mom's" experienced poverty at a rate much higher than in other Northeast areas. In contemporary times, many black South Side residents live in an impoverished situation. "Fifty-three percent of Syracuse's children live in poverty, the second-highest rate among New York's big cities, according to a report released today by the Fiscal Policy Institute," (Weaver, 2012). Since 1970, this has been accompanied by the lowest high school graduation rate of the major New York cities; which in-turn has resulted in lower rates of pay and an increase in marginalized life styles. This was compounded by the marked increase of Syracuse's postwar black population, decline of affirmative action, and decline of manufacturing industrial/working class employment (Cloe, Interview by the Author, 2012). Even today, in professional employment and in large companies, "very few African Americans are being hired in these capacities," (Jessica, Interview by the Author, 2012).

This is the socioeconomic backstory to the characters in the play, "Meeting at Mom's." In my work, I use research interviews to create the characters' backstories which allow for a more personal look at life in Black Syracuse than has been done thus far by research and writing of historians, sociologists, education scholars, such as Milton C. Sernett, K. Animashaun Ducre, S. David Stamps and Miriam Burney Stamps, and Deborah Davis. For example, Sernett's *North*

*Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (2002), focuses on Underground Railroad history; whereas in Stamps and Stamps, *Salt City and Its Black Community* (2008), the central focus is Syracuse's South Side/15<sup>th</sup> Ward, on which Ducre builds *A Place We Call Home: Gender, Race, and Justice in Syracuse* (2012), in her examination of Black Syracuse and environmental justice. In none of these important manuscripts do the aforementioned scholars document the construction of black identity in Syracuse through life stories and narrative theater.

My work attempts to extend what has been written on Black Syracuse by privileging personal insight into this community through art, to offer a fresh approach to looking at the obstacles faced by blacks as well as the successes of blacks in the area. My basic approach begins with the conceptual understanding that culture can be expressed through many different mediums and can be used to bridge the gaps created by categorization. For "Meeting at Mom's" the medium used to examine Syracuse African Americans is art as intergroup forum in the form of a dramatic play that has as its goal the reduction of prejudice by bringing diverse individuals into personal contact and/or learning to see others more clearly (Smith & Mackie, 2007). Central to my work is the combination of principles that originated in the 1960s within the Black Arts Movement, namely the blending of Maulana Karenga's belief in the importance of African ethics in African American art, with Amiri Baraka's belief that the African American life experience is a valid focal point for African American Art. The play, "Meeting at Mom's," examines the African American community and black lives to provide its audience with tools for understanding human relations in the post-civil rights era of Central New York (1970-2015). It seeks to build on the ever-increasing body of work of Black Syracuse, by introducing the concept of "community consciousness" to that experience and issues of identity for multicultural African

Americans in Greater Syracuse (Mugo, 2012). In the 1950s, community consciousness was first introduced in Conscious Theater in Africa. In the 1960s, this concept and medium were adapted to the African American experience in dramatic work that became the focal point of the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976). Written in the African Conscious Theater/Black Arts Movement tradition “Meeting at Mom’s” examines the identity crisis faced by multicultural blacks in Syracuse, with special attention paid to how they overcame those problems as a conscious community.

***The Study: Objectives and Justification***

“Meeting at Mom’s” examines racial conflicts in the Syracuse area which affect the ability of African Americans to navigate between their communities and white mainstream culture. The conflicts/environmental influences under examination are customary racial discrimination in housing, education, and employment. The play will analyze individual reactions and responses to racial discrimination/antagonism in Greater Syracuse as a model for understanding the black experience in the post-industrial U.S. Since the 1970s, the economic struggle of industrial cities has added to the racial conflict in cities such as Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, as unemployment has risen and financial opportunity has declined. This dramatic shift is subtly described in the backdrop of “Meeting at Mom’s.”

The main thrust of the play is its analysis of diversity of persons of African descent in Central New York from the perspective of multiracial intermingling and the complex creation of black identity, which has arguably been increasing since 1970. The increase in contact between different groups of people necessitates a look at the societal attitudes that exist toward ethnic



diversity. The societal framework of the United States has long been dominated by a white majority—primarily WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). WASP social behavior has served as the mainstream consciousness of the national psyche. Africans/Asians/Latins/Native Americans have had to fit into a social reality that has been shaped by the dominant white persona of middle-class family structure and values. In "Meeting at Mom's" Black Syracusans make a claim for ownership of that society, refusing to accept myopic limitations as legitimate or binding, and insisting on a society that is broader and deeper, more diverse and inclusive, multi-colored and multi-cultural.

This thesis translates that conflict and energy into material artistic expression, through theater: an open forum that explores the socioeconomic divide between the black and white communities, and exposes the tense emotions that exist. For "Meeting at Mom's," theater serves as a resource for the community that brings to light a variety of issues for discussion. Borrowing from African Conscious Theater, my play transfers ideas from a single person or group to a larger group. It intends to engage the audience, and to develop empathy and understanding for a situation by using theater to expose issues, and work on possible solutions. In my work, theater is used as an instrument for change by bringing to the attention of the community a variety of Black Syracusan experiences.

Moreover, writing about Black Syracusan lives in dramatic format allows their experiences to be discussed without injury to participants' personal lives. The names of the survey participants were changed in both the research analysis and in the play to allow discussion of sensitive topics. The removal of actual names and the alteration of characters in the play also provide the audience with a protective wall of separation: the audience can be exposed to the information without it becoming too personal.

“Meeting at Mom’s” incorporates elements of standard Western style theatrical writing designed to keep the audience captivated and invested in the lives of the play’s characters. Although the play exposes and explores real experiences and events, it is written so that the audience is guided through events from the viewpoint of an observer. This allows the audience to be exposed to the information in “Meeting at Mom’s” while also having an enjoyable experience. It allows the audience to think of the topics, and not be overwhelmed by them. By intersecting the methodologies of African Conscious Theater, Black Arts Movement, and Ethnography, Black Syracuse issues will be discussed, investigated, and brought to the community in my play. “Meeting at Mom’s” intends to instigate conscious change to bring about a future that has less racial tension and more open perspectives and possibilities for Syracuse’s black community.

### ***Theoretical Frameworks with Special Rationalization on the Black Arts Movement***

“Meeting and Mom’s” utilizes theoretical frameworks that were developed during the Black Arts Movement. This cultural and artistic movement paralleled the Black Power Movement, emphasizing African American life and sociopolitical expression as the focal point for artistic endeavors (Smethurst, 2005). The movement combined previous African American art forms to create visual and performance art that related to life in America and centered on the Southern Black Belt and the black urban experience. The African American urban lifestyle is a valid source of artistic endeavors and this dramatic work celebrates that reality. The play developed in this research addresses the problems of blacks, which was one of the purposes and directives given to black writers by the Black Arts Movement. Black Arts Movement theorist Larry Neal explained the tenets of the Black Power Movements and its effect on the black artist.

“The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968). The play, “Meeting at Mom’s” addresses this primary duty to the cultural needs of black people. It also addresses another essential question raised by the Black Arts Movement: “Whose vision of the world is finally more important and meaningful, ours or the white oppressors’?” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968). The play promotes the idea that each person’s view of the world is equal in worth. The Black Arts Movement promoted the concept of black worth.

The Black Arts Movement was part of the evolution of black politics and writing inspired by the political activities of the 1950s. It was formally launched in the mid-1960s, following the death of Malcolm X (Smethurst, 2005). In 1968, Black Arts Movement pioneer, Larry Neal, described the origin of the movement as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (Neal, 1968). Writers central to this movement, such as poet Amiri Baraka, wrote about the needs and culture of African Americans in the United States (Collins & Crawford, 2008).

Charged by the Black Art Movement, and addressing issues of identity, this research strives to give voice to the concerns of multicultural blacks in post-civil rights era Syracuse. “Meeting at Mom’s” asserts that there is value in the work produced during the Black Arts Movement. In the 1960s, the movement was popularized by an exciting group of activists, among whom were Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Maulana Karenga. It developed into popular avant-garde art intentionally focused on the life experiences of blacks, and was given voice and expression by the writing and art of African Americans (Smethurst, 2005). It looked at the traditional African American black experience as originating from Black Belt South; a name that

came to refer to Southern states whose population in the 1800s included millions of black slaves. The movement also examined the urban experience in major cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. The Black Arts Movement was a combination of different art genres, blending jazz, blues, and beats with spirituals and western styles. More important, it paved the way for twenty-first century artists by establishing the importance of the lived black urban experience in the United States. It placed importance not just on “black aesthetics,” but also on the entire life of the African American urban working class as part of living art by combining different forms of popular black culture into significant works of art. Black urban murals included black poetry in their public presentation, both in the display of the written text and the performance of black poetry at art events. The result was a combination of the emotive and the creative, as facets of African American art.

The Black Arts Movement developed in parallel with the African Conscious Theater Movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the African Liberation Movement on the African continent. Both movements valued social justice and urgently sought liberation from oppression. Poet, dramatist and essayist Larry Neal explains this in his book of essays, *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (1989). Neal postulates, “For without a change of vision, we are slaves to the oppressor’s ideas and values—values that finally attack the very core of our existence. Therefore, we must see the world in terms of our own realities.” In this statement, Neal explained the need for a “black aesthetic” that included black writers writing about their own realities. This was a new political stance that was not taken during the first African American political artistic movement, the Harlem Renaissance, of the 1920s and ‘30s. According to Baraka, “...for the first time, black people were defining their art, their aesthetic.”

The Harlem Renaissance was noted by Black Arts Movement writers to be catering to white audiences, and not to black aesthetics or to black audiences (Collins & Crawford, 2008). Catering to black aesthetics is what “Meeting at Mom’s” intends to do. “Black aesthetic” is a black arts concept that was both popular and revolutionary in that, artistically, blacks were not considered beautiful by art critics. The “black aesthetic” came from African American concepts of a cultural avant-garde rooted in a black vernacular (Smethurst, 2005). The aesthetic model was developed by black artists who voiced the idea that “Black is Beautiful.” The mantra and theme song of the movement was James Brown’s popular song, “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (Collins & Crawford, 2008).

“Meeting at Mom’s” is also influenced by the works of Black Arts Movement playwright and poet Ntozake Shange. Shange is credited with being the writer who created interest in black female writers. Her greatest work, the monologue play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* became a model for a new genre for playwrights in the 1970s. Her book broke barriers on the tail end of the Black Arts Movement (1976), becoming internationally acclaimed while being showcased at Henry Street Settlement’s New Federal Theater in New York City—a Black Art Movement theater. In the following year, this worldwide recognition resulted in *For Colored Girls* becoming the second play produced by an African American woman to be featured on Broadway.

Although Shange’s writing has inspired my own theatrical writings, in “Meeting at Mom’s” Shange’s choreopoem monologues differ from my dialog in that mine uses the actual words of people I have interviewed, rather than being literary poetry about their lives. Moreover, as a theatrical play, “Meeting at Mom’s” uses the Black Arts Movement theatrical model of

using short plays and oral testimonies of African Americans for the play's narration. Oral traditions are linked to the creative process on both the North American and African continents. The history of Africa was passed down by oral narrative on the African continent; and African American culture has been notably impacted by the African experience, and by slave hollers and spiritual songs in the U.S. Both cultures generally place emphasis on the emotive nature of black arts, and on addressing human relations and identity through black voices.

The play, "Meeting at Mom's," connects to the Black Arts Movement in that it is about black lives for the purpose of improving the living conditions of blacks in Syracuse, New York. It will do so by blending of Maulana Karenga's belief in the importance of African ethics in African American art with Amiri Baraka's belief that the African American life experience is a valid focal point for African American art. In particular, "Meeting at Mom's" is partial to Karenga's Kawaiida philosophy whose central aim "is the continuing quest to define and become the best of what it means to be both African and human in the fullest sense" (Karenga, 2014). Ultimately, this thesis articulates the importance of striving to be the best human possible despite obstacles.

## **Review of Relevant Theater Traditions**

This thesis uses three methods to examine multicultural black people in the Syracuse area. The first and second methodological approaches use the Black Arts Movement and African Conscious theater frameworks briefly discussed below to create an analytical play on multicultural African Americans in Syracuse. The third methodological approach—which will be examined in its own section (on page 41)—is Ethnographic: the characters in the play have been developed from interviews and life stories.

### ***The Black Arts Movement***

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to define and identify American “blackness.” It created guidelines for black artists including ethics, aesthetics, composition and community awareness as part of a national movement to promote black arts. The Black Arts Movement moved black art from the sidelines to mainstream society in an effort to create a black national consciousness that valued the works of blacks as equal to the works of white mainstream artists. The Black Arts Movement created a black identity within the art community that was reflective of Black Nationalism.

Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones, is credited with founding the Black Arts Movement on the East Coast, while Maulana Karenga, formerly Ronald Everett, is credited with being the source of the “Black Cultural Nationalist Movement” on the West Coast (Smethurst, 2005). Karenga is best known for establishing the US Organization (“us African people”), and the Kawaïda thought and practice that forms the intellectual and spiritual foundation for the Pan-African holiday Kwanzaa. The Black Cultural Nationalist Movement that Karenga co-pioneered asserted the belief that African Americans can find value in African ethics instead of relying on

white mainstream societal views for self-evaluation. Karenga believed that African American art should blend with African values—a belief with which East Coast Black Cultural Nationalists, such as Baraka, agreed. However, Karenga’s idea had a slightly different conceptual undergirding; he asserted that the future of African American art and life had to begin with an appreciation for the black grassroots experience in the U.S.

Although the traditions of African American art emanated from generations of African American writers and artists who paved the way, the predecessors were more inspiration than imitation to the Black Arts Movement writers. Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Sterling Brown and other writers and performers brought African Americans to the forefront in theater long before the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the Harlem Renaissance writers relied on western white standards for art and literature (Collins & Crawford, 2008).

Further, there is a long history of intersection between black poetry and black theater, because the writers of both are often one and the same person. Many Americans know of the great black poet and playwright Langston Hughes, but there is also a multitude of black poets and writers that emerged in the 1960s belonging to or coexisting with the Black Arts Movement and the audience they wrote for was the black audience (Collins & Crawford, 2008). Some of these artists include “Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, A.B. Spellman, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Haki Madhubuti” (Smethurst, 2005). Arguably the most famous of these artists was Baraka; who was also credited with giving the Black Arts Movement its name. His poetry influenced artistic work in many urban centers before he returned to Newark, New Jersey, and established his own center for the arts. Baraka has been noted as having started the Black Arts Movement after the assassination of Malcolm X (Collins & Crawford, 2008).



During the Black Power era, Baraka worked closely with Larry Neal, the principal theorist of the Black Arts Movement, who is credited with initially challenging black writers to create material that was relevant to the black community. Neal wrote of this in *The Drama Review* in 1968, “The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968). In the article, he further outlined the need for a “black aesthetic” that set aside white western traditions. In 1968, Neal explained how he conceptualized the new black aesthetic:

When we speak of a “Black aesthetic” several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the usable elements of Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.

Neal’s definition of a “black aesthetic” places value on African Americans, their lives, their arts and their culture (Collins & Crawford, 2008). He goes on to state that, “there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African-American cultural tradition” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968). For Neal, the influence of the Black Arts Movement artists on the African American experience must take into consideration the Third World liberation struggle abroad. Neal described this part of the black aesthetic, “The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors’?” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*,

1968). Neal felt that liberation from oppression was a new stance for writing in the United States. He wrote, “These are basic questions. Black intellectuals of previous decades failed to ask them” (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968). In stating this, he exposed how black writers in the 1960s differed from their predecessors in other black literary movements.

In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement inspired a sub-movement in the Black Theater Movement. Writer Elaine Langlois wrote an article chronicling the birth and progression of Black Theater in the United States (Langlois, 1982). She recounted the birth of Black Theater in the United States from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, becoming fully established in the 1930s with such actors as Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Langlois noted four important actions of the Black Theater Movement: the production of plays written by black playwrights, the development of plays that depict black lifestyles, the creation of characters that were multifaceted, and the ability of black theaters to support the careers of black actors. The community support shown by black theater companies actually predated the principles of Black Arts Movement founder Amiri Baraka. Baraka supported other poets’ careers by offering them publication and career promotion (Thomas, *The Shadow World*, 1978).

The artist community support in Black Theater began in the Harlem Renaissance with the actors and writers of the LaFayette Players and LaFayette Theater (ArtsEdge, 2003). In an oral interview Sr. Francesca Thompson, daughter of Harlem Renaissance actress Evelyn Preer, described the Harlem Renaissance theater activities. She recalled,

The (LaFayette) Players were, by 1924, to be divided into four different groups—the group in Harlem at the Lafayette, the group in Chicago, a group traveling up and down the East coast in the black theaters, and then a group that traveled throughout the South that starred my mother and father. They introduced black

serious drama in more than 25 cities; to people that had never seen blacks doing any kind of drama.

Thompson's depiction of black theater projects as one unit with separate branches suggests a community in black theater that transcends location and distance and focuses on the depiction of black actors as capable theater professionals. Black theater progressed from the Harlem Renaissance era but continued to maintain a strong community of support. Some of the progression is attributed to arts funding that was available as the result of national programs such as the Federal Theater Project of the middle and late 1930s (Langlois, 1982). The Federal Theater Project had a branch that was for blacks, The Negro Theater Project.

The 1960s and 1970s marked a period of change in black theater in the United States because of the political influence of the civil rights era. The plays produced were similar to Lorraine Hansberry's plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s in that they focused on African American life but deviated from the traditional western styles of playwriting. Ntozake Shange is noted for developing her style of choreopoem play at the New Federal Theater. Plays and poetry, performance art, mingled during the Black Arts Movement to create new experimental performances that reflected black life and art in the United States. Black theater became a forum for both artistic creation and political voice.

### *Conscious Theater*

The use of different art forms in the creation of a theatrical work is not just an element of the Black Arts Movement. It was also done in the African Conscious Theater Movement during the 1950s-1970s. While the Black Arts Movement incorporated the southern black folk culture into the arts, the spiritual artistic element originated in Africa and was the central link between theater in the United States and theater in Africa (Walker, 1983). This link to Africa was rooted in the 1950s and '60s theater concept of "Theater of Consciousness": one that brought the audience into contact with the issues and problems that affected the community. In "Meeting at Mom's," community consciousness provides the framework within which the community analyzes culture and identity throughout the play. According to scholar and leader Amilcar Cabral (1970),

Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinate of history, by the positive and negative influences which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society as well as among different societies.

The cultural significance of drama and theater is as a medium of the people to express their history and to voice concerns about their future. Societies throughout the world are depicted differently because of cultural heritage. Theater and drama add to the cultural heritage of a society by placing ideas and concerns into stories that are viewable by and understandable to an audience.

Conscious Theater was the theatrical movement in Africa that first utilized the concept of Theater of Consciousness in a revolutionary style. It was a removal of the Western European Theater imposed on Africa during colonization. It was also a medium of change in that it re-

instated African theater forms to return African culture to its rightful importance in Africa. It was also a means of change in that it allowed the African Liberation Movement to pass the messages to communities and build support.

Theater of Consciousness was described by Bernard J. Baars, “A message is ‘broadcast’ globally, but it is interpreted locally in the mind of each audience member” (Baars, 1997).

Bernard’s statement was part of his scientific explanation of the theater model and why it is a good method of communication. Bernard describes the impact of consciousness and why it is a useful tool for learning. Conscious Theater uses the tools of “Theater of Consciousness” for learning and developed it to instigate change in Africa.

Theater is the performance of cultural ideas and attitudes, while a drama is the story behind what is performed. African theater is a performance of culture. It includes elements of nature, relationships, animals, people and the supernatural or the unexplained. These elements in theater represent the relationships found in society. Man is the receiver of experiences with nature, other men and other societies. Drama is the story that man tells about those experiences. It is the oral history, the dance, the song, the words that express man's situation in his environment (Mugo, 2012).

Cabral (1970) explained man's cultural situation as “relationships and type of relationships among individual or collective components of a society. To speak of these is to speak of history, but it is also to speak of culture.” Drama examines the relationships that exist in a society, and therefore it is a creator of both history and culture. African culture can be examined in terms of its development of theater, because theater is the development of opinions

and ideas related to the culture. The aesthetic qualities of African drama have not been fully outlined but the relationship between African drama and culture has been (Mugo, 2012).

Ruth Finnegan's book, *Oral Literature in Africa*, discusses African storytelling and performance as forms of drama. Finnegan explains how elements of western theater are present in African performance but are used differently. Finnegan wrote, "Thus storytelling can only be spoken of as possessing certain dramatic characteristics, rather than being 'drama' in the full sense" (Finnegan, 1970). She does not "authenticate" African drama as a theater form similar to western theater, but she does expose all the critical elements of theater in the performances she describes. The components of African theater as they are described by Finnegan would make an elaborate theatrical production of several hours.

The stage for African drama is the African village and gatherings in different communities instead of the classical setting of western theater. The "village" performances are linked together by the use of dance, drums, masks, mimicry, traditional characters and settings.

Though different elements of drama are stressed in different African cultures, one theme that seems to run through almost all these African performances is the overriding significance of music and dance and the secondary importance of the spoken word. (Finnegan, 1970)

Again, Finnegan does not validate African cultural performances but does recognize the importance of the traditional elements. Finnegan looks at the features of western theater that are exhibited in African drama, but states that they do not add to the interpretations of traditional "tragic archetypes." African drama is set aside from traditional or "western" drama and said by Finnegan to emphasize song, dance and mime.

African theater is historic theater despite Finnegan's critique; African drama uses all the theatrical elements and performance elements used in Western theater. Finnegan negates the historical value of African theater. This is an extreme error in Finnegan's writing in that modern African theater evolved from historic African theater and reflects the culture of its time and place, just as Elizabethan theater reflected its era and location. A difference in the style of theater does not remove the fact that African performances are theater.

Joachim Fiebach argues against Finnegan's position that the elements of African performance do not fit in with western theater. "...African cultures do bear out what western anthropologists, sociologists and artists such as Brecht have advanced about theatricality and performance" (Fiebach, 2004). Fiebach uses four examples of African performance to argue that African performance does have all the standard elements associated with theater in the western world. He uses examples that date from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century to show the relevance of African performance to western theater.

African drama is expected to include elements of dance, song and storytelling but it is not a deviation from western theater norms. Elizabethan drama is said to have included "dances, jigs, popular ballads...folklore..." (Gassner, 1967) which are some of the elements in African theater. Other similarities exist between African and Western Theater and in theater productions in general. One specific feature of theater is that it offers a method of relaying a message from the actors to the audience. Elizabethan theater was written in different ways; some plays were written for the courtiers and some were written for the people. Elizabethan and African theater both follow the one-step flow and two-step flow models of communication.

The one-step model of communication is to write a play or stage a theatrical work to be seen by masses of people and flow the message from the stage to the audience (Mda, 1993). The two-step flow method allows for the production of drama that is for a select group of leaders who then disperse the message of the play (Mda, 1993). The Elizabethan dramas were aimed at courtiers while African drama is aimed at community leaders. "It involves the assumption that individuals are not social isolates, but members of social groups in interaction with other people" (Cabral, 1970). The message of the drama is spread through association by the viewers of the drama, whether they are elitist courtiers or common leaders, ideas can be spread by hierarchical contact with others or by the general masses.

Culture, theater art in particular, can be a medium for change, and can direct that change in a positive direction. Not all theater is directed at change, some is directed at creating an understanding of a situation or problem. Theater must have cultural relevance if it hopes to create either understanding or change. The audience must be able to relate to the message, to understand, and to grasp its worth. So the presenter of drama must be able to convey the message through methods whereby the audience will be able to understand and appreciate the message that is of cultural relevance.

Storytelling is a type of theater in both the acting and the drama. Both the character and the author are telling tales. The story is the message that is sent from the actors to the audience. Drama varies as to the type of story; it can be historical, cultural, emotional or variations and combinations of literary themes. Orature, the African form of oral literature that is comprised of oral history and stories that have been passed down is arguably a type of drama. It tells a story to an audience that can have varied messages.



Playwright and orature scholar Micere Mugo in *Writing and Speaking from the Heart of My Mind* defines theater and drama in Africa in a perspective of understanding and historical significance (2012). In explanation of African Community Theater, Mugo states,

Drawing as it does on African orature, genres, and aesthetics that inform and shape the artistic production process, Community Theater is created with the broad masses of the people as the primary intended audience. (Mugo, 2012)

African theater is presented as a form of expression that is expressive of African history and society.

Theater can be examined as a voice for the African people to show positive and negative changes in society. Dr. Mugo explains the loss of cultural authenticity during the colonial period when the state produced European forms of theater and not theater that was rooted in African tradition (Mugo, 2012). Theater messages must be culturally relevant to the audience if the message is to be understood and appreciated. The removal of African messages, stories, dances and songs during the colonial period led to a theater that was not genuine in reflecting the culture.

Mugo details how European theater is rejected in Africa and how “extramural theater” became the voice of the masses and of resistance to colonial domination in Kenya and Tanzania. In Tanzania, the theatrical form, called “mass-based theater”, was manipulated and commercialized to create demand for products. The commercialization of “mass-based theater” continued into the neo-colonial period as a means of creating tourism. “Mass-based theater” is defined in part as realism, telling the truth, but is also defined as creating a weapon against the system of oppression.

Theater becomes a functional art in that it has a purpose, giving the people a voice but this is an aside from European or Western art which is said to be nonfunctional and possessing aesthetic value, but having no direct applications. “The creative process becomes an embracing act; the final product, a shared experience. This contradicts the paradigm of ‘art for art’s sake’...” (Mugo, 2012). African theater has a purpose, the liberation of people from oppression and the communication of positive ideals.

Zakes Mda’s “When People Play People” (1993) discusses the development of African theater from an analytical perspective. It traces the origin of African theater from historic and cultural significance to the birth of an art form. Mda also differs from Finnegan in giving value to African performance as a form of theater. Mda speaks of traditional performances as “traveling theater” with traditional elements. “This they did on their own initiative, or at the invitation of important personages in host villages, and their performance was comprised of dance, story-telling and drumming.” Mda discusses the same elements as Finnegan, but gives the African performances credit for theatrical value.

Mda further discusses how African theater developed as both the voice of the African people and the expression of African history and culture. Mda explains the ups and downs in the development of African theater, from the problems of censorship to the creation of an artistic form and ideology. The new theater art form derived its value from the masses and popular theater. “Although this new theater continues to use the same age-old proverbs and riddles, songs and dances, these forms are not imposed on the people by outside forces who think that is how an African should be” (Mda, 1993). The new theater art form is culturally relevant and it is more culturally “authentic” than the western theater norms imposed on African culture.

African theater is defined as creating a consciousness among the people and has importance as catalyst in expressing the views and sentiments of the African people. "Drama can raise consciousness because it is a mode of communication that has a life of its own..." (Mda, 1993). That consciousness is an important element in culturally aware theater; but does every show need to have a message? It can be argued that all performance has a message. What varies is the level at which that message is understood by the audience. That is the importance of communication between the audience and the dramatist.

Mda defines three requirements of theatrical performance: "developed communication, motivating and developing communities and raising a critical consciousness or awareness" (Mda, 1993). The development of communication is the act of conscientizing the audience and making them aware of the message. The idea of raising the consciousness of the audience is the importance of cultural significance in theatrical works. An author or performance group can choose to make a production that in the Western ideal is just for enjoyment but that does not mean that it is without a message. The message may be as simple as enjoyment.

Theater is like any other means of communication; it can be used idly or with purpose. If a house is on fire, and we pick up a phone to call the fire department that is correct communication. We would not want to yell to the fireman who is blocks away nor would we call a friend and talk about the weather. Theater can be viewed as the phone that is used to tell people the situation. It could be used idly to discuss the weather but it would be more beneficial if theater communicated an important message, like that of the house being on fire.

A question arises at times about what right a theater group or a writer has to tell someone what is an important issue? The answer is: The same right as anyone has in a community. A

person would be glad if their neighbor told them the house was on fire instead of letting them burn. A theater lesson is similar; it is better to learn of a problem before it is at its worst or if possible when change can be made. Awareness is a community responsibility and Community Theater must take up the responsibility of bringing about awareness in the audience.

Theater is culture, and as Cabral said, culture influences relationships between men, environments and societies (Cabral, 1970). To separate theater from its ability to contribute to society would be to stop it from being cultural. Theater and drama can add to the benefits of society or they can detract and that is the importance of theater of consciousness. Conscious theater adds to the benefits that society receives from the theatrical art form. It is not just a belief in the relevance of African culture to Western theater. It is a belief in the relevance of theater to society.

## Literature Review

The goal of this research is to examine black identity in Syracuse, New York. Black identity shapes the life and culture of people of African descent. During the 1960s and 1970s, a “black aesthetic” was developed by the Black Arts Movement that theorized black space and identity in regards to white mainstream society. This “black aesthetic” has been discussed in literary journals from the 1960s to the present.

Some writers have argued that the Black Arts Movement limited black artists to political issues. Other writers have called the “black aesthetic” a natural progression in the political lives of black Americans. The following articles discuss “black aesthetics” as a theory, the Black Theater Movement during the 1960s and 1970s, the black female writer in the Black Arts Movement and the predecessors and successors of the movement. Following a discussion of the critical literature about the Black Art Movement is a look at some of the articles written by members of the Black Arts Movement. Finally, at the end of the review, this paper presents a look at the available literature on blacks in Syracuse.

The theory of the Black Arts Movement has been discussed by scholars since the 1960s when the movement began. The principal Black Arts theorist, Larry Neal, wrote several journal articles about the movement and the movement’s theoretical foundation. Since Neal’s original Black Arts Movement articles, the debate has continued as to the aesthetics of the movement, its positive contributions and its anti-white concepts. Articles have been published in top black scholarly journals that analyze the literary works created by Black Arts Movement writers; some of the journal articles analyze the movement writers and others compare Black Arts Movement writers and their work to that of predecessors and successors. John Runcie, Elsa Honig Fine,

Darwin T. Turner, David Lionel Smith, bell hooks and Daniel Matlin have offered different perspectives of the theory behind the Black Arts Movement.

John Runcie (1970), in *The Black Culture Movement and the Black Community*, asserts that establishing a cultural identity for blacks in the United States is a difficult process because of conflicting value systems in white and black America. Runcie compares integration philosophy with the philosophy of the Black Arts and Black Power movements that celebrated blackness. Further, Runcie contrasts the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s (Runcie, 1976).

Defining “what is black art” is the concept behind Elsa Honig Fine’s article (1971), *Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement*. Fine criticizes the Black Arts Movement for reverse racism and for a lack of literary consistency. She promotes the ideal of a “Black Aesthetic” that relates to the African American lifestyle but as a category of American Art instead of as a separate reality. Further, Fine places Black Arts Movement art in a secondary category of protest, propaganda and political art (Fine, 1971).

Darwin T. Turner (1987), *Retrospective of a Renaissance*, stresses the difficulty that exists in defining the progress of the 1950s and 1960s in relation to the overall black struggle for equality in the United States. Turner attempts to clarify the theory and place of the Black Power movement in the context of the 200-year struggle of blacks to attain liberation. Turner concludes by contrasting the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, identifying both as progressions of black culture with different significances (Turner, 1987).

David Lionel Smith (1991), *The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics*, discusses a lack of literary criticism and research into the Black Arts Movement. Smith postulates that there is a

need for critical discourse about the Black Arts Movement in order to examine fully the theory and philosophy of the movement. Smith observes that anthologies of the Black Arts Movement do not give voice to the full meaning of the literature that was created during the movement (Smith D. L., 1991).

The article penned by bell hooks (1995), *An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional*, discusses how a black art aesthetic from the racially segregated South incorporated political statements as a natural part of the art. The beauty in the lives of poor blacks despite mainstream standards for beauty is explained by hooks. The author asserts that the black aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement was a necessary and natural construction of the black political voice. However, hooks postulates that the Black Arts Movement limited black artists by insisting on political statements (hooks, 1995).

Daniel Matlin's article (2006), *"Lift up Yr Self!" Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka*, presents the Black Arts Movement from a perspective of violence and rape. Matlin outlines the black males' assertion of Black Power as a means of forcing submission on women. However, Matlin asserts that although Amiri Baraka has been seen as part of the black macho attitude, in fact Baraka promoted new ideas of black manhood. Also, Matlin outlines the history of Baraka's involvement in and foundation of the Black Art Movement (Matlin, 2006).

The Black Theater Movement that was part of the Black Arts Movement was also spearheaded by Black Arts Movement founder Amiri Baraka. Originally writing plays as LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS) in Harlem after leaving his white Jewish wife, moving to Harlem and converting to the Muslim religion. He produced black theatrical productions both at BARTS and later at a second theater in New

Jersey. Daphne S. Reed, Vivian I. Davis, and Sandra G. Shannon have penned articles that follow the career of Amiri Baraka and the Black Theater Movement.

The article written by theater director Daphne S. Reed (1970), *LeRoi Jones: High Priest of the Black Arts Movement*, explains the evolution of Jones into Baraka in relationship to the plays he wrote in the 1960s before and after his conversion to the Muslim religion. Reed discusses Jones as the Black Arts Movement founder, his revolutionary theaters and his theatrical philosophy. She acknowledges Baraka as the force behind the Black Arts Movement that defined Black Theater for the 1960s generation (Reed, 1970).

David Haberly's three stage model for the cultural advancement of oppressed people is the major subject of Vivian I. Davis' article (1981), *Black American Literature: A Cultural Interpretation*. The article examines the progress of Black Arts Movement artists in comparison to the artists that came before it. Davis did not find that Black Arts Movement theatrical characters represented new theater characters, and felt the characters fell into five types that already existed.

Amiri Baraka's plays from the 1960s are compared to the more modern work of August Wilson by Sandra G Shannon (2003) in *Evolution or Revolution in Black Theater*. Black Nationalism and the black aesthetic are the common concepts examined in the plays of the two playwrights. Shannon expresses the need for Black Theater as a separate theatrical space in which blacks can examine issues that affect the black community (Shannon, 2003).

The black male was not the only voice of the Black Theater movement; black females were part of the dissension in response to the image of blacks that was portrayed by mainstream white media. Black female playwrights began to voice their own concerns in theatrical works,



setting aside traditional theater forms and creating their own space and dialog. Women of the Black Theater movement were the concern of authors Olga Barrios and Harryette Mullen as they traced the genesis of black females in theater.

Post-colonial literature expert Olga Barrios' article (2003) about black female playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s, *From Seeking One's Voice to Uttering the Scream*, focuses on four black female playwrights: Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Aishah Rahman, and Alexis De Veaux. These writers provide a look at the agony felt by black women in the United States that was endured in silence until uttered in the plays created by black females of the Black Arts Movement. The article presents a chronology of these black female playwrights, demonstrating their individual contributions and their connections with each other (Barrios, 2003).

Ntozake Shange and Allison Mills are the focus of Harryette Mullen's article (2004), *Artistic Expression Was Flowing Everywhere*. Mullen examines black female writers who were an intricate part of the Black Arts Movement and describes how they shaped the dialog between black men and women of the 1970s. The progression of black female writers from bohemian to radical is also examined in the article (Mullen, 2004).

The effect of the Black Arts Movement on generations other than the founding generation is important. The worth of the movement has been the subject of critical dialog since its inception in the 1960s. Trey Ellis' article looks at the effect of the Black Arts Movement on the generation that immediately followed it, the 80's generation. Sandra G. Shannon's article, mentioned previously, also analyzes the effect of the movement on literature that was written after it.

Trey Ellis' article (1989), *The New Black Aesthetic*, explains the mindset of Post- Black Arts Movement artists in how they differed from their predecessors and how they benefited from earlier movements. He asserts that New Black Aesthetic (NBA) artists are the next step in the evolution of black culture, not limited by white standards as the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were, nor reactionary to racism like the artists of the Black Arts Movement. He also promotes a new concept, the "cultural mulatto," one who navigates life in both the white and the black worlds (Ellis, 1989).

Black Arts Movement era writers and theorists have also published their opinions on the Black Arts Movement's goals and ideals. Larry Neal published many articles on the Black Arts Movement before his death in 1981. One Neal article, "The Black Arts Movement", was published in the 1968 Summer issue of *Drama Review*. Printed posthumously in the *Black Scholar Journal* was his article, "The Social Background of the Black Arts Movement," Vol. 18 1987. His book of essays was also published posthumously, by his wife Evelyn Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, 1989. The book contains Neal's essays, a selection of his dramatic work and selections of his poetry. Neal's book holds three essays which focus on the role of the Black writer, one essay each on the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power Movement and Malcolm X, as well as several literary critiques.

In his 1968 *Drama Review* article, Neal postulates the positions and theories of the Blacks Arts Movement while it was in progress.

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of

the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. (Neal, *The Black Arts Movement*, 1968)

In stating this, Neal positions the Black Arts Movement in both a political stance and a social stance. The political stance is black power and the social stance is that of a black community in the United States.

Larry Neal's 1987 article further explains the political position that was taken in the Black Arts Movement from a historical perspective of what led to the movement and how he became involved. Neal poses the same questions that were being asked before the beginning of the Black Arts Movement and how they, writers in the movement, attempted to answer those questions.

At the time, the Civil Rights Movement was going on. People were beginning to take sides and trying to discuss issues about various things. One of the issues that arose was what was the role of literature? What was the role of the writer? How did we fit into all of this? (Neal, *The Social Background of the Black Arts Movement*, 1987)

Those questions started critical thinking in the civil rights era among black scholars. Larry Neal began to theorize on those issues and became the principle theorist of the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka called Larry Neal "the spiritual leader of the movement" (Neal, *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 1989).

Amiri Baraka, who died in January 2014, also wrote many essays, articles and poems. His article, "Black Art," 1987, written for *The Black Scholar* periodical, talks about his ideology for drama and art.

Black art, in the sense that we first used it, meant not only an art that was an expression of black life, but revolutionary art. The theater we spoke of was revolutionary theater, a theater that was black by color in that it was created by black people; black by culture, in that it was an expression of African culture; but also black in terms of its consciousness, that it wanted to create a political statement that would benefit black people.

This model from Baraka shaped black theater for the 1960s and 1970s. It is the basis for the theorization of most American black theaters even today. Baraka set a goal for black authors to write to a black audience about problems that affect black people. It is a premise that is being used in this research. The principle is that the lives and problems of blacks in Syracuse are worthy of being written about in a play and that the community should have knowledge of those problems.

Baraka wrote another article about the role of black art in the United States, “The ‘Blues Aesthetic’ and the ‘Black Aesthetic’: Aesthetics as the Continuing Political History of a Culture”, in the *Black Music Research Journal*, 11 No. 2, 1991. In the article, he asserts that mainstream society accepts the “Blues Aesthetic” but disconnects it from its black origins.

So we can claim an aesthetic for Blues, but at the same time, disconnect the historical continuum of the Blues from its national and international source, the lives and history of the African, Pan-African, and specifically Afro-American people.

Baraka explains that although black Americans have contributed to American art, that credit is robbed from them in the assimilation of that art.

Poet Lorenzo Thomas also wrote articles on his involvement in the Black Arts Movement. He was involved in UMBRA, a writers' workshop that was part of the Black Arts Movement. Thomas' article, "The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement," in *Callaloo* Literary Magazine (October 1978), discusses his involvement in the movement in New York City.

When I look back at that period, it is clear that, despite the normal diversity of personal tone and style, these writers all shared a common orientation. The young black writers in those years approached their work with a sense of outrage and with a missionary zeal borrowed from the Southern Civil Rights struggle and heightened by an urgency bred by their urban surroundings.

The article explains the genesis of the movement from the writers' perspective; that writing of the period was an outcry against the situation that existed for blacks in urban settings. The play in this research is also a look at life in an urban setting and how it has failed blacks who live in that environment.

More recently, Lorenzo Thomas has written about the Black Arts Movement and his involvement with Amiri Baraka. The article, "The Character of Consciousness," written for the *African American Review*, Summer-Fall, 2003, explains his relationship with Baraka.

There was a journal published in Paris called *Revolution*. And one of the issues, I think it was Spring 1964 number, included a special section called "Five Young African American Poets." The editors had, in fact, asked Baraka for some of his poems, and it was his idea to expand that invitation to include several others.

Thomas describes Baraka's altruistic nature that was the basis for a writers' community that involved compassion and sharing. Thomas further outlines how that altruism became part of the Black Arts Movement identity. This research, however, also looks at how black identity is projected in the Syracuse area.

The literature about blacks in Syracuse is not extensive; the book by the Stamps, *Salt City and Its Black Community*, is the best known work on the subject. Other sources are *A Place We Call Home: Gender, Race, and Justice in Syracuse* from K. Animashaun Ducre (2012), *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* from Milton C. Sernett (2002), *The Syracuse Black Community: A Comparative Study 1970* from Seymour Sacks and Ralph Andrew (1974), followed by *The Syracuse Black Community, 1980* from Seymour Sacks and Robert K. Sacks (1987), and *Syracuse African Americans* from Barbara Sheklin Davis (2005).

Ducre looks at the negative environment that exists for blacks in Syracuse through her photo journal exploration of different areas in Syracuse (Ducre, 2012). Sernett surveys the historical nature of black presence in Syracuse from the arrival of the first blacks in Syracuse through the emancipation and reconstruction period of the 1860s and 1870s (Sernett, 2002). Seymour Sack's book from 1974 is a demographic profile of blacks in Syracuse that focuses on population, occupation, income and housing (Sacks & Andrew, 1974). The Sacks' book from 1987 deals with the Urban Renewal project in Syracuse as well as Syracuse housing projects (Sack & Sack, 1987). Davis's book, *Syracuse African Americans*, is a historical photo journal of blacks in Syracuse. This thesis will extend the Syracuse literature by adding the Black Syracusans' words and experiences, from interviews that inquired about how they have lived, worked and felt growing up and currently living in Syracuse.

Identity within the black race is a complex emotional development that does not simply result from reliance in white mainstream social structures where color acceptance is only for whites. Identity is also determined within the black race and by navigation between black and white worlds. The articles and books listed previously each have a different perspective on black identity and how it has been shaped by both past and present views on race. Understanding past and current concepts on race and identity will aid in future acceptance of ethnic diversity and color identity that is not part of white mainstream color acceptance patterns.

## **Ethnography**

Undergirding the development and assessment of characters for “Meeting at Mom’s” is ethnography. For this project, this play uses a multi-sited ethnography method to examine culture from multiple points of view. For example, the urban location of people and the bureaucracy that affects their lives are examples of multi-sited ethnographic locations (Lavenda & Schultz, 2000).

Central to my work are the interviews of multiracial blacks in Syracuse in August 2012 and in March and April 2013. The interviews were to determine the hereditary and social influences that created and shaped the lives of the people interviewed. The interviews gave insight into the identity that is established not by the societal views of blackness but by personal identification. Personal identification statements show how black people navigate societal attitudes on blackness and attitudes about other racial or cultural mixtures.

A selection of the interviews was then used to create a series of monologues meant to increase awareness of discrimination and to create empathy and understanding for the people interviewed by giving the community exposure to the problems faced by black people in Syracuse. Selected for the play were audio recorded interviews that allow a concise depiction of the black voice true to its spoken grammar and inflection. The recorded interviews were transposed and synthesized into monologues and then developed into dialog for the play. Since the interview subjects were all asked the same questions their responses have allowed them to be molded into group conversations in the play.

Further, the variation of racial identities was evident in the research interviews. Black people vary widely in their racial composition, genetically speaking. Interviews were conducted with people who had a direct biracial history and with people who had historic or non-immediate racially mixed backgrounds. Each person, while having a unique life, experienced similar



obstacles in their pursuit of economic success; those barriers appear to be the main reason for marginal life-styles. The interviews were informative in establishing the effects of discrimination on the formation of individual identity and the amount of oppression faced by the interviewees.

This current research project deals with an existing reality in Syracuse. That is, the dehumanization and marginalization of black people. Through creating awareness of racial discrimination, this study hopes to establish empathy and understanding for black people in a way that reestablishes their humanity. This research explores the contradictions that occur in Syracuse as a result of conflict between the legal state of equality as established by the New York State government and the experiences of the individuals interviewed by this researcher.

The play “Meeting at Mom’s” was created to examine black identity from the point of view of interviewed Black Syracusans. Identity in the United States is understood to be a product of the biological inheritance and the socioeconomic environment of the individual. Biological identity is inherited from our birth parents and that identity can sometimes be in conflict with mainstream American identity. Anthropologist John L. Caughey states, “Every large scale cultural system contains at least some contradictions” (Caughey, 2006). Contradictions in the American cultural system occur as a result of navigations between the dominant white society and the other ethnic cultures that exist in the United States. The role of blacks and persons of mixed cultural heritage has been defined by these societal norms as having a lesser social standing or as not equal to the standing of whites in society.

Complexion color and racial mixtures can create internal conflicts or contradictions in persons of African descent, and this manifests in dual and triple self-identities. A person may be

viewed by the American cultural system as black, but the person may have other ethnic identities. This research was instigated to examine those conflicts in the relationship between a person's black identity as established by American societal norms and their own cultural identity that is not always part of the societal identity.

Amílcar Cabral defines culture not as the biological heredity of a person, but as the history of a group of people.

Whatever may be the ideological or idealistic characteristics of cultural expression, culture is an essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant....History allows us to know the nature and the extent of the imbalance and conflicts (economic, political and social) which characterize the evolution of a society; culture allows us to know the dynamic syntheses which have been developed and established by social conscience to resolve these conflicts at each stage of its evolution, in the search for survival and progress.

Black people in the United States represent or come from many different historical backgrounds. Some of the interviewees had parents who migrated from the South, one had a parent who was directly from Africa, and another had heritage from Puerto Rico. Yet, all of these people are placed in two cultural categories, American and Black, despite those categories not accurately defining how these people navigate their daily lives and how they search for survival and progress.

The separation of different groups of people within a society into specific categories is called social stratification and is a type of hegemony. Hegemony is the imposition of the

hierarchy of one group upon another group by acceptance of the dominant group's standards because of minimal benefits to the subordinate group. One example would be the trinkets offered to the indigenous population in colonial America in exchange for Manhattan. Indigenous people had no land ownership prior to colonization but accepted land ownership as outlined by the European colonists. In early American colonization, most domination of indigenous cultures occurred by military force. Later, acceptance of colonial societal values became common-place. Stratification of society occurred as colonization spread and the hierarchy of the American society was established. This social hierarchy also affected the black image in the world.

Frantz Fanon wrote of the negative black image created by societal norms in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2005). Fanon emoted about his blackness, "...I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down..." (Fanon, 2005). Aime Cesaire was asked to define a state of blackness called "negritude," but a solid definition of ethnicity or blackness is not always possible. Each individual has a personal view or perspective on blackness and black identity. In the words of Cesaire (1995),

What is this reality?

An ethnic reality, some would say.

But the word ethnic should not confound us.

In fact, negritude is not essentially of a biological nature.

Beyond immediate biology; it obviously refers to something deeper, more precisely, to a sum of lived experiences which have defined and characterized one of the forms of human condition made by history. (Cesaire, 1995)

Each interviewee in this research has a personal statement about blackness or negritude developed from life experiences. The interviews and life histories derived from the interviews provide some insight into individuals' experiences that were directly affected by life in Syracuse.

Further, my identity research utilizes a concept developed by Caughey, which is the "Who am I..." identity of an individual, an introspective look at the self from various points of view. Fanon's look at his blackness is an introspective point of view. The Caughey idea is that in different social worlds individuals present themselves differently and their identities shift as they travel from one social realm to others in which they interact. A person has a different answer to "Who am I" when present to family, friends, work and/or other activities. Each social identity is a separate statement about the person that does not negate the previous statement but shows a different aspect of the individual (Caughey, 2006).

In addition to the barriers to success mentioned earlier in the section on "Statement of the Problem: Backstory," family and kinship can also be obstacles to racial equality. One interviewee, Sarg, was not allowed access to his biological mother's white immigrant Italian family (Sarg, Interview by the Author, 2013). Jessica, who was in an interracial marriage, was annoyed that other people in her community did not perceive her as an important part of her white in-laws' family. She was asked to pass on information to her white in-laws instead of being asked for decisions on her white step-grandchildren's activities. A neighbor told Jessica to ask the children's parents if they could attend an event during a time when Jessica was in charge of the children (Jessica, Interview by Author, 2012).

Interviewees also targeted social venues such as after-school dances or community events as not being open to persons of black heritage. Socialization with whites was deterred,

sometimes by force and other times by a lack of opportunity for social interaction. One interviewee, Belinda, was forcefully pulled away from an Italian boy during dance class. The teacher showed them their skin colors when separating them as an explanation for why they should not interact (Belinda, Interview by Author, 2012). Another interviewee, Monica, felt that she was left out of social activities in high school because of her black heritage (Monica-Dan, Interview by Author, 2012). Interviewee Jessica felt that Syracuse lacked night clubs or social venues where blacks and whites could develop social relationships (Jessica, 2012).

In conducting personal interviews with local area residents, I was seeking to explore the self-identification that goes beyond the ethnic-racial label. Although my interviews had a set of basic questions that I asked each interviewee, the responses I received differed and each person had developed a unique sense of identity in the community. Each informant, also, has different educational levels and work experiences. The interview experiences were developed into a selection of life histories. Later, the interviews became the dialog for the play, “Meeting at Mom’s.”

### ***Character Breakdown: Life Histories***

Anthropologist John L. Caughey developed a method for conducting interviews to create life histories. In his methods book, Caughey outlined the role culture plays in how a person navigates between different cultures while trying to conform to or achieve success in mainstream society in the United States. Caughey discusses a “bi-racial professor” who had been included in a colleague’s work. He explained how, although that professor is labeled African American, there are other labels that he applies to himself and that others apply. Caughey states, “Thus his own sense of self is differentiated far beyond the ethnic-racial label” (Caughey, 2006).

In this section, the life histories listed closely echo Caughey's assessment of self-identification. These interviews were conducted in August 2012. They are the foundational material for character development in "Meeting at Mom's." These were the questions asked of each person interviewed:

- Where do/did you live in Syracuse or near Syracuse?
- How do you view yourself ethnically?
- What type of family life did you have?
- What type of schools did you attend?
- Does ethnicity play a major role in the friends or dates you choose?
- Are there any stereotypes of multiracial people that you would like to see changed?
- Were there any color-related obstacles in your life?
- How were they resolved or were they resolved?

### *The Life Stories*

#### **Sarg**

Sarg is a biracial black male who was born in the 1950s and who has lived his life on the fringe of social acceptance. He comes from a background where his Italian relatives ostracized the biracial family, and his parents divorced. His mother remarried and he has more siblings from her other marriages. He grew up in Catholic schools in the Syracuse area where he experienced discrimination as a black child in white schools. He graduated from high school and joined the military where he was once again the only black person in his section. He retired from the military, married and became active in local politics and the local Catholic Church. However, he

was always depicted as a black candidate or black church leader and not seen as just a Catholic man or politician (Sarg, 2012).

Sarg currently lives with one of his children, a son. He struggles to make ends meet in the declining economy in Syracuse. He considers himself to be getting by and feels that's good enough. He has worked his entire life to support himself and feels that his work ethic was not one of love but one of necessity. He did what he had to do whether it was being the only black in his military section or being the only black politician in city council. He doesn't complain about discrimination but feels that it has affected his life by putting barriers in his way. For example, he knew while in the military that if another black was applying for a position or area, that he could not also be assigned to that position or area (Sarg, 2012).

Sarg's mother was a first-generation Italian and his father was a black man from Mississippi. He was educated in private Catholic schools like his Italian cousins, because they had allowed him that one advantage. He experienced racism not only in the school system, but also within his Italian family. However, his career choices were not based on his family or his education. Sarg chose a military career because he needed work (Sarg, 2012).

Sarg's military life was an example of the military's idea of desegregation in the armed forces -- in each assignment he found himself the only black male. He does not complain about his work life. It was just a means of achieving an income. "I worked to live. I was fortunate enough to be able to do things, not to have to do things I did not like to do" (Sarg, 2012). His satisfaction with his military career may be due to the fact that finding jobs in the Syracuse area was difficult (Sarg, 2012).

Sarg was happy to be able to earn an income and to excel in a career. "Everything was what it was, and you did what you could to make the best out of the situation" (Sarg, 2012). He

felt he had nothing to complain about even though he was only considered for positions where no black man had already been hired. Tokenism in employment was an accepted fact of life (Sarg, 2012).

Sarg when relating his story of how he was a token black in both the military and in Catholic Church duties, showed how he relates in the binary world of black and white. Although biracial, in each of those instances he represented African Americans. However, he has also been isolated from both the black and white communities as a biracial person. An incident at Christian Brother's Academy (CBA) occurred where he was left behind by a white coach after a sporting event, and was pursued by the opposing school's black students who meant to attack him. He sees this as an example of his black identity conflict. He was not included with the CBA white students who were sheltered from abuse, nor was he accepted by the opposing black students. This identity conflict is the dual navigation that is at play in the daily lives of black people.

### **Jessica**

Jessica's dual identity is not as apparent as Sarg's biracial identity. Jessica is a black female who lives in the suburbs of Syracuse. She is originally from New York City and migrated to Syracuse for her education, and decided to stay after graduation. She is in a biracial marriage; her husband is white. She is a stepmother to white children, but considers them her own family. She went to school at Syracuse University during the 1960s and was active in the university's black press and in civil rights (Jessica, 2012).

Jessica is living in a world completely different from the one in which she grew up. She comes from an ethnically diverse neighborhood where social acceptance was normal. She finds life difficult in Syracuse in that there is nowhere to go to socialize (Jessica, 2012).



Jessica had an experience similar to Sarg's of being a token black employee, but in the field of education. She had been the only black in her program at Syracuse University in the 1960s. After attending Syracuse University, she was employed in the Syracuse area as a teacher, but had few peers that were equally educated. The education system in Syracuse produces fewer high school graduates than any other major city in New York State according to a Syracuse.com article based on New York State reports. "Syracuse's rate was the lowest among the Big 5 urban districts, just below Rochester's rate of 46.1 percent. In the other cities, Buffalo had 47 percent, New York City 61 percent and Yonkers 63 percent" (Riede, High school graduation rates improve slightly, but gaps remain, 2011).

Jessica had migrated to Syracuse from Brooklyn, New York. She did not wish to return home after completing school. She said her employment search was aided by the work of action groups that had pushed for affirmative action.

I was also blessed at a time when the Urban League, NAACP were pushing to make sure there was equality in interview processes and hiring practices and that kind of thing. Um, and so when I walked in the door to various places maybe I was the only or one other black there. But certainly given the opportunity, instead of just being written off right away and saying, 'Well we don't even want to interview this person' (Jessica, 2012).

Jessica grew up in a two-parent black family in New York City and had sisters and a brother. Her neighborhood in New York City had ethnic diversity: blacks, Puerto Ricans and Jews. When she came to Syracuse, she was different from the other students coming upstate for an education; however, she faced the same discrimination as other black applicants while searching for a job in Syracuse. She related a few of her experiences, explaining the types of

discrimination she faced. One incident involved the fact that her speaking voice did not denote her race, and she was given interviews over the telephone, but treated differently in person. This type of discrimination was also noted in a telephone interview of another interviewee, Cloe (Jessica, 2012) (Cloe, 2012).

Another type of job discrimination mentioned by Jessica is diversity in the large company job market. She had noticed that some large corporate employers did not have a representative population of black employees. She stated that although she had spent a lot of money at a certain grocery store, in the store she never saw any employees who resembled her (Jessica, 2012). Jessica's navigation between being a stepmother to white children and her identity as a black female creates a conflict with her ideals of a socially equal community. She was viewed by her neighbor as a black person, and not viewed as a person of equal standing and family responsibility. She was outraged that people could not see her as part of her white marital family.

### **Belinda**

Belinda has a different conflict than Jessica with the acceptance of whiteness. Belinda is a very light-complexioned woman, who visually resembles the ideal of a mixed person. However, Belinda presents herself as a black person in the Syracuse community. She has publicly denied having any white blood at all and does not explain to people where her light skin originates. In the interview, Belinda admitted to having a white family, but on the many occasions when I have met her, she has insisted she was all black. Also, she has been vocal in advocating for the rights of blacks in the community, and has stood against the prison industrial complex system of incarceration of black men.

Belinda's mother supported the family after her father died when she was 4 years old. Belinda had to take on the additional responsibilities of being caretaker to her younger brothers and sisters. She became a mother in her own right at age 18. After receiving her GED, she attempted to go to college. Her first attempt at finding housing was when she applied to rent an apartment for college. She was discriminated against when the landlord came to her house to drop off the apartment keys and saw her. Her roommate was an even lighter complexioned black female and the landlord had not suspected that they were black until he came to her home and saw her family's dark skin (Belinda, 2012).

Belinda filed a discrimination suit after the landlord refused to give her the apartment. She won her law suit. She proved that the apartment was available but that the landlord had lied and claimed otherwise after discovering she was black. The apartment law suit was not her only case of discrimination. She experienced discrimination throughout her life in Syracuse (Belinda, 2012).

A second obstacle in finding employment in the Syracuse area is exemplified by the work history of Belinda. Belinda was raised outside of Syracuse in a small town and both sides of her family are native Central New Yorkers. Her family has a cultural mixture of black, white and Native American but she identifies as a black woman. Her younger brother had cancer and her divorced mother had to work; therefore, she dropped out of school (Belinda, 2012).

Belinda attempted to return to school after her time as a care provider for her brother was over. Unlike Jessica and Sarg, she never finished high school and has not yet finished college. Unlike Jessica, she did not benefit from the work of action groups in obtaining employment. However, an action group did provide legal assistance in her housing suit. Belinda has had to manage various job roles throughout her career (Belinda, 2012).

Belinda has made a living by working in non-permanent positions such as a teaching artist and touring poet. She has worked doing tours of prisons. She has also spoken or read poetry at many universities. She is paid by performance or assignment and does not receive benefits. Teaching artists work on an hourly basis for the city school system. Touring poets get paid per poetry reading. It is difficult to find constant sustainable work as a touring poet. These nonpermanent jobs are indicative of the predicament of many disenfranchised workers in Syracuse but are a predominant source of income in the black community (Belinda, 2012).

Belinda's black experience is not completely the result of her own identity issues, but is accentuated by the perceptions of others who view her as culturally mixed or who mistake her for a white person. The name calling she suffered from blacks in grade school and the housing law suits against her white landlord are just a couple of examples of how the perceptions of others affected her life. Belinda's lack of a degree and lack of stable employment are the same issues that affect the entire Syracuse black community.

## **Cloe**

Cloe also suffers from a lack of stable employment in the Syracuse area. Diversity at large corporations was discussed by Cloe as a problem that has long standing in the Syracuse area. Cloe is a black female who was raised in Syracuse in the late 1970s. She has two parents who are still together and migrated to Syracuse from the southern state of North Carolina. Cloe herself is divorced and college educated. Cloe has her master's degree but has not been able to find employment that utilizes her degree to the fullest. She grew up in the university neighborhood near the area where Sarg was raised 20 years earlier (Cloe, 2012).

Cloe publicly identifies as black or African American, but like Belinda has stated she is mixed African American, European American and Native American. She personally views herself as black and has studied her different heritages. She values the indigenous mantras she learned while researching her heritage, and credits her emotional stability to having learned her native beliefs. Cloe's complexion is not as light as Belinda's complexion, and is a light brown just above tan in color.

Cloe's family life was one with an absentee father because her father worked abroad having been unable to find substantial work in his field in the Syracuse area (Cloe, 2012). Her father did provide financially for the family and she was not an impoverished child, as Belinda was. Cloe was also not a loner growing up, and has had the support of the black community. She was popular at the city school she attended, and has many friends in the Syracuse area.

Cloe related an incident of racism that happened when her father applied to work for General Electric (GE) in the 1950s. Her mother was employed at Syracuse University, but her father was denied an interview at GE after he had a scheduled appointment. The position, he was told, did not exist; however, when a white male applied for the same job he was given it. This became known because the white male who received the job from GE hired her father as a subcontractor (Cloe, 2012).

In a telephone interview, Cloe informed me about a similar mixture of different jobs she holds to make ends meet, just as Belinda does. She works as a seamstress, on small film projects and other odd jobs. Cloe is from a classically structured family: two parents, one brother and one sister. She grew up in the Thornden Park area of Syracuse, attended city schools, completed four years of college, plus a master's degree. However, she had numerous personal experiences of racism in the job market that was similar to her father's experience at GE (Cloe, 2012). Cloe's

job search included not only interviews that were denied after telephone confirmation but instances of disrespect due to color. One instance of disrespect involved a white male photographer she had hired to shoot photographs for an ad campaign. The male questioned her about the number of blacks she had assigned photo shoot appointments. When she confronted the man, he denied that she had any authority over him even though she was the hiring agent (Cloe, 2012).

The disrespect Cloe felt from the photographer is only one of many problems faced by blacks in the workplace. Sarg had mentioned in his interview that in order for a black applicant or employee to be promoted that person had to be better than any other applicant or common employee. He noted that being just as good as a white employee was not enough to secure a position. That holds true throughout the Syracuse job market: a black person must be superior to any competitor. That is a difficult accomplishment in an environment where the majority of blacks live in the city and attend city schools where the graduation rate is the lowest of any city school system in the state.

The lack of an adequate education hinders employment. Education is human capital. Income is a necessity for a successful life in a so-called free-market-based system. Income for blacks is historically lower than income for whites. The income for whites in Syracuse is lower than the national average and, therefore, blacks in Syracuse are also at a double disadvantage. Discrimination in employment is and has been a major barrier for blacks in New York State. Economic inequality, racial discrimination in employment, is the great injustice that postwar New York State tried to eradicate (New York State, 1945).

The fact that New York State legislature has attempted to eradicate discrimination in employment and education since the 1940s is important in understanding the long-standing fight

for equality of opportunity that is ongoing for black people living in the Syracuse area. Racial discrimination continues to exist in Syracuse due to the poor quality of education that is a result of white flight to the suburbs of Syracuse. It is also evidenced in the lack of a representative population of blacks at major corporations in Syracuse. Unfortunately discrimination also exists in other areas besides employment and education; housing has also been cited as a major source of racial discrimination.

### **Monica-Dan and Darlene**

Two other interviews are important in this research and they are two current Syracuse University students. I have given them the pseudonyms of Monica, who is the basis for Dan in the play, and Darlene. They were interviewed because I was asked how the environment of racism in Syracuse affects the student population. I interviewed four black students, three who were biracial and one of light complexion but not exactly half black and half another race. I am including two that are biracial because they exemplify both on-campus and off-campus living.

Both students are biracial but are different racial mixtures. Monica is what historians call a “true mulatto”; she is half white and half African, whereas Darlene is half African American and half Puerto Rican. A “true mulatto” is a literary fiction in that it divides racial heritage into exactly two halves. In truth, Monica has more than two ethnic heritages. The concept limits ethnic diversity by placing value on the difference between European origin and African origin. Each student is navigating dual cultures in the flattened bipolar scheme of racial diversity while attempting to fit into the mainstream culture at Syracuse University, which is White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Monica was not born in Syracuse, but in the U.S. South. Her father was an African from Nigeria, and her mother a white American of European descent. Her parents divorced while she was young; she later studied in Africa as an adult. She was raised in both black and white schools in Louisiana, Michigan and Indiana. While attending school in Michigan, she felt ostracized from social events because of her color. She was sure that white classmates did not invite her to events strictly because she is black (Monica-Dan, 2012).

Monica lives off campus in the gay district of Syracuse on the North Side called the Hawley Green neighborhood. She is not gay in that she dates men, but she also sees women on occasion. She could be categorized as bisexual, but her overall preference is to date ethnic men or non-white men. She has a light complexion but prefers ethnic men of darker complexion than herself. However, her overall purpose in being in Syracuse is her education and not romance. She is a graduate student at Syracuse University and a distinguished scholar. She suffers from a lack of parental funding in that her mother bore the burden of her financial support growing up. Monica attends Syracuse University on scholarship funding (Monica-Dan, 2012).

Darlene is also not a native Syracusan. Like Monica, she came to Syracuse to go to college, but is an undergraduate student. She supports herself by working two jobs and sometimes three jobs while attending classes at Syracuse University. She justifies her work schedule by stating that it makes her be more accountable for her time. She schedules study time, appointments and other activities and sticks to a schedule (Darlene, Interview by the Author, 2012).

Darlene's blackness differs from Monica's in that she is not half European white, but half Puerto Rican. However, she comes from an ethnically diverse family that does include European whites in the extended family. One of her main arguments against racial discrimination is the



ignorance demonstrated by racists or bigots. She mentioned that many of her friends are ignorant about how she feels when they make jokes about Hispanics (Darlene, 2012).

Darlene's dislike of jokes about Hispanics is similar to Belinda's feelings about having been heckled or teased as a child growing up in the Syracuse area. Both experiences deal with the embarrassment of being different because of cultural heritage. Belinda was called a "banana girl" by her peers, a derogatory reference to her light skin complexion (Belinda, 2012). Both women expressed a dislike of stereotypes of mixed persons and of being asked about their ethnicity.

Belinda's response to questions about her ethnicity is that she is a whole human being and not a part of a person (Belinda, 2012). Darlene chose not to reveal her racial mixture to her peers (Darlene, 2012). However, she stated that she does not consider herself untrue to either of her cultures. She does not give half value to being Puerto Rican and half value to being African American. Darlene values both cultures as important in her life (Darlene, 2012). Her duality is one of the contradictions that occur when negotiating cultural identity in the United States.

The life experiences of the individuals interviewed in this research and my own experiences are what caused me to want to voice concerns over black issues. Theater can be used as a medium to voice social concerns in a way that creates empathy and understanding. Conscious theater allows the community to hear and understand the concerns of individuals without having to experience the same situations. That need for community concern is why their stories are being voiced in a play for public theater. The underlying concept is to make the audience aware of conflicts in a manner that allows understanding and empathy with the situation.

### **Analysis: “Meeting at Mom’s: Issues of Identity for Multicultural Blacks in Syracuse, New York”**

“Meeting at Mom’s” is a development of the series of monologues, “Issues”, that was originally written from the research interviews. The focus of the play is the life experiences of biracial and multiracial blacks in Syracuse, New York. The research interviews are altered into dialog between the play characters while attempting to keep the diction and style of the speaker. The process enables the Black Arts Movement theoretical approach to black voices to be applied to this play. The voices of black people are considered to be expressive of their emotions; I have strived to keep each person’s voice true to their black identity within the dialog of the play.

The play is set in my neighborhood, now called the Westcott area or Westcott Nation on the University Neighborhood of Syracuse, previously called the Thornden Park Neighborhood. It is an example of the separation and segregation that exists in the city. The internal identity conflict or duality in the characters arises from the desire to be part of the black community in a neighborhood where the black population is not the majority. Interviewees Cloe and Sarg’s families had lived in the Thornden Park neighborhood prior to it becoming known as the Westcott Nation. An identity conflict exists in the characters because of the negative racial stereotypes attributed to blacks by community members, and having to associate with the white community that does not understand race sensitivity.

The character, Reesie, is based on my experiences in Syracuse. I entered the Syracuse eastside community in 1981, and have spoken and interacted with the various interviewees in other settings outside of the interviews. The character, Reesie, is an older graduate student at Syracuse University and the script is based on conversations that Reesie (myself) had or experienced while living here in Syracuse. Reesie’s conversations with people are transferred

from their original locations to one place, Mom's diner. Mom's diner occupies a corner on Westcott Street where everything in the neighborhood can be observed.

The characters' names are the same fictitious names that the interview subjects were given to keep their identity private. However, in one case the name of the character had to be changed because the character was given a different gender than the interview subject. Also, the character was given a race change to add more variety to the play. The dialog of the interview subjects was kept as close as possible to the original words of the speakers.

The character, Sarg, is the child of a biracial union. His father was a black man and his mother a white woman of Italian heritage. The character is an example of the problems that exist for an ego that develops in a multiracial person due to the separation of kinship and community because of racial mixture. Sarg, currently living without a marital partner, has been active in the Syracuse community. He is an advocate of the "school of hard knocks." He has had to make it on his own. He has worked his entire life but has never reached the pinnacle of success other than being a local community pillar. He has lived a segregated life with *de jure* equality.

The character, Jessica, is a black woman who is in a mixed-race relationship, someone who has struggled through racial oppression. She sees the negativity that comes with racial stereotyping and acknowledges the barriers that are ever-present in both social life and employment. Jessica grew up in the civil rights era and later became a professor. She walked the walk, and did everything she was told was necessary to succeed in the U.S. Yet, education and hard work were still hampered by racist attitudes and opinions that exist in the Syracuse area.

Jessica juggles more than one job even with graduate degrees and has to choose between association in the black community with other minorities and association in the white community

with coworkers and her spouse. She is not homeless and marginalized but is an example of navigating separate cultures. She navigates the black community without her spouse at social and other events, but still would like to be able to function on a social level as a couple.

The character, Belinda, challenges the stereotype of black Syracusans as migrants from the south. She is someone who was born and raised in the Syracuse area. The woman is currently married but has had a hard life, mostly due to color but also due to social-economic circumstances. She is married to a man with a dark brown complexion, and their children range in skin complexions from very light to very dark.

Her mother was the sole worker in the family and as daughter in the household she had to take on the household duties and become caretaker to younger siblings, one of whom was terminally ill. She had little community support and that caused her lack of education, and further deterioration of her socio-economic status. She navigates multiple cultures being involved as a mother, teacher and advocate in the prison industrial complex. She has survived by sheer will and determination.

The character Dan, interviewee Monica, is a graduate student at Syracuse University. Since Monica is bisexual, I took the literary liberty to personify her character as a white male. Dan spent his childhood in Louisiana and then moved to Indiana. The character is a biracial student who deals daily with other people's color attitudes. He is a successful person who has been isolated simply on the grounds of his origins in a biracial marriage. He grew up knowing that he was excluded from activities of his white peers because of his color. He has also been excluded from the activities of his black peers. Dan is close with his mother who is white, but dates "ethnic" people both men and women. Dan was raised within his white mother's family

and not as a separate entity. He is not ostracized by his family but by the black and white communities.

The character, Darlene, navigates two different cultural worlds, Puerto Rican and Black. The character goes past the dual nature of black and white, and shows ethnic duality exists in more than a single cultural mixture. This character shows how navigation between cultures is a delicate balance that is negotiated daily and affects the lives of multicultural individuals in their identity and well-being. Darlene is a clear example of how people can have dual identity, work and live in more than one culture simultaneously.

The women in the “Local Dispute” are also real Syracuse people. The incident with Betty occurred on a Centro bus one day coming back from Destiny, USA on the bus. Each black woman had a different Afrocentric hairstyle. T’Wanda, who had been mimicking Betty and other passengers, had extremely mannish features with extremely short hair that was twisted in little sections. Delores, who took up the argument, was slightly lighter than the other two women with a dark red brown skin tone. Delores had long gheri curled hair held back with a barrette on the sides. T’Wanda and Nika had dark ebony colored skin. Nika, the third woman, stayed out of the argument until it became racial. The assaulted Korean girl, Betty, was equally vocal and insulting.

The argument on which the scene is based lasted longer than the scene I have written. I am using it because it is an example of how racial tension can escalate and become an unsavory situation. The other passengers on the bus were frightened by the entire incident. It is an example of how the actions of a few can affect a larger group of people than the few immediately

involved. It is also important because of the need to discuss those situations so they are not repeated.

### Characters

Sarg - Middle sixties, black and Italian, a retired military officer who has a bitter sweet look at life both in the past and the present

Julie - Early twenties, a white blond girl, full of herself and secure in her attitude.

T'Wanda – Late twenties/early thirties, a dark skinned black girl with smooth skin, a bad attitude and extremely short hair in twisted tuffs.

Delores - Late twenties/early thirties, a medium dark skinned red/brown girl with short spiral hair wrap that is plastered down.

Nika - Late twenties/early thirties, a somewhat educated dark brown skin girl with a chip on her shoulder and shoulder length hair.

Betty - Late twenties, loud, obnoxious, chatty Asian girl who disrespects her mother and idolizes her father.

Reesie - Late forties, a black graduate student who lives in Syracuse and is trying to figure out what life in Syracuse was like before she lived there.

Professor Dicks – Forties, Harvard graduate, on paper activist, he writes about the plight of Third World countries but does nothing to personally aid the Third World.

Belinda - Middle fifties, a light skinned black woman, born and raised in the Syracuse area, an activist that was born too late to be part of the '60's generation but holds to the black power ideology.

Jessica - Late fifties, a black woman originally from Brooklyn, part of the '60's generation that bailed from the city and lives in the suburbs, small but commanding, authoritarian.

Dan - Early twenties, a graduate student who believes he can make a difference in the world.

Darlene - Under twenty, black and Hispanic, a college student with big dreams and ideas.

Cloe – Middle fifties, a medium brown skinned black woman who has survived both divorce and breast cancer.

Father Bogdan – a local Catholic priest who believes in helping the poor and needy.

### **Time and Place**

The Westcott area of Syracuse, New York, in 2012.

### **Setting**

A café/diner setting, a counter area and a seating area.

### **Scenes:**

Scene 1: Local Dispute.

Scene 2: An Interview.

Scene 3: Banana Girl.

Scene 4: Power to the People

Scene 5: Survival in Syracuse

Scene 6: Sarg's Sermon.



### *Synopsis /Themes*

The play centers on Sarg, a retired military officer and Reesie, a graduate student. Reesie is in dire circumstances trying to finish her research despite obstacles from her graduate department. They ordered her to do more research. If he doesn't finish the interview, she will not have enough material for the summer and will fail a six-credit class. She needs Sarg both to do the interview and to give her important information.

The city, located in the northeast, United States, is quiet but awake. Traffic is heard outside the diner as cars pass. The diner used to be a Laundromat, but was sold to "Mom" and slightly redone. The floors are the same speckled floors that the laundry had. Where there once were washers is now the kitchen area, and the former dryer area is now the table area. The rest of the place is still the same, large plate glass laundry windows that look out into the street, but are now covered in blue plate special signs.

Sitting in the diner is Sarg. He has a cup of coffee and a paper. He is waiting for Reesie, who is late. It's 11:17 in the morning and they were supposed to meet at 11:00 AM. Reesie had gone to the wrong coffee spot. Around the corner is a hip coffee café with mochas and biscotti, where Reesie had meant to meet with Sarg. Reesie finds Sarg and their discussion of the past gets interrupted by the other characters and their input.

The discussion is of racism in Syracuse and how it has been an ongoing battle for blacks as well as other ethnic groups is the central focus of the play. The play examines the effects of racism on the lives of the characters and how that effect is long-lasting.

### Scene 1: Local Dispute

*SARG is seated at a table. He is drinking coffee and looking through a newspaper. Four women enter, one Asian woman followed by three black women. The young Asian woman is talking loudly on her cell phone as she heads to the counter. JULIE is behind the counter at the register.*

BETTY

Mom, is Dad home? I want to talk to him about my dog. Mom, my dog leash broke and the dog needs a walk. Dad is sleeping – can you wake him? No, Mom, I don't want Dad to walk the dog. I want to talk to Dad about the leash. Mom, I've had the dog for three weeks. You know I have a dog, Mom. Will you put Dad on the phone? No. Mom, will you please put Dad on the phone. Call back when he's awake?! Mom the stores will be closed by then.

T'WANDA

*(Mimicking.)* "Mom". Mom hang up on her.

BETTY

What! I'm talking on the phone. Mind your own business.

DELORES

You shut the fuck up. You loud piece of trash.

BETTY

Mom, I got to go. I'll call you later. I can't talk right now. *(To the women mocking her.)* Leave me the fuck alone.

DELORES

You're too fucking loud. Shut your mouth.

BETTY

Shut up yourself. I was on the phone. You are rude and ignorant.

DELORES

I'm rude and ignorant? You are a loud ignorant bitch.

BETTY

I talk loud but I'm not the one who's ignorant you are. You ignorant dirty whore. All of you leave me alone.

SARG

Leave her alone. This is a restaurant.

JULIE

You can't talk like that in here.

DELORES

You ugly chink bitch. You racist slut.

BETTY

What's a chink?

DELORES

Do I have to spell it out for you? You Chinese piece of dirt.

BETTY

Well, you are ignorant because I'm not even Chinese.

NIKA

So what are you then?

BETTY

I'm Korean. You should be able to tell the difference. I'm not the racist.

DELORES

What do you mean you aren't the racist? With that "all of you" shit. All of us, are black, and we outnumber you. So, think about what you said – ignorant bitch. *(She does an inclusive circle about the room with her hand.)*

SARG

This is a damn shame.

BETTY

I am not ignorant. I meant "all of you" laughing at me. I talk loud. You dirty disease bag. Do you understand that?

NIKA

You are ignorant. You don't even know you are a Chink.

DELORES

You better watch out before I kick your ass, Chink.

JULIE

Not in here, you're not.

BETTY

I am not a chink. You dirty nasty whore. I am Korean.

NIKA

In this country, you are a chink, you Orientals are all the same.

T'WANDA

Chinks!

BETTY

I told you, I am Korean! You are ignorant! I didn't call you a racist word. I just wanted you to stop making fun of me.

DELORES

That's not going to happen. (*Taunting again.*) "Mom." "Mom." Stupid bitch.

NIKA

"My dog needs to be walked." You call us all the same and you expect me to call you something different than Chinese or Chink.

BETTY

I didn't call you all the same. I said all of you. Not all of you black people.

JULIE

You all need to go.

NIKA

But we are all black people to you. Do we all look the same to you? Did it ever occur to you that we aren't all from the same place? Africa is a large continent, like Asia. But you don't bother to know the difference between us. Well, you all look the same to us, Chinks.

SARG

Leave that girl alone.

NIKA

Everyone in the world lumps dark people into the black race but when you call an Irish person Scandinavian, they get mad.

DELORES

They are all racists. No one is going to stand up for you, Chink.

BETTY

That guy did.

NIKA

That's because you're a ho! That guy is only trying to make it to base with you.

JULIE

That's it leave.

DELORES

Ho, Chink, ho!

*JULIE comes from behind the counter. She opens the door to the diner.*

JULIE

All of you can get out. Now. Or I'm calling the police. I'm not putting up with this crap.

*The three women head for the door. DELORES kicks BETTY in her butte. BETTY stumbles but regains her composure. The 3 women exit, laughing obnoxiously.*

JULIE

*(To the room.)* Anyone else have something to say? *(JULIE returns to behind the counter.)*

SARG

Racial hate is learned. Those women are echoing the system that has made them the way they are. We have to remove that hate to have a community that is solid and functional.

*The phone starts ringing.*

JULIE

Good luck with that. I won't have it in here.

*JULIE heads over to the telephone. She answers it.*

JULIE

Mom's Diner

*The James Brown song, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" is heard over the radio.*

End Scene 1

**Scene 2: An Interview**

*SARG is seated at the table reading his paper with Julie standing over him with the coffee pot.*

No breakfast this morning?

JULIE

I ate at home.

SARG

What are you doing here this late? You like my coffee that much?

JULIE

I love your coffee but I'm here for an interview.

SARG

With who?

JULIE

An SU grad student. The priests at the Cathedral asked me to help her out.

SARG

Why?

JULIE

It's penance.

SARG

What's that?

JULIE

It's atonement.

SARG

*(JULIE looks confused.)*

Making up for past regressions.

*(JULIE still looks confused.)*

Punishment.

JULIE

Why?

SARG

I had some regressions. The priest wants me to be more active in the community.

JULIE  
Oh.

SARG  
I'm only going to give her a few more minutes.

JULIE  
I'd tell the priests to make her be on time.

SARG  
Thanks for the coffee.

*JULIE moves away to put the coffee pot back on the burner. SARG looks at his watch. He is tense. REESIE enters, looks around and sees SARG sitting with his paper and a cup of coffee. She is highly annoyed but can't say so. She heads to his table and sits down.*

REESIE  
I thought we were meeting at the other café?

SARG  
You are late. It's past 11:15 AM. We were supposed to meet at 11 AM.

REESIE  
I was here at 10:45 but at the other café.

SARG  
Why would you go to the other café? This is more like home. Would you really expect me to be in there?

REESIE  
I see you have your coffee and your paper.

*(Silence.)*

Would you like some more coffee or a donut?

SARG  
You can see my coffee cup is full and I don't like donuts. Now what are you doing -- do you want a cup of coffee or not?

REESIE  
I had a mocha at the place around the corner -- while waiting for you.

SARG  
That's ridiculous. Why would you wait for me there?

REESIE

I'm pretty sure that's where we agreed to meet.

SARG

I meant here – at Mom's. *(Silence.)*

REESIE

I'm sorry I was late. I really need this interview. I will fail my summer program if I don't complete my research.

SARG

Now what do you want to talk about?

*REESIE gets out her digital recorder, paper to write on and sets things up on the table. Then she starts recording.*

REESIE

Life – here – in Syracuse. Where did you grow up?

SARG

The east side on Ashworth Place, a few blocks away from Madison. *(REESIE looks clueless.)* South of Syracuse University.

REESIE

That's my neighborhood. I live on Columbus. The first place I lived here was on Bassett Street.

SARG

All of my cousins live down on Bassett. My relatives were at the top of Bassett hill, but I'm a little bit further west than that. I'm over by University Ave.

REESIE

You grew up there?

SARG

Yes. Until I went into the military.

REESIE

What's your family like?

SARG

My mother's Italian, first generation Italian, and my father obviously was African-American out of Mississippi. I don't know how she met my dad. They were married in Syracuse though. My mother was out in the Albany area. She came here because her father, my grandfather, came here with the railroad, and I guess he was stationed here and bought a house here.



REESIE

Do you have a lot of sisters and brothers?

SARG

I have one brother and two sisters: one older sister, a younger brother and a younger sister. The younger ones are my half brother and sister. My mom divorced in the early '50s.

REESIE

What type of schools did you attend?

SARG

Parochial; they had just desegregated the school. The first two blacks graduated from Christian Brothers Academy here in Syracuse in 1966.

REESIE

Did you have a lot of friends?

SARG

Oh yeah everyone in the neighborhood; back in those days it was all about neighborhoods. We were with the same people for 18 years until we went off to war or jail. One of the neighborhood kids, Cloe, I still know.

*SARG's phone rings and he answers it. While SARG is on is cell phone to CLOE, PROFESSOR DICKS enters. He goes to the counter and waits for JULIE to take his order. REESIE notices and motions to SARG.*

SARG

*(To phone.)* Cloe, I was just talking about you. What? I missed the board meeting. Belinda and Jessica are looking for me? They know where to find me. See you soon. *(He hangs up.)*

REESIE

*(To SARG, almost whispering.)* Looks like my professor found his way from around the corner.

SARG

*(Suggestively toying with REESIE.)* Is that who's around the corner? Is he why you were late?

REESIE

It's not like that. I wasn't there with him. I think he's checking to make sure I'm doing interviews.

SARG

Isn't that what you're supposed to be doing?

REESIE

Yes, but some of the other students made up their interview responses. Now, he's watching *me*.

*DICKS walks over with a to go cup of coffee in hand.*

DICKS

So this is where you are. Nice little place here. This is a gem of a place. *(To SARG.)* Hi, I'm Melvin.

REESIE

Hi, Professor Dicks.

DICKS

Have you been doing all your interviews here?

REESIE

*(Ignoring the question.)* Didn't you just have coffee around the corner?

DICKS

I had breakfast. Now, I am having coffee. You need to be more observant.

SARG

Are you joining us?

DICKS

No. I'm not staying. You have to keep an eye on this one.

SARG

Really?

DICKS

She doesn't give direct answers. She still hasn't given me an answer as to who her editor is.

REESIE

Nice to see you. Sorry you can't stay.

*DICKS' cell phone rings. He loses interest in REESIE and heads out the door, talking as he goes.*

REESIE

I had an editor who was a professor at Cortland. He said he would have given me an A even without editing. On the paper Dicks gave me a B+.

SARG

That professor from Cortland isn't the one grading you. That man that just left is.

REESIE

*(Laughs, uncomfortable.)*

SARG

Can we get back to the interview?

*The Offspring song, "She's Got Issues" is playing as the scene closes.*

End Scene 2

### Scene 3: Banana Girl

*SARG and REESIE are seated at the table. JULIE has come out from behind the counter.*

JULIE

Do you need more coffee?

SARG

I could take some cream and sugar. Or a bowl of soup.

JULIE

The cream and sugar are by the door. The soup's not ready yet.

*JULIE returns to behind the counter. BELINDA and JESSICA enter and go to the counter. SARG gets cream and sugar from condiment stand, and then he sits back down at the table. Meanwhile, BELINDA and JESSICA order donuts and tea. They notice SARG and come toward the table.*

JESSICA

That theater board meeting was the longest driest boringest meeting ever.

BELINDA

*(Walking over to table.)* Where were you? We couldn't get a majority vote without you.

SARG

I had things to do.

JESSICA

Left us in that meeting with all the work to do.

BELINDA

You know we need to come up with a major fundraiser. We could have used your ideas.

SARG

Ladies. Joining us?

*REESIE gets distressed. She shakes her head.*

REESIE

This is ridiculous.

BELINDA

*(Sits down.)* Runnin' late. Always running late. *(Flirting.)* I do have a few minutes to talk if you want some company.

REESIE

Well, actually...

JESSICA

Needed some refreshments after sitting through that. *(Probing.)* What were you doing?

REESIE

We were talking about Syracuse and the 15<sup>th</sup> ward, racism and discrimination.

JESSICA and BELINDA

Damn.

REESIE

I'm doing graduate research at SU. My topic is blacks in Syracuse. I'm trying to interview Sarg. If you don't mind, can I get back to the interview?

*The door opens and two SU students enter, DAN and DARLENE. They sit at the adjacent table after getting food at the counter.*

BELINDA

I know what it is like to be on the outside of a group. People used to call me, "banana girl". It was hurtful. People wanted you to prove that you're African-American. You got to be tough, militant. If you speak proper English, like I learned in Catholic school, they'll say, "Oh, you're a White girl." Those are stereotypes because anybody can speak proper English and it has nothing to do with ethnicity.

DAN

*(Interjecting.)* Hmm. I mean, I feel like, because my family is so diverse, like, I feel like I'm an open person to, like, you know, try to be kind to everybody and whatever.

*REESIE reacts with dismay. She covers her face with her hands.*

DAN

So, it seems like I do, maybe, tend to, to, uh, be with black people or people of color, you know? Like, maybe, I relate to them more. I have had experiences where white people just say off-the-wall stuff. I'm white but white people can say, like, ignorant things too.

BELINDA

*(To Sarg.)* White people always have something to say.

DAN

Living in Indiana, I mean, that's when I first heard things worse than "banana girl." Like, I heard the "N" word. You know, kids say that. I've heard all sorts of names, like, "pubic hair head," like crazy things, makin' fun of black people hair.

DARLENE

Yeah. That's some bullshit.

DAN

People say stupid stuff. Like, you know, like your skin rubbin' off.

DARLENE

What?!

DAN

Because they hang out with you.

DARLENE

What?

DAN

They think that associating with a black person makes them black. Like your skin is rubbing off and onto them.

DARLENE

Is that what they meant?

DAN

I feel like, I mean, there are a lot of stereotypes about mixed men. My best friend is a mixed guy. He gets it all the time. Being a pretty boy, being feminine, being, like, whatever. So, like is being called a "banana girl" so bad?

SARG

"Banana girl" is a stereotype. All stereotypes are bad. A lot of light skinned or mixed women have had to deal with that label.

DAN

My best friend tells me stories about mixed girls. And, like, people assume that mixed girls think they're better than other people. That they think they're prettier. I mean, most people are sort of egotistic anyway, no matter what color you are.

DARLENE

Dan. We hear you. I have family members that are lighter, but aren't dark skinned, -- people just assume that they're prettier or have it easier. They don't go through the "dark skinned struggle." I can be White and struggling or I can be 10 shades darker and have a perfect life.

BELINDA

Yes. Light skin does not guarantee a perfect life or mean that you have a different life than any other black person.

DARLENE

There are other racial stereotypes that I don't like. For instance, Hispanics; my friends always joke and call me Mexican and say that I sell oranges on the highway, and I'll laugh. But that should not be okay, like it's not funny.

REESIE

No, it's not funny.

DARLENE

These are real jokes that people laugh about, and I have some pretty ignorant friends. They just really don't care to distinguish or learn more about other cultures. They're very intelligent; they just don't mind joking about stuff like that.

REESIE

My sister makes jokes like that and her daughter is actually mixed. The other side of my niece's family is both Mexican and Puerto Rican.

DARLENE

Oh that's awful. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans already don't like each other.

REESIE

When they pass a fruit stand my sister will tell her daughter, "There are your people out there." "Go help them."

*They laugh.*

DARLENE

It's funny now, but when you think about it. It is very offensive. Not funny.

DAN

I want to add somethin' else, definitely the whole media image. Like, you know how mixed people are portrayed as being more sexual. But that's all black women. The objectification of mixed women's bodies and things like that. You know, in all the rap videos, they always have a bunch of women with big butts.

SARG

I can't really object to seeing sexy black women. However, I did notice a lack of black women in local politics.

DARLENE

True. So, true. We've got to get going. It's been real.

*DARLENE and DAN get up from their table and leave. The James Brown song, "It's A Man's Man's Man's World" plays.*

End Scene

#### Scene 4: Power to the People

*SARG, BELINDA, JESSICA and REESIE are seated at connecting tables. REESIE has her head in her hands. JULIE is wiping tables around the room.*

REESIE:

I hate that negative image the media gives black women. Ho's and welfare mothers who stir up trouble and pull the race card out. It is hard for all black women despite sexuality.

JESSICA

I'm from Brooklyn, New York. I think I was blessed to be in a...grow up where the mixture was just unbelievable. The families above me were Puerto Rican. My neighbor was Jewish. We all had a very good sense of community and getting along and doing for each other. I think that was a huge blessing.

BELINDA

Well, I was born here. But I lived part of my life in Elmira and then we moved back here to Syracuse. You know, there are still, racial issues and people are still racist and judge, prejudge because of skin color. Not me personally. I'm assertive enough to demand my rights.

JESSICA

Something occurred to me though about color problems. When I'm out with my husband, who is white, he and I make a game of it sometimes. But the stares. You still get those black-white stares. When I have my grandsons, I get the same thing. People staring at me like I'm their nanny or something. - Instead of their grandmother. We were shopping or doing something at Wegman's, and these white women said to the kids, "Well, we want to talk to your mom about your coming to the party." I said, "Well, you can talk to me about it." You know people just size you up right away. I have a friend who is white, and married a black guy. Their son is very light skinned. She is livid about that kind of thing because people always think that she's babysitting or that she's adopted some black kid. People are just...

BELINDA

There's stereotypes about everybody I'd like to see changed. A lot of times, when I was growing up, one of the things that people would ask me—and it was really hurtful—people would say, "What are you?" And I said, "What am I? What do you mean, what am I?" "Well, what are you?" And, and especially when I wore my hair straight, they'd say, "Well, you're not African-American." And I'd say, "Yes, I am African-American. I have other blood but I am African-American." People judge people by the way they look or by the way they speak. I'd certainly like to see that changed. Probably not in my lifetime but, you know, I'd like to see it change.



SARG

It's the stereotype and it's the attitude about us that they have, and that's typical Syracuse. That is why they removed the 15<sup>th</sup> ward because it was a strong black community.

REESIE

*(She shuffles through her papers trying to find the questions on the 15<sup>th</sup> ward. She reads from one of them.)* Can you tell me more about the 15th ward? Were you affected by what happened?

*FATHER BOGDAN enters. He looks around the room then heads to the table where SARG is.*

BOGDAN

Sarg, I was short on communion servers today. Where were you?

SARG

Right here.

BOGDAN

Mass was at 12 and I thought you would be there.

SARG

I thought so too. I was meeting Miss Reesie here at 11 and I thought I'd be done before 12.

BOGDAN

It's 1 o'clock. Weekday mass is over quickly. Couldn't you have come to Church then come back to whatever you are doing?

REESIE

Sorry, Father. I really need to get this interview done.

BOGDAN

You're not done yet?

REESIE

A lot has happened.

SARG

There was a fight. Her professor stopped in – then some students, Belinda and Jessica and now you.

REESIE

Father, can I please finish this interview?

BOGDAN

Go ahead. I'll wait around the corner. I like the mochas there better. Sarg, we can have lunch afterward. You can serve communion at the evening mass. *(BOGDAN exits.)*

SARG

What was that question?

REESIE

The 15<sup>th</sup> ward.

SARG

All the folks who were there -- who lived in those homes were moved out. They cut up and subdivided houses that were meant for one to two families and subdivided them into four to six apartments and moved new people in there. That is the houses that aren't now a parking lot, like mine is. Now they're moving blacks further south over the Seneca Turnpike just to get us away from center city, and they took Townsend Towers, Harrison Towers, Presidential, all of those which were good addresses for people who were trying to make it, took them away and gave them to Syracuse University and moved those folks down south to the south side of Syracuse.

REESIE

The Cherry Hill apartments were rat infested.

*JULIE comes over to the group and wipes the table, lifting the cups and saucers.*

JULIE

Does anyone need anything?

BELINDA

*(To JULIE.)* No, thank you. *(To REESIE.)* Those conditions in Cherry Hill did not go down until the state of New York took over those buildings or let them go. They let them go for a reason. Had any private developer owned those and let those buildings and those communities go down like that, they would have been fined, but the state of New York had it and so there was no repercussions. They went down, and the people who suffered were the black people who lived there.

SARG

Those were good addresses. I remember when that was Blood Alley. I remember when that was Continental Camp. I remember when the new technology building was the first OCC location and Smith Corona before that, and all of the black businesses were down there on Water Street and Erie Blvd. All of the bars and clubs were good, vibrant places. They took them, and then they realized they could remove blacks from the city.

JESSICA

They're moving us further and further from downtown. You know the same thing happened to the west side up around Gifford Street, Shonnard Street and Seymour Street. That area between West Street and Geddes Street; they're going to need that area, and you have *seven, eight different cultures*, that as far as the city is concerned is *one*. That's the biggest mistake, but they're going to be moved down close to the reservation. Everything is being pushed out closer

to the reservation down by Seneca Turnpike. It's a hop, skip and a jump from the reservation. Out of sight, out of mind.

SARG

It's rough being black in America. It's rough being a black man in America, and I imagine it's bad for women. I got eight babies, the oldest one is 45. I've got 13 grandbabies and eight great grandbabies, and I feel for them. I fear for them because life for them is not any better and probably worse. It's not any better, depending on where they're at. My daughter, the one in DC, she would never come back to Syracuse.

BELINDA

It's not where you are. It's who you're with when you're there.

JESSICA

The memories from a place outweigh everything else. There are always bad times, but the memories, the fun, the laughter, the joy, the playing around, and the listening. I wouldn't change any of it.

BELINDA

I'm very proud of being Black. I would not be anything else if I could choose. I would not be anything other than what I am. I like to say, I'm the best of all worlds. I have a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

*JULIE has returned to behind the counter.*

REESIE

What are some of the obstacles you encountered?

JESSICA

I ran into issues, as a performer, wanting various parts and if you weren't white for a white part, you didn't get it. So, most earlier roles were maids or parts made specifically for us. It wasn't until, when was it, the 70s when those lines were crossed. With jobs, that's always been subtle. You kind of know when you walk in a place. If you talk to someone and for a very long time, and this is the way it was phrased to me, I sound white. I would talk on the phone and then when I arrive—it's total shock. I mean there are ways to get around racism at job interviews, thanks to the civil rights movement and such. But aside from that... and the reason my diction was so precise, is because I was in theater at a very young age and you had to get rid of accents and colloquialisms in order to have a neutral voice and apply to whatever the part is.

REESIE

But you got past that?

JESSICA

I was blessed to be on this earth at a time when there were many transitions and the civil rights movement. In college people were curious about me, coming up to Upstate from Brooklyn. I was a different type of person. I auditioned for different roles, different parts, learning things,

jumping right in with both feet and not being shy about it. The Urban League and the NAACP were pushing to make sure there was equality in interview processes and hiring practices. When I walked in the door I was the only black there. I was given the opportunity instead of just being written off. Once I got my foot in the door, I could prove myself competent.

REESIE

So, you had help overcoming obstacles but the obstacles were still there though.

BELINDA

I remember when ... uh ... when I was in college in Oswego. Oswego State. This was in the '70s. My roommate and I—rented an apartment. The complex was called the Blue and Grey Apartments. And they were off-campus. They were halfway decent. So anyway, I called, and I made the arrangements and I sent in the deposit and all of that. The landlord was supposed to come by and drop off the key, just before school started.

So we lived on Valley Drive where—actually in the same house I'm living in right now—and at the time, it was pretty much an all-White neighborhood. That summer, my college roommate was staying with me. So there is a knock on the door. And she answers the door—she's African-American but she's very ... she's lighter than I am—so, she answers the door. The landlord kind of looked at her but he asked for me because I was the one who sent the money. So when I came to the door, he looked at me and he sat down.

“Oh, I have some bad news.” He said, “The apartment that you were going to have, the people that were in it, it was a family, and the father has cancer and I can't ... you know, they're going through this and I can't, you know, kick them out, so I'm going to have to send your deposit back and I'm sorry for any inconvenience.”

Okay. And I just knew that, that it wasn't ... what the deal was. After he left, I called the Human Rights Commission. I reported it and I gave 'em all the details and gave them his number. The next day, they sent a White woman and he rented the apartment to them.

JESSICA

For real?

BELINDA

Yup. So we took him to court and what ended up happening was they judged in our favor. They made him give us the apartment, plus three months of free rent.

SARG

You deserved more.

JESSICA

I've got to get going. You coming?

BELINDA

Yes. I better get going too. My husband may be tired of watching the kids.

*SARG tries to leave with BELINDA and JESSICA.*

SARG

So nice meeting you. Good luck with your summer project. I'll tell Father Bogdan that you said hello.

REESIE

But I have more questions.

SARG

It's been almost 3 hours.

REESIE

But –

SARG

I've missed a board meeting. I missed Church. I need coolant in my radiator.

REESIE

I need more information.

SARG

Can't this wait?

REESIE

No.

SARG

Look, I'm sorry but I've got to go. (He exits.)

*REESIE throws her hands in the air, then covers her face again and hangs her head.*

*Lights down.*

End Scene 4

**Scene 5: Survival in Syracuse**

*REESIE is seated at the table packing up her papers. JULIE is filling the condiments stand.*

JULIE

You deserve that.

REESIE

*(Looking up.)* What?

JULIE

Mr. Sarg had been here since 10:30. You left him sitting here.

REESIE

Our appointment was for 11.

JULIE

You weren't here at 11. There was a gang fight in here at 11. I was going to call the police on those women.

REESIE

I had nothing to do with that.

JULIE

You come in here and you have your own agenda. You don't notice the rest of us are dealing with this every day.

REESIE

I noticed. That's why I don't come in here.

*CLOE enters, looks around, sees REESIE and heads to the table.*

CLOE

Have you seen an older guy? He was here for an interview.

REESIE

Yes, I'm the one who was doing the interview.

CLOE

Where is he?

REESIE

He left a few minutes ago.

CLOE

You doing okay?

REESIE

I wasn't done. I had some more questions.

CLOE

What kind of questions?

REESIE

We were discussing racism in Syracuse.

CLOE

Girl. I can talk all day on that. *(She sits down.)* You're working on your master's? Do you know how I got my master's degree? Online. I have an online master's degree because I couldn't go to Syracuse University or Le Moyne College. And my mother was a cleaning lady at SU. Do you think a cleaning lady's kid gets a shot at a master's degree? Not in my generation.

REESIE

My mother has a Ph.D.

CLOE

You are not getting it. It is not about educational level. It has to do with color and what is expected of a poor black person in this town. My family came from the bricks. Pioneer Homes, down there by route 81.

REESIE

I don't know where you mean.

CLOE

You've seen those red-brick buildings on the other side of 81.

REESIE

The place where people get shot all the time?

CLOE

That's where my parents moved when they came here from South Carolina. It's where I was born. My parents came here in the Great Migration, looking for work. My dad couldn't find a job and my mother did cleaning to earn an income for the family. My dad couldn't get a job because he was black. He couldn't get a home loan.

REESIE

What did he do?

CLOE

My dad worked as a contractor for a person who was contracted to GE. He had applied for a job at GE and was told there was no job. A white man in the parking lot when he was leaving asked him if he had applied. My dad told the man that they said they weren't hiring. The man went in and came out with the job – which had been advertised. He hired my dad to do the job as a

contractor. My dad is great at building things. However, here is Syracuse, he was a subcontractor. He had to leave Syracuse to get work. My dad became an expatriate.

REESIE

My dad was always gone working on government projects.

CLOE

But he came home?

REESIE

Every two weeks or so.

CLOE

My dad was gone for years. It was like I didn't have a father at times. But he provided for us. I have the house I grew up in on Madison Street. My dad bought that and later sold it to me because he was broke. But we had a house to live in and we had food on the table. Getting that house was no easy task. The bank denied my father a home loan even though he had savings equal to the price if not more. Daddy went to work in Europe and Africa where he could put some money into savings.

REESIE

He came home?

CLOE

Yes. My parents live in Fayetteville, in a nice retirement community. My dad is still one of the best builders I know.

*Silence. REESIE starts packing her things up to leave.*

REESIE

I guess Sarg is not coming back. It's been great talking to you.

CLOE

Let me tell you. Keep going. Keep working. I own three houses. I got my degree online. I have been denied jobs. I've been denied education but still I have my master's degree and I have my home. It is difficult to deal with discrimination but it is not impossible. You have to build on your strengths, enable yourself to keep going. Education is not the only source of happiness but it helps to have it. Remember that life still goes on outside the walls of the college. Look at my family. My parents are happily married. They didn't get there without a struggle but they got there. You need to do the same. Get past the struggle and get to where you need to be. People will always have expectations of you that are beyond your capability or that require more effort than you see as worthwhile. The thing you have to do is plan how to get things done anyway. Just like Sarg and I haven't given up on living in Syracuse. What keeps me in Syracuse is the belief that things will get better. That a happy life is possible and that the effect of my actions will bring about a better tomorrow.



*SARG enters and walks over to the table.*

CLOE

Look who's here! I was stopping by to surprise you. Now, I have to get going to the hospital.

SARG

I thought you were done with those cancer treatments.

CLOE

I'm a cancer survivor - *(Looks at REESE.)* but I'm giving back to the community by participating in research. *(To SARG.)* I'll see you later. *(She exits.)*

REESIE

Thanks for coming back

End Scene 5

## Scene 6: Sarg's Sermon

*SARG and REESIE are still seated at the table. SARG'S cup is empty and he is getting hungry. He is anxious to get the interview over.*

REESIE

Has there been any improvement?

SARG

In?

REESIE

Is there less discrimination now than in the past?

SARG

There's less employment, fewer people are graduating from high school. The graduation rate has gone way under 50 percent. There are fewer jobs available for people of color. And we've got the worst housing stock in the United States. All of the black folks who lived in the central city have been moved out by Syracuse University. For a long time there have been no grocery stores. They just started bringing in stores like Aldi's and Price Right. They've closed many schools that serviced the inner city, the black population in particular. The incarceration rate has increased proportionate to the lower education level and higher unemployment rate. This used to be a manufacturing district, 240,000 workers, now we're down to 130,000. You can go all day and not see a black person working downtown. So, I would argue unemployment is even higher. It's much worse than it was. It was bad in 1970. It's worse now.

REESIE

I noticed the unemployment rate for Syracuse was 4.6 in 1990. Then it was 8.6 in 2012. I saw one article that said it's up to 10 percent.

SARG

For the black population, it's close to 30 percent. 'Cause I should know, once you're off unemployment they don't count you. Once you're out of that unemployment list and not getting the checks, you're no longer considered as part of the statistics. Go to the west side or the east side somewhere. There are no jobs out there. What kind of job can a black man in Syracuse expect to get? Blacks in Syracuse have the highest poverty rate at 34 percent.

Poverty. Poverty and segregation go hand and hand. Syracuse has the reputation of being the most segregated city in the north. I would go as far as to say that would include part of the south. In all of my travels I've never seen, have not seen anywhere nearly as bad and entrenched in its racism as Syracuse is. Syracuse was listed the 9<sup>th</sup> most segregated city in the country. That was in the 2010 US Census.

The whole structure of Syracuse and Onondaga County is and has been racist and will continue to be that. You know, it's not like this was not planned. The forerunner for the Metropolitan Business Association, the MBA, his name escapes me. When they first developed a fifty-year-plan under then Mayor Walsh. Bill Walsh. The fifty-year-plan for what they were going to do to redevelop Syracuse. It was the first head of the MBA. He came out of Washington, D.C. with the *template for urban renewal*. They took a voting block of black people. The city would look a lot different, an awful lot different if you had the 15th ward vibrant. They took all those houses off Madison Street, with urban renewal and worked all the way down to State Street. Then went to Fayette Street, all the way up to Adams Street. All those homes that were there, all of us that lived in that area, were removed. What they have told black folk, brown people, people of color in this country, in this city particularly, is that we are not only expendable but we don't count. And I guess it should be expected when we live so close to the Onondaga Nation and they have completely ignored the Onondaga Nation. *Because* what they do to black people is not unlike what they did to the Onondaga Nation. They lived on 34 acres of land, nobody cared about them. That's why they are pushing the black people toward Seneca Turnpike, toward the reservation, to ignore them like they do the Onondaga.

*FATHER BOGDAN enters with a mocha coffee from around the corner. He comes over to the table.*

SARG

It's about entitlement. This is America. These are white men getting rich, super rich with more money than they or their next five or six generations could ever spend. They have billions and billions and billions of dollars. For every billion dollars they have—they have all of these people who are suffering. I look at Syracuse, I look at Onondaga County and I see it as a microcosm of the nation of the United States. I mean all the bad in the United States I think is epitomized in Syracuse, New York and Onondaga County. Unemployment, poverty.

They take things, justify and rationalize treating people differently to reinforce the system of entitlement. To reinforce their sense of privilege over black people, brown people, and anybody who is not a white Protestant male. I've been around, seen all of the nonsense, heard all of the excuses and the things that they've done.

BOGDAN

Amen.

SARG

Chris Rock said, "There is nothing more intolerant than an old black man." I laughed when I heard it but, it is so real, I'm 65 years old. And nothing's more intolerant than me.

*REESIE turns off the digital recorder.*

Black Out.

The End

## Conclusion

“Meeting at Mom’s” examines black lives through the medium of theater to provide its audience with tools for understanding race and human relations in post-civil rights Central New York (1970-2015). At the heart of this play is the examination of multicultural black identity in Syracuse. Special attention is paid to how the characters empowered themselves to respond to de facto racial discrimination and interracial/intraracial misunderstandings as they pertained to racial identity. As academic work rooted in the Black Arts Movement and African Conscious Theater, “Meeting at Mom’s” provides a direct challenge to the white mainstream societal view of blacks, i.e., the “one-drop rule.” It does so by promoting the idea that racial dialog can bring about an end to misperceptions, and by explaining the lifestyle and by understanding the different choices made by Black Syracusans, who represent a microcosm of the African diaspora. By doing this, “Meeting at Mom’s” builds on the ever-increasing body of work being written about Black Syracuse, by introducing the concept of “community consciousness” to that experience, and closely examining the many different shades of black identity for multicultural African Americans.

Identity is partially shaped by lifestyle and the lifestyle of many African Americans has been marginalized. The marginalized lifestyles of blacks in Syracuse are an indication of a need for change in the environment. Amilcar Cabral theorized about “marginalized-urbanites” where urban blacks exist on the periphery of society (Cabral, 1970). This is true in the case of Syracuse blacks; they live on the edge of society and are not the center or the focus of the Syracuse community. Although blacks comprise over 29 percent of the city’s population, there are very few blacks involved in local politics or recognized as local leaders. The marginalized lifestyles of black Syracuse residents are ones of alternative employment and under education which force

blacks away from the mainstream societal norms such as 40 hour work weeks. The declining educational opportunities create further disparities between blacks and whites, placing most blacks further from the societal ideal standard of living in a single family home that is in a community with good demand, good public schools, and is safe. This is the American dream that most whites have been living since World War II (post-1945). This was also the time in which proletarian/working class solidarity systematically broke down along racial lines in favor of many white working people using white supremacy and institutional racism for the acquisition of their power and privilege as they became “white.” For African Americans, this was the latest betrayal of class solidarity that traces back to African enslavement into the present in which blacks are disproportionately linked to de facto racial oppression in the industries of education, entertainment, media, prison, and welfare to name a few.

My play, “Meeting at Mom’s” seeks to provide a model for blacks overcoming America’s systems of oppression by focusing on urban African Americans as humans who have taken on a diverse range of approaches that represent the broad range of blackness and concerns throughout the African diaspora. Television and film media, which are distributed throughout the world, distort the image of blacks in America with stereotypes and fictional lives. The life stories in my thesis are true stories and not media fiction. By relying more on people’s real life experiences than on statistics, the life stories provide a concrete example of the struggles faced in America and how they survived. “Meeting at Mom’s” does this as an extension of the Black Arts Movement tradition. In particular, this research examines black American agency and how blacks have impacted their social environments. This impact positively constructs a black consciousness that is not defined by white mainstream norms and mores.

“Meeting at Mom’s” combines principles that originated in the 1960s within the Black Arts Movement, namely the unification of Amiri Baraka’s belief that African American life is a valid focal point for African American Art, with Maulana Karenga’s belief in Kawaida philosophy, which promoted “unity in diversity, unity without uniformity” (Karenga, 2014). For my work, these theoretical approaches have resulted in my use of theater as a public forum for explaining and expressing concerns of Black Syracusans about their living environment. My conclusion is that Black Syracusans do not need to share identical ethnicity in order to form a community. What makes them a community is pride of color, pride in themselves, pride in what this broad diversity of black people can accomplish individually and together.

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## **Vita**

### **Education**

Syracuse University Syracuse, NY 13210

Continued Undergraduate Studies: English and Textual Studies, 2004 - 2005

GPA: 3.76, President's List

Graduate Studies: Pan African Studies, 2011 – 2015

GPA: 3.593

Niagara University Niagara University, NY 14109

Bachelor of Science in Commerce – Concentration: Economics, May 2000

GPA: 3.32, Cum Laude, Dean's list

Onondaga Community College Syracuse, NY 13205

Associate in Applied Science - Art, December 2003

GPA: 3.817, Summa Cum Laude, President's List

### **Work History**

2013 to present, 2001 – 2011, also 1998 - Onondaga Community College, Syracuse, NY

Academic Tutor 2: Microeconomics, Macroeconomics and Oceanography

2011, August to May 2013- Syracuse University, Pan African Studies, Syracuse, NY

Teaching Assistant

2011, January to March - Say Yes to Education, McKinley Brighton School, Syracuse, NY

Teaching Artist, Drama Club

### **Associated Organizations**

Black Student Union (BSU) – President, Niagara University

Phi Beta Delta – Collegiate International Honor Society; Niagara University and Schiller International

Phi Theta Kappa – Junior College International Honor Society; Onondaga Community College

Alpha Kappa Psi – Business Fraternity, Niagara University

### **Publications**

30 Years and Many Tears, 2012 hardcover, 2013 paperback, poetry book, author

International Who's Who in Poetry 2012, featured poet

Syracuse University, English and Textual Studies, Undergraduate Conference Journal, Spring 2005, poetry.