

**Secrets Keep You Sick:
Dramaturgy for *No Further...* and Other Notes**

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The research on eating disorders, disordered eating and substance abuse in the United States and abroad is vast but not as diverse as it should be. There are many diagnosable disorders listed and described at length in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition. A multitude of quantitative and qualitative data on those living with such disorders can easily be found in articles, books, manuals, and video resources (*see some below*). Still, Black, Indigenous, Latina/o, Hispanic, Asian, LGBTQ, nonbinary, and male-identified people—whose cultural and social identities often factor significantly in their illnesses—are mostly an addendum in, or absent altogether from, the literature. The lack of prioritization of said identities and experiences in the literature and in arts, media, and entertainment denies our existence and helps keep us sick.

Eating disorders are largely considered a young, white woman's problem, and BIPOC folks are often underdiagnosed and undertreated for them. The Emily Program, citing Goeree, Ham, & Iorio's 2011 study, reports that "Black girls are 50 percent more likely than white girls to engage in bulimic behavior" (1). They also report that "Recurrent binge eating is more common among Black women than among white women" (Ibid). Why are these statistics so hard to believe? Because there is little presentation or representation of these women in the discourse on body image and eating disorders. As a result, we do not look for them. We do not expect them to show up in the world this way. And they suffer in silence. The absence of black and brown people, regardless of gender, in the discourse on ED is both telling and harmful. *No Further...* seeks to contribute voice, presence, and perspective to the discussion of eating disorders.

The dramaturgical process for this virtual reading included individual research and lengthy conversations with the brilliant Dylan Carter, a prospective MA Anthropology student at the University of Cincinnati. We discussed the many diagnosable eating disorders and how they might manifest, the absence of ED research on non-white people, and substance abuse and addiction as a coping mechanism for trauma. *We were also graced with the occasional appearance of his cat, Daisy, on our Zoom calls. With such heavy material, we tried to find ways to keep it light and get distracted.* We talked at length about the gaps in the literature and potential interventions. Completing this play, for me, has been an attempt at creating a dramatic intervention to the gaps in the discourse on race, gender, mental health disorders, and mental health treatment.

I have been revisiting/procrastinating writing this play for 15 years. For some reason, I did not have the intention or focus needed to complete it. When I think back over this time—during which I earned an MFA, a PhD, and a Graduate Certificate; taught many students; performed in many projects; wrote lots of other material—I realized that so much of it (*that time*) was spent in my head, in the gym, on the scale, and in the kitchen obsessed with food and with my body—a vessel that carries me around, a home that has never (quite) been a space of comfort. Not completely. And there are reasons for that. As Nora intimates in *No Further...*, she didn't just

wake up one day and decide to have an eating disorder. There is an origin to her behaviors—a pain center.

In *No Further...*, I am trying to say something about what it's like to have a long, unhealthy relationship with food and one's body, and the potential origins of such behaviors. The diets, the restriction, the overeating, the tears over wanting one's body to be something it is not and does not have to be, the outside observations and opinions from family members, friends, even teachers... they all matter. They all mattered. Admittedly, they made me more of a serious, self-critical, and isolated person than I would have been had the real estate in my brain been filled with how wonderful I am, rather than how inadequate my body may or may not be...for my career, for other people, for the family portrait...whatever.

My former and current students (many of whom worked on this virtual reading with me) reminded me that I was writing this piece. That may seem strange, but they reminded me that it was still in process in my life. In 2006, when I began writing *No Further...*, and far earlier, I struggled with my body: how I felt about it, how I wanted it to appear, and how others felt about it. I still do. In drama school, I remember physically holding myself together in one of the few spaces where I felt safe—the theatre. That struggle was often debilitating, leaving me to strategize every move, every step in my life rather than live actively and freely in the moment. Leaving me paralyzed by my own mind.

In my students' writing and performance work in my classes, and in long private conversations with them that went no further than my office, I was reminded of how important it is to share your story. To tell your truth. It is interesting how the omission of one's identity and experience from scholarship, media, and performance can make you—your voice, your body, your mind, your experiences—seem/feel unimportant. And it is amazing how community can change that. As a black, queer-identified woman, I see even less representation of all my selves. Instead of sitting defeated, though, I choose to use art to allow folks like me to speak their secrets aloud. And the characters in *No Further...* have much to say. It is my hope that you will hear them, individually and collectively, and that their stories touch you, help you, change you.

Resources

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