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## The Marrow: Laurie Carlos

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## THE MARROW

# Laurie Carlos

B. JANUARY 25, 1949

QUEENS, NEW YORK

Anybody would find it overwhelming when you're trying to do self-examination and examination of your own body and spirit and language and staying true in the moment and creating new moments and not doing easy answers and not repeating old stuff over and over again. But of course that's the work the artist has to do, 'cause it's/that's the artists' work / that is what your work is.

You don't ask yourself to do easy things, you know.

Even though they're beautiful, some of the answers you get, some of the moments you get, some of the things you've done are beautiful. They're wonderful, they are technically fine, and brilliantly constructed, they have incredible aesthetic levels . . . that's a wonderful review, that's perfect, it's wonderful this is, is just great.

Yeah don't bring that crap to me next time,

'cause we did that, so let's go see the next thing one has to do. That's very difficult.

It's hard to do that, to not get up and just simply cliché yourself through your life as an artist. To not get up and do the shtick over and over again, because the world will tell you that the shtick is fine . . . but at the level that you make commitment to this replication over and over again of yourself as the artist you have died.

—Laurie Carlos<sup>1</sup>

*Oya whips through and changes everything*

*a gale that uproots trees and human lives*

*subtle breezes that lick the ears with promises of something more*

*once she passes, nothing is the same.*

## Jazz Narrative

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**JAZZ NARRATIVES** occur as a layering of elements. The primary layers are usually the textual, the physical, and the sonic. Because theatrical jazz sees truth-telling as foundational, the textual layer is often autobiographical explorations of family, neighborhood, era, secrets, personal history, and epiphanies. The nonlinearity of the textual layer resists the normativity of chronology, and allows for a reimagining of narrativizing that works against the deeply discursive nature of Black oppression. The physical layer may be dance in a traditional



Figure 10. Laurie Carlos in *Kshoy!/Decay!* This performance was inspired by women's relationships to land, exile, and homemaking, presented by the Ananya Dance Theatre at the Southern Theatre in Minneapolis, 2010. Photo by V. Paul Virtucio.

sense, but more often it builds on a gestural vocabulary that works as purely non-mimetic, or as synecdoche suggesting a larger experience, or as some combination

"I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO MOVE WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF EUROCENTRIC PLAY FORM . . . I HAVEN'T NAMED THE AESTHETIC: IT IS NOT ABSOLUTE . . . I HAVE NO WAY TO DEFINE IT RIGHT NOW. SO IN THAT WAY MY AESTHETIC IS WITHOUT DEFINITION, WHICH IS NOT A TERRIBLE THING. I CAN REALLY START TO LET IT DEFINE ITSELF:"\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* *White Chocolate for My Father*, 5.

of these possibilities. The abstract and metaphorical nature of nonmimetic movement pushes theatrical jazz explorations beyond the dangerous shorthand of verisimilitude that asks audience/witnesses to affirm the known rather than speculate on an array of imaginative possibilities. In the nonmimetic space, there is room for Black bodies to innovate and for audience/witnesses to experience Blackness outside of well-worn tropes. The theatrical jazz soundscape is rich in music, and can also employ

breath work, aural synecdoche, and rhythmic sounds made from playing the body and using stage objects like instruments.

Carlos's jazz narrative strategies make ample use of these three planes: the textual story that is seriate, and spirals and repeats, that revisits images, characters, and ideas as if turning something over, seeking some combination of understanding and resolution; the gestural tale of nonmimetic movements that seem randomly juxtaposed against the verbal text, a hand sliding across the chest pulling the body in a new direction, a hip jutting into space while the torso remains still; and the soundscape, the bits of blues, jazz, rock and roll, children's rhymes, and Western classical music that live in her texts, the playful use of voice, the choral orchestration of performers' text, along with the audible breathing. These three modalities have their own story to tell, and move together like a free-jazz composition in which each element seems independent while being crucially interdependent.

Much like Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman," Carlos's pieces end even as they resist resolution. She concludes *White Chocolate for My Father*:

LORE: Who are you?

TONY: Do you love me?

DEOLA: What wars do you remember?

Lore: Yes.

*Red light climbs out from everywhere.*

Yes.

TONY: Do you love me?<sup>2</sup>

And *Feathers at the Flame* ends with:

MENGA: I am returning every day.

HALF EYE: I will be there very soon.

POOR DOG: Expect me at dusk.

RACHEL: I am here.

GLENA: We are close.

SKYWALKER: Going.

MU: Where are you?

*Scene: Family portraits. Home town welcome signs. Road and mileage billboards.  
A collage of memory rural and urban.*<sup>3</sup>

These questions open the endings rather than close them. Carlos's verbal text encourages comprehension beyond what the words alone can bring.

## Textual Strategies

Fact, fiction, myth, wish, projection, fantasy, necessity meld into a faceted set of truths that is Laurie Carlos. Her personal history, and her style of sharing it, is as dense and labyrinthine as the structure of much of her performance work. The

"AUTOBIOGRAPHY FOR ME IS PHANTASMAGORICAL TO EVERYBODY ELSE."  
—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Phone interview with author, July 11, 2003.

maze of details pushes the listener to attend closely, to make individual decisions about what truth is and what really matters when stories are exchanged. Such fractured telling is an African American legacy revealing a host of celebratory storytelling practices and the deepest trauma, grief, and annihilated selfhood. Under such circumstances the details of one's life move through prisms of possibilities, where the telling itself supersedes the veracity of the tale.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1.

TONI MORRISON: "The crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "The Site of Memory," 93.

Carlos conjures a personal history of betrayal and beauty, of family intimacy and ruptures, of gentility and grotesquery, of brutality and bounty. This personal history makes its way into her texts—bits of memories, images, thoughts that she turns over and over from one writing to the next. The dexterity with which she weaves her own mythology, and her ability to help others weave theirs, is a hallmark of both her writing and her workshop facilitation.

In her autobiographical works—*The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, *The Cooking Show and How the Monkey Dances*, and *White Chocolate for My Father*—Carlos tells her life stories over and over, never exactly the same. *Teenytown* has a section entitled "White Chocolate" that is also found in *White Chocolate for My Father*. *The Cooking Show* includes "Phosphorescent," which also appears in *Nonsectarian Conversations with the Dead*.

The individual threads of the triple-strand narrative device move across texts so that when considered together, many of Carlos's works seem like movements within a single examination of a 1950s East Village childhood. In *White Chocolate* and *The Cooking Show*, the following passage appears spoken by The Monkey and Tiny, respectively:

Borinque thru azure & rain storms in ruffles, closed in fingers. An unknown listener of love and clear light playing guitar, answering questions about the origins of roaches and tears. Borinque clean washed linoleum raised against too much steam heat. High-rise 10 to 4 rooms and rice and rice and rice grateful for meat. Unable to find mangos in season or blue water. Loving everything American. Working New York brooms and Long Island gardens. Loving Ricky Nelson & Topo Gigo, Joselito on the Sullivan show.

Calling Carmen! Carmen Morales Rodriguez Ortiz Aiyala Arroacho Perez Cruz Carmen Sanchez Dominques Pinero Rivera Santiago Sonja Clara Jose Manueto Edgar Ellia Luz Anna Borinque. Crying pleanas [*sic*] in Pentecostal basements. Just good dancers. Villains cut in brillante. Singers leaning gorgeous in Woolworth powder. The Lord lives in us all! Borinque marching on the head of disaster. Declaring summer by congas and cheering loud for the Yankees. Parking DeSotos sideways on Columbia Street repairing nylons for the week. Borinque a world of pink rollers bringing stripes to florals orange to gold. Flirting loud on corners lined with garbage. Smelling summer in the eyes of Borinque thru azure. Eyelids lined in tragic black pencil.<sup>4</sup>

This is a provocative memory to mull over from 1988 (*White Chocolate*) to 1996 (*The Cooking Show*). It reveals a lush world, full of rich mundane details of people, of place, of class, of an era. In the printed texts, not one word is different across the eight years that separate the works. The memory returns. Stuck perhaps. Providing comfort or raising questions. Though the words remain the same, the truth of the memory shifts as it is positioned between conversations among apparitions and the living in *White Chocolate*, and between a recipe for chickpea salad and a loudly sung lament of dislocation in *The Cooking Show*.

She makes a return—refocusing, standing at a new angle, tilting anew—as if the revisitation is a search for some understanding or resolution. This spiraling back through moments often happens when chunks of text appear across pieces. The children’s rhyme “Clap hands clap hands till daddy comes home daddy had money and mommy had none” is found in both *White Chocolate for My Father* and *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*. In *White Chocolate*, the rhyme comes after a female ancestor explains how she negotiates repeated rapes by placing a bag over her head—“He can only take me like this . . . Cant [*sic*] look at my face.”<sup>5</sup> After the rhyme is sung by the children in the family, this elder ancestor goes on to describe the tenderness of her father. In *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, the rhyme is inserted in the narration, creating a bridge between the description of a young wife who strained to maintain a well-kept home, and the narrating of her husband’s imminent death. In both instances, the rhyme is a pivot between one tone and telling, and another. The lyrics speak of male power and female

“I WRITE IN THE TONE OF GOSSIP AND OLD  
METHODOLOGIES OF STORYTELLING.”\*  
—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Phone interview with author, June 2011.

impotence that is graphically referenced by the older characters. The rhyme reflects an imbalanced relationship, and disconcertingly inserts a child presence in the midst of joyless adult relationships. The effect is one of simultaneity—adults conducting their business as children conduct their own, each group marking the other. Carlos returns to details as if she is working to understand them, as if she is working through an understanding about her own life and history. Her personal storytelling style reflects the structure of her written work for performance—the story spirals back with a bit more or less detail, with a new cadence, or in another character’s voice. This allows the reader or audience, and Carlos, an opportunity to feel the same image/idea/moment anew.

Characters and references also appear from one work to the next. Monkey references appear in *Teenytown*, *The Cooking Show*, *White Chocolate* and “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy.” In *The Cooking Show* and “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy,” The Monkey is Carlos herself. Monkey carries conflicting connotations—a child-like mischievous playfulness, an animal coerced into commercial entertainment tethered to an organ grinder’s string, and a sardonic echo of racist nineteenth-century images. These contradictions are part of the very power of Carlos’s verbal texts. A reader digests all of this at the same time, trying to catch up to the multiple meanings evoked. Carlos as a smart disconnected child is the protagonist of several of her autobiographical works, and with *White Chocolate*, she felt she “can now speak about other things that are not autobiographical, and that are also not in my child’s voice, which I had been unable to do for a while. The language is so simple because I had to say it in the language that I knew at the time, as the child in the moment. I couldn’t write it from the point of view of reflection.”<sup>6</sup> In spite of anticipating a move from autobiography in 1988, Carlos as Monkey returns in the 2003 “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy.” Although “Marion” offers adult reflection, nagging vestiges of childhood may remain.

The multiterminous nature of theatrical jazz manifests in Carlos’s work through the infusion of historical artifacts in current reality. There are repeated minstrel references in *Teenytown*. The opening sketch is called “Minstrel Mania,” the closing stage direction indicates that “the entire cast performs ‘Buck and Wing,’ an original aboriginal tap dance, in silence,” and throughout the first half of the performance, the performers assume traditional minstrel roles as Carlos plays the Interlocutor, Robbie McCauley plays Bones, and Jessica Hagedorn plays Jones. In *White Chocolate*, two scenes are described as “vaudevilles, improvisations told in two voices.”<sup>7</sup> These minstrel elements are not situated in their nineteenth-century moment, but are fully integrated into the now of the work encouraging contemporary contemplation on racism, on entertainment, and on the particular surrogates Black artists often unwittingly embody when we take the stage.

While Carlos turns over a memory from one text to the next, a constant in each of these works are the adults who are consumed by sorrow and/or rage, and the children who are left to make sense of the world essentially on their own.

Lets say I want to tell you a story /  
 Some gave less to a lot of them who came passing through /  
 Some of us had to leave the party to raise the baby /  
 Some could never go back not that way /  
 Lets say that as I am telling you this story I am reminded of another  
 story and I begin to tell that one /  
 Lets say the story has a beginning /  
 Lets say the second story reminds me of a third and then another /  
 The story crashing silver out of nostrils full of gestures / Flames of breath  
 churned to curl / °

° Laurie Carlos, "The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)" (unpublished manuscript, draft 1, 2006), 22.

This truth telling arranges and rearranges life like a strong wind, picking up an idea here, depositing an image there, tossing a memory backwards and forwards in a whirl of historical shape-shifting. Carlos's present has porous contours, so that time and memory waft through now, creating an ever-evolving past-laden present. In *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, the narrator tells us "Everything from back yonder time crawled and sat under the nails." Even the self-policing middle-class family of this performance novel<sup>8</sup> cannot rid themselves of a past they would like to erase.

## Soundscape

Imagining Carlos's personal narrative style as the wind is more than a useful simile. Breath, air, and movement are key ingredients to Carlos's written work, her performance work, her directing, and her workshop facilitation. Carlos studied modern

"SOUNDS IN MOTION CHANGED EVERYTHING IN TERMS OF HOW PEOPLE RELATED TO THE AVANT GARDE AND JAZZ. AUDIBLE BREATHING IS ALL ABOUT McINTYRE."\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Phone interview with author, June 16, 2008.

dance, and used the form's emphasis on breath to negotiate the asthma she was born with and the myasthenia gravis (MG) she acquired as an adult. Conscious controlled breathing in modern dance can intensify the contraction and release that characterize modern dance movements.<sup>9</sup> While MG is most often identified by the weakening of muscles that control the eye, eyelid, facial expressions, chewing, talking, and swallowing, the muscles that affect breathing are also susceptible. A myasthenia crisis can lead to paralysis of the respiratory muscles requiring ventilation assistance. In extreme cases, the fatigability of the muscles is life-threatening.

A characteristic feature of Carlos's performance work and directing is the perceptible inhalation and exhalation of air, an artistic impulse she learned from



Dianne McIntyre at McIntyre's Sounds in Motion dance studio of Harlem. From McIntyre, Carlos came to understand how to take language into the body and release into breath and flight. Carlos credits McIntyre's breath work with providing her with the method for stemming the effects of MG. McIntyre was exploring improvisations between dancers and jazz musicians that sometimes included vocalized sounds and spoken narratives.<sup>10</sup> Her studio became a Harlem gathering place during the Black Arts Movement and beyond—Olu Dara, Sekou Sundiata, William "Butch" Morris, Craig Harris, Cecil Taylor, Thulani Davis, Ntozake Shange, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Marlies Yearby, and Carlos were all regulars over time.

Carlos's sounds/breaths are idiosyncratic and mostly unchoreographed, though her written texts sometimes incorporate the exact placement of the breath or explicit references to breathing. Breath, movement, and life itself intertwined

**BREATH / BREATH / TO EVERY ONE AFTER / BREATH BROKEN / CAPTURED, RELEASED STEPPING / \***

\* Laurie Carlos, "The Pork Chop Wars" (unpublished manuscript, 2006), 1.

as the diaphragmatic breathing encouraged her respiratory muscles to keep their rhythms full and steady. The breath informs the ges-

ture, and the gesture carries the story. In this work, the very idea of story is often the thing being investigated.

In Yoruba cosmology, *Oya*, the Divine force of nature that is dynamic air, works a duality—life-giving breath and the deadly winds of destruction. Even the Niger River with which *Oya* is associated reflects radical change as it flows away from the sea for several miles then boomerangs near Timbuktu turning toward the sea and emptying into the Gulf of Guinea. This force sweeps into one's life and reorders everything, or sustains one's life through air itself. It is *Oya* who claims the

Figure 11. "Open the Sky," by Tonya Engel. After Engel originally presented me with a version of the painting, she and I collaborated for weeks on how to infuse more mystery, simultaneity, and Divine energy into the work. In this final version, birds have been added as they tweet a private message and evoke the ability to move between worlds; the primary figure straddles here and there as the head seems to become one with the cosmos, and the eye takes in the unknown. The figure is both powerful and porous; distinctive and elusive. Photo by Tonya Engel.



last breath at death, and who prompts the first breath at birth. *Oya's* unpredictability and ferocity make her a force to be respected in nature, and in the workings of one's life. As Carlos's autobiographical character Monkey notes in "Marion's Terrible Time of Joy," "The book don't tell you how strong the wind is gonna be in your life / Book don't tell you that /."<sup>11</sup> In the destructive mode, *Oya* is a sword-wielding warrior, ready for battle as the fierce companion to lightening, thunder, and rain.

*Laurie came to my graduate course, Devising Solo Performance, during the spring of 2009. I have been in so many transformative workshops with Laurie, and seen her cut right through the very core of someone's façade. I have ducked from those sharp insightful knives of hers hoping to be spared embarrassment, and simultaneously longing to be fully exposed by her insights so that I could just get on with myself. Part of Laurie's genius is her ability to see what is needed, to ferret out artifice in order to reveal the pulsing vulnerability and power beneath. Some of my graduate students had seen her performance of "Washed" in which she offered her easy sense of command, her compelling movements in every corner of the stage, and her deliciously stimulating narrative—at once private introspection even as it was direct conversation with the audience. The students listened to her discussion of art during the talk back. They were excited by her work, and eager to talk with her after the performance. In the class period before Laurie's visit, I told the class about her work, about the jazz aesthetic, about the necessity of a rigorous self-honesty—indeed these were concepts we had been working with all semester. The class decided that it would be a great addition to our work to have her come to our class. Laurie entered the class and arranged us in her customary circle seated open-legged on the floor. After some introductions, Laurie brusquely told one student—"Just step up! Just do the work!" and tears slowly welled in the student's eyes. We moved on, did exercises, made important self-discoveries, and then Laurie said to another student "Speak up! You always wait so that you are the last one to speak! Well now you have our attention! SPEAK!" And for the next three to four full minutes, the student tried to speak—but only a paroxysm of sobs came forward. Three minutes of watching this student agonize. And through that pain, I saw the class stand tall. When one student went to comfort the paralyzed student, and Laurie told her not to, the students' faces seemed filled with understanding rather than horror. In the moment, it was both devastating to witness the student's tortured attempts to speak, and invigorating to feel right inside of a potential life and artistic transformation. This is what Laurie brings. This is her gift. Her extensive history of developing work with experimental sensibilities, her countless collaborations with luminaries in dance, theatre, and music, her life of doggedly pushing for honesty in performance—all of this came to bear on the moment in my classroom. Could the students see how much growth was happening as one student was forced to confront her habits and stand inside of her choices? Were they able to hold up a mirror to their own stuck spaces? I felt pretty certain that the student being addressed found no virtue at the time in Laurie's approach, but I could see more clearly than ever that sometimes a jolt is the way to bring someone into the present moment, that the classroom can be a safe space precisely because it can carry us through intense productive upheaval.*

*In one class session, Laurie managed to bring a profound change into the room, a change I knew was needed but one that I couldn't orchestrate. She was asking the students to examine themselves and to stand up. And though the style had mellowed over the years, the strategy remained the same, and the effect was—as before—cyclonic.*

MONKEY

In the days when I'm in battle I always know I will win /

ANANYA

How / How do you know? /

MONKEY

Not how do I know / But why fight / It's always my battle with myself /

ANANYA

No / That's not what I am talking about / It's these crazy small people with their arrogance /

MONKEY

Arrogance is the best battle cry / It's what gets your feet up to dance / You should thank the little people /

ANANYA

Do you really think they deserve anything with their tiny minds? /

MONKEY

With their short visions /

ANANYA

I know you can't stand them either /

MONKEY

I can't stand anything or anybody / It all gets on my nerves /

ANANYA

So what's all this about them being helpful? /

MONKEY

I didn't say they were helpful / They sure are not the reason for my personal battles / I declare war / Supply the troupes / Bomb residential areas and sign truces / Rock in my rage I'm a good dancer / The little people really couldn't ever play the music / I got multiple rhythms with changing melody lines / And I'm addicted to the Tango\*

\* Laurie Carlos, "Marion's Terrible Time of Joy" (unpublished manuscript, 2007), 5.

The air travel of many of Carlos's characters reflects another union with *Qya* whose dominion is the air. A trip to Italy opens *White Chocolate*—"Opening: Everyone Knows a Dance! This is a voyage of improvisational movement and sound"—after the character Lore declares, "Someday Im gonna go all over the world. All over."<sup>12</sup> Tony then begins to recall her first trip to Italy with sister Tiny and friend Ida in which the Italian TWA agent printed the wrong departure time on their tickets. The girls had plans to visit Tony and Tiny's mother in Africa, but that would now have to wait. Taking full responsibility for the error, the agent promised the girls they could stay at a hotel until the next flight in three days, and all expenses would be paid by the airline. At the end of the play, we return to the three girls trying to get out of Italy when TWA refuses to pay for their three-day stay and lavish dining at the finest Italian hotel. After harrowing encounters with angry Italian TWA agents, the girls are allowed to leave the country. In the transitional site of an airport, the trip is ruined. Travel is not the freedom space the characters' fantasies imagine it to be ("I dream of Sweden and Paris in your eyes"<sup>13</sup>), and, importantly, the girls do not see their mother.

The mother figure is literally and figuratively distant in much of Carlos's work. In *Teenytown*, Her, who is a clear stand-in for Carlos, gives a final commentary about her mother when she says, "First she moved to Brooklyn and then to Zaire in 1971 she has not returned. She made both moves alone with her children. She has never been to Sweden."<sup>14</sup> Although the mother has done some traveling with her children, she and they remain alone. In *White Chocolate*, Mickey the mother says, "Tough little pudding heads. They all dance. Yes sir. All my children dance. Whirl around and sing too. These children of mine all mistakes."<sup>15</sup> The apparent cruelty of Mickey's comments is mitigated to some extent by knowing that she endured beatings and sexual assaults by her mother's boyfriend. Mickey tells her own absent mother: "I am sitting outside waiting my turn. Waiting. Mama, why didn't you help me? Mama, why didn't you help me? Mama, why didn't you help me?" then proceeds to sing "Dixie," a song etched in historical memory as the anthem for a racist southern United States. Mickey speaks of her abuse through this racially charged song that includes a failed romance between a deceiving man and naïve woman. In much of Carlos's work, mothers do not protect children but instead work to protect themselves from harrowing memories.

Throughout *Teenytown*, *Qya*'s winds of change make international travel unsettling. Laurie tells the audience,

Paris is a stinking racist town  
 Argentinians refuse to serve  
 us steaks we don't even want—  
 WE WANT CAFÉ! CAFÉ OLE! THAT'S  
 ALL WE WANT YOU NEO-NAZI EXPATRIATES

arbitrary & arrogant  
 gendarmes demand

i.d.  
in crowded subway stations

we whip out passports  
trembling with rage.  
we dream of singing  
right up in their faces  
but we know better.  
you know the rap—

*“je suis une ugly americain, bebe!”*  
hiss that secret litany,  
protection against evil spirits:  
little richard,  
fats domino,  
chuck berry  
otis uno  
otis dos  
otis tres,  
fontella bass.

we’re international citizens,  
you understand.<sup>16</sup>

While Carlos’s characters often understand themselves to be citizens of the world, they are frequently reminded of the limitations imposed by race, gender, and nationality. Carlos’s work points to the illusion of freedom for Black women regardless of their class status.

Music is vital to the soundscape in Carlos’s work. It is in the language of her characters, it is indicated in the stage directions, it is on the radio, it is sung. Music becomes the reference point for her feelings, the guide in workshop exercises, and the marker for a memory. Specific songs and rhymes are essential to the way Carlos creates jazz structures. Many of the songs/rhymes speak of coded forms of oppression in the lyrics. In *White Chocolate*, that oppression is mostly gendered and/or sexualized. The power dynamics in “clap hands clap hands till daddy comes home daddy has money and mommy has none!”<sup>17</sup> speaks of male power and female dependence. *White Chocolate* also opens with a reference to “Little Bitty Pretty One”<sup>18</sup> whose lyrics disturbingly suggest pedophilia—

Oh, itty bitty pretty one  
Come on and talk to me  
Let me grab you lovely one  
Come sit down on my knee  
I could tell you a story

It happened a long time ago  
Little Bitty Pretty One  
I've been watchin' you grow

LAURIE'S DISCOGRAPHY OF IMPORTANT  
MUSIC AS OF 2011\*

JOAN ARMATRADING  
JONI MITCHELL  
BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE  
LAURA NYRO  
HARRY BELAFONTE  
JOHNNY MATHIS  
PRINCE  
DAVE MATTHEWS  
LOURDES PEREZ  
GRISHA COLEMAN  
HAMZA EL DIN, EVERY DAY FOR 30 YEARS

\* Laurie Carlos, e-mail message to author, November 30, 2011.

—as well as a reference to the Bobettes' 1950s hit single "Mr. Lee," which also suggests a relationship between young girls and an older man.<sup>19</sup> Racist oppression is found in the music of *The Cooking Show* with "I'm gwine to jump down / tern round / pick a bile / o'cotton jump down, / tern round / pick a bale / a day."<sup>20</sup>

**Fieldnotes**

*Rehearsal for con flama  
Texas State Mental Hospital<sup>21</sup>  
8 August 2000  
6:45 pm*

*LAURIE: "a lot of work initially is for us to learn each others' rhythms; everything is already in the room."*

*Method—*

*LAURIE: "let us hear your voices; don't go so far inside yourselves"*

*—opens with short passage then has them read;*

*performers all unsure who starts and who continues*

*LAURIE: "let's go back. Let's read it again. What do you know about it right now?"*

*They read—*

*LAURIE: "Did you get what you wanted? Go back and get what you want."*

*Gives each performer a style; Florinda in the story; Zell is past the story; Ana telling someone else's story.*

*They are told they can stand. Only Florinda crouches—Zell and Ana remain seated.*

*LAURIE: "Either be in it; away from it; or repeat it as gossip"*

*"Don't let it pull you into some cliché of language—'arty poo-ey'"*

*LAURIE: "I want you to be able to tell me when you find the surprise"*

*"Stop! Nobody can hear anybody else. Do whatever you need to do to hear each other."*

*"Everybody gets stuck in the funnel! Do what you have to to see each other."*

*Clear change in response to language when they looked at each other.*

*w/ Tommy Nakamura section*

*the 2 women "gossip" while Zell tells the same text as the teller of the tale.*

*LAURIE: "break the language up" = don't say all the words*

## Physical Idioms

In Carlos's work, the body is telling its own tale. Full of angularity and multiple simultaneous directions, her gestural vocabulary is a blend of her own movement background and her careful attention to the movements of the performers. Sometimes these movements are marked in the text, other times they evolve during rehearsal.

*During rehearsals for Pork Chop Wars, Laurie introduced a series of gestures that the eight women performers began to imitate then personalize with their own distinctive style. When Laurie did the gestures, they had a buoyancy, as if her body was floating or suspended. When we did them sitting in a semi-circle of chairs, they were individual expressions rather than a unison group commentary. I was designated to lead the gestures, and the women would echo my movements. Turn knees to the right, slide the downstage hand across chest, raise fist to eye level, twist the fist three times, slap thigh. Then, at one rehearsal, I missed my cue! The women were confused! Should they try to do the sequence without me? Would I suddenly remember and do the gesture at a different moment? Would this throw off the later gestures? Is this the very serendipity that makes this aesthetic fly? We fumbled forward, gestures askew. I wondered what the audience made of these movements when they saw them in performance. Do they take in the different qualities along with the similarities, and make their own meaning? Are they distracted by the movements? Do they give the gestures meaning in relationship to the verbal text? As with so much of this work, I yield to allowing my body to have a story while my words are sharing another.*

The stage directions indicate that A Monkey Dance appears in *White Chocolate*—"A trip up North. Kick up your legs and get onboard. Everyone's crossing the line. Everyone picks up a gesture,"<sup>22</sup> and also in *Teenytown*—"I go camping outside on the drive looking for Canarsie. 'They got a fishin' place there.' My clothes are stuffed under the bed! I'm ready like a fleet of rubber ducks in red beak."<sup>23</sup> These are dances of children on a journey. In the first instance, the dance indicates the body movements the performer is to execute. In the second instance, the dance is a verbal allusion to travel as the child imagines getting away. Both, however, reference travel to somewhere presumably better than "here." Dance, for Carlos, is an expansive term suggesting travel, a transition, creating a space of pleasure, safety, and escape.

"I TELL THE STORIES IN THE MOVEMENT—THE INSIDE DANCES THAT OCCUR SPONTANEOUSLY, AS IN LIFE—THE MUSIC AND THE TEXT. IF I WRITE A LINE, IT DOESN'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO BE A LINE THAT IS SPOKEN; IT CAN BE A LINE THAT'S MOVED, A LINE FROM WHICH MUSIC IS CREATED. THE GESTURE BECOMES THE SENTENCE. SO MUCH OF WHO WE ARE AS WOMEN, AS PEOPLE, HAS TO DO WITH HOW WE GESTURE TO ONE ANOTHER ALL THE TIME, AND PARTICULARLY THROUGH EMOTIONAL MOMENTS. GESTURE BECOMES A SENTENCE OR A STATE OF FACT. IF I PUT ON A SCRIPT 'FOUR GESTURES,' THAT DOESN'T MEAN I'M NOT SAYING ANYTHING; THAT MEANS I HAVE OPENED IT UP FOR SOMETHING TO BE SAID PHYSICALLY."\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

Carlos's signature breath work is linked to movement, and movement is linked to language. The

\* *White Chocolate for My Father*, 5.

“. . . I THINK IF WHEN YOU START TO TALK ABOUT LANGUAGE, WHEN LANGUAGE BEGINS TO HAPPEN IT AFFECTS THE BODY. IT AFFECTS MEMORY. IT AFFECTS WHAT'S IN THE BONES AND IT AFFECTS MUSIC. WHEN YOU START TO SPEAK, LANGUAGE BECOMES MUSIC . . . THERE'S REALLY NO WAY TO MOVE AWAY FROM MOVEMENT WHEN YOU ARE CREATING LANGUAGE.”\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Interview by author, New York, July 2003.

*TONY AND TINY EXECUTE FIVE GESTURES THEN WALK INTO THE LIGHT AND SPEAK AT WILL.\**

\* *White Chocolate for My Father*, 17.

fusion of movement, breath, and language is characteristic of Carlos's performance work. A puff of air here, a hand sliding across the heart and into the sky there, spinning on the balls of her feet following a new diagonal while finding the melody inside a line of text—that is the simultaneity of expression that is quintessentially Carlos.

**Fieldnotes**

*Rehearsal for con flama*

*Texas State Mental Hospital*

*15 August 2000*

*It was Florinda's birthday—  
Laurie, Lourdes and Annette and Sonja  
brought KFC, flowers, jelly beans.  
Eating and check in*

*Aunt Gussie Section*

*Laurie gives a clap a snap and a sign to Ana and Florinda and Sonja*

*—she creates an auditory landscape—a soundscape*

*she refers to the physicality as “language”*

*—describes movements in detail, where the energy begins, what muscles are used*

*—has definite sense of how the movement looks and happens*

*—she dances the words “hands turning soil, toes wiggling”*

*—distinctly “black” gestures w/ the scooped back and rounded butt*

*—so she choreographs*

*—she hears the music of the words & she feels the movement in the words*



Figure 12. Laurie Carlos teaching hip movement during *con flama* rehearsal. Carlos (foreground), Florinda Bryant (left), and Ana Perea (right). Photo by Bret Brookshire.



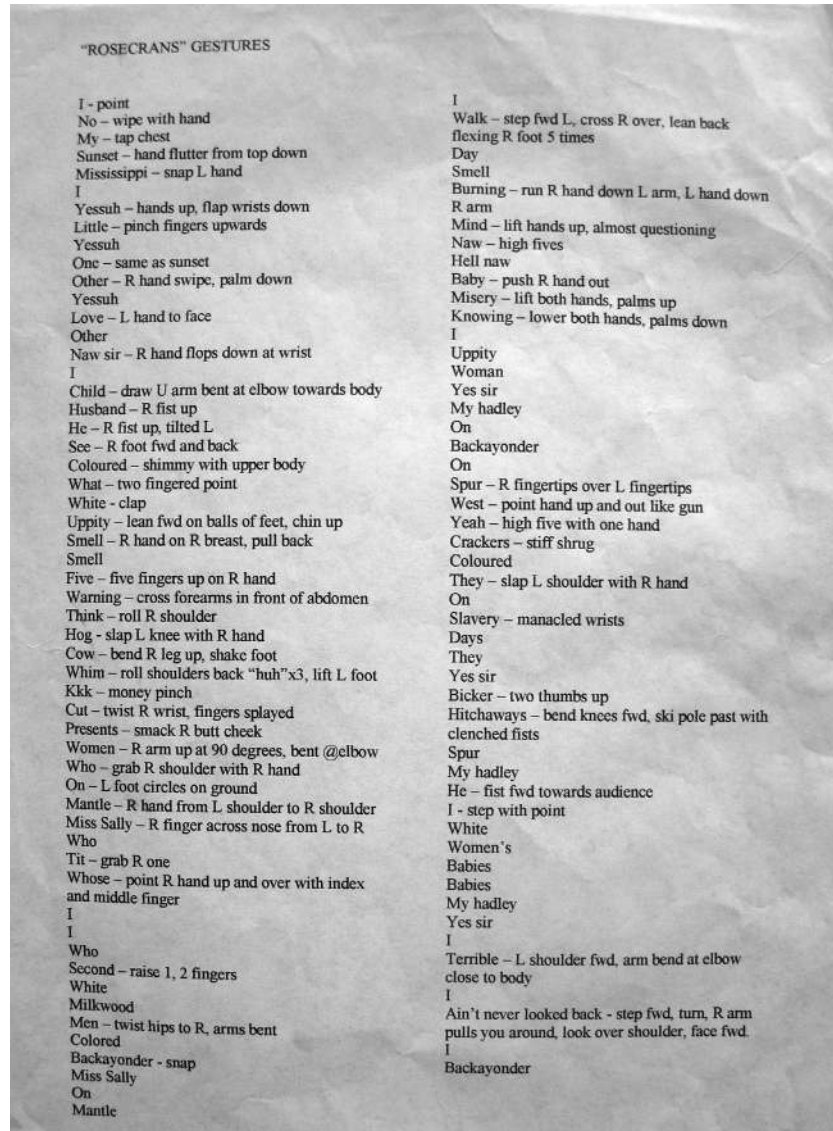


Figure 13. *con flama* gestures and language sheet. During rehearsals for *con flama* in 2000, assistant stage manager Kim Burke recorded this list of gestures that Laurie Carlos generated for specific ideas in the section of text known as "Rosecrans." The gestures may suggest some quality in the words, but are not literal embodiments of the key words Carlos identified. In performance, these gestures created an ongoing flow of movement that was juxtaposed against verbal text. Photo by Ruth McFarlane.

*Stage manager told performers to wear gym shoes because of the cement floor, Laurie however is barefoot*

*Laurie: "Don't think of it as dance or you're in fucking big trouble" the movement is somehow mundane but gets elevated because it is set apart in the performance*

*Laurie assumes women's bodies are strong*

*it just looks so beautiful; when it works there's a breath in it when it's beautiful*

*She says “go, go”—to speed them up. Like the caller in a crew squad*

*We worked for about 2 hours on 17 lines of text*

*LAURIE: “Rehearsal is really about putting a muslin drape cloth on the body that will later become the dress”*

*Something is off*

*LAURIE: “everything just drops and gets very foo foo foo foo.”*

*“It gets very ghostly because you are not breathing w/ each other.”*

*“It’s so fucking serious. I don’t want it to be serious. Let’s have some fun.”*

*“The first 12 beats are always hard for me. And they’re usually at the beginning and this time they’re at the end”*

*Laurie moves while Florinda says the words “voice like the wind”—p. 28*

*—she finds the movement in her body; she discovers as the words inform her.*

*LAURIE: “and then the twist, and then the twist, and then the twist”*

*—after she finds it in her body w/ the words, she shows it to all the others*

*“we’re not going to illustrate the language. We’re not trying to illustrate every word”*



Figure 14. Laurie Carlos teaching gestures during *con flama* rehearsal. Carlos moves, and the company follows by finding their own sensibility within her choices. With Carlos as guide, the performers learn their own bodies and develop the foundation for ensemble collaborations. Left to right: Laurie Carlos, Sonja Parks, Florinda Bryant, Ana Perea. Photo by Bret Brookshire.

*Rehearsal for con flama  
Texas State Mental Hospital  
17 August 2000*

*The movement of Ana's that made everyone cry yesterday (hands around her face) is not being used in another moment.*

*The gesture is a phrase that Laurie returns to  
She treats the script like music or dance*

*Performers read text, Laurie listens and then gives the physical idea*

*By the time the performers have physicalized the piece they are clearer about the emotions of the pieces*

*When she demonstrates it doesn't have the dictatorial feeling of a line reading*

*LAURIE: "Does everybody know where they are right now?"*

*"any moment of it that's not true, just screams"*

*"a lot of vulnerability in the stomach and the thighs that you are not working w/ yet,  
but I know that you'll get there."*



Figure 15. Laurie Carlos teaching ensemble movement during *con flama* rehearsal. Carlos suggests an image that might be useful in helping the women feel their relationships to each other. Left to right: Florinda Bryant, Laurie Carlos, Sonja Parks, Ana Perea. Photo by Bret Brookshire.



Figure 16. Sonja Parks, Ana Perea, and Florinda Bryant performing ensemble movement during *con flama* production at Frontera@ Hyde Park Theatre. The rehearsed image makes its way into the production, though Carlos's rehearsal work is not primarily about creating images that will be put on the stage. Set design by Leilah Stewart. Photo by Bret Brookshire.

*Rehearsal for con flama*  
*Texas State Mental Hospital*  
*24 August 2000*

*Check in includes "how did everybody feel about the work last night?"*  
*So much of the discussion of the play happens rather casually*  
*Standing, going over the physical problems from the previous night.*  
*When Ana jokingly made a leg move that was very balletic*  
*LAURIE: "Very pretty Ana—I don't want to see it again!"*

*She often asks for a flat foot—"very colored"*

*Ana asks "who is it I'm kissing" and Laurie says "Ana! I don't know! We're just trying to have a party here!" and that's what they are trying to do—find the party in the spirit in the union of words/movement/body/text/experience. The spirit is the àşę— They are trying to locate the àşę in the work—and they do it together. They create it by listening and feeling each other.*



Figure 17. Laurie Carlos indicating specific muscles during *con flama* rehearsal. She explains which muscles are used to achieve a particular arch and sway. From this initial precision, performers are left to make individual adjustments to the movement. Left to right: Florinda Bryant, Laurie Carlos, Ana Perea. Photo by Bret Brookshire.

**“DIANNE WAS THE MOTHER OF DANCE FOR US ALL.”\***

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Phone interview with author, June 16, 2008.

DIANNE McINTYRE: “I was trying to merge the dance, the movement, and the words [in Shange’s *Spell* #7]. Sometimes [Laurie Carlos and Beth Shorter] were mirroring. Sometimes the words were in Beth and the movement was in Laurie. We did it very fast. We did it very

fast, but Laurie had the dance inside of her. She already had the natural wanting to do that. It was like we gave her permission to do that, she could do it from one place and show you a whole world, at the same time she and [Beth] were like one, even if they were not in the same place. She did not overshadow the dance and the dance did not overshadow her. It would not have been the same if Laurie said the poem while Beth danced.

This happened throughout the piece. I always loved her sense of movement connected with the word. Ntozake’s writing is like that. She always loved dance and the spoken word equally, so her words are very easy to make dance. Laurie has that connection of the movement and words already in her body.

Laurie has to go to the place that is not the everyday world. It is performance possession. Such people transform us. They transcend their own bodies. Laurie brings people to new places—things they didn’t know they could do.”\*

\* Phone interview with author, June 2009.

**Apprentice / Elder / Ìkó'sẹ**  
**Apprentice / Elder / Ìkó'sẹ**  
**Apprentice / Elder / Ìkó'sẹ**

Carlos provides *ìkó'sẹ*, transformative training from a master that is required for acquiring facility with theatrical jazz. By the 1990s Carlos had worked with a wide range of artists including Samuel L. Jackson, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Denzel Washington, Greta Gunderson, Ntozake Shange, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Marlies Yearby; had produced work in mostly experimental venues such as BACA, Dance Theatre Workshop, Franklin Furnace, The Public Theatre, and PS 122; had premiered the role of the lady in blue on Broadway in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*; had collaborated in the formation of the avant-garde ensemble Thought Music with Robbie McCauley and Jessica Hagedorn; and had become co-director with Marlies Yearby of Movin' Spirits Dance Company and a company member of Urban Bush Women. Her distinctive gestural impulses and breath rhythms have extended into many artistic genres and traditions.

In Austin, Carlos presented Theatre Communications Group–sponsored workshops through Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre, and was a guest artist with the Austin Project from 2002 through 2009. Her facilitation is based on questions and commands that require an honesty for group cohesion and ensemble trust—“sit next to the person you feel the most kinship with in the room,” and “sit next to the person you think does not want to work with you”; that require respectful and playful listening—“begin singing ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat,’ and find your own

C. DENBY SWANSON: “What do you do when you are revealed? *That's* what your art is about. Don't try to hide *the thing*. That's what Laurie is interested in.”\*

\* Interview by author, Austin, TX, July 8, 2009.

instrument in the song”; that require self-clarity—“what is the most damaging mythology you create about yourself?” A master teacher's strategies are not always gentle, as the old ways of being must often be vigorously exposed and dislodged to make room for the profound spaces of art. Playwright C. Denby Swanson believes Carlos's questions that cut to the bone are designed to force a confrontation with one's self as artist.<sup>24</sup> Carlos often breaks open a foundation built of habit to expose the life-carrying marrow inside. These commands and questions can open participants up to themselves, and it can terrify some into isolation.

*I can't quite remember the first time I worked with Laurie. It was probably in the mid-1990s in a workshop at Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre. What I do remember is that that work gave me a vitality and aliveness that was profound. I was also terrified and outraged by what seemed to be an unnecessary brusqueness. Her questions during workshops were both shocking and simple. I knew that if I answered them honestly nothing would be the same. Laurie's way with people was spare, direct, spontaneous, interior, presentational; mine was decorous, formal, wrapped in protocols, planned, representational. Laurie*

*was the slashing wind, revealing truths in the wake of her stormy arrival, I was the meandering river, laughing, comforting, caretaking; Qya and Ọṣun in their archetypal sisterly contrasts. After years of integrating her powerful questions into my self-understanding, of being in productions where I felt the most vulnerable, after countless car trips hearing her life unfold, after picking the right asparagus and the best salmon for a communal meal, after learning to take the opportunities her whirlwind provided, I became a more sturdy reflection of the river, thereby able to be present and sincerely generous with the community around me. That style of hers that is so different from my own was a pivotal force in my naming myself an artist.*

Passing on knowledge is important to Carlos, who believes it is the responsibility of the artist to train others. Through *ikọṣẹ* relationships with young artists, Bridg-

"I DIDN'T MEET LAURIE UNTIL '98. I WAS COMPLAINING. AND LAURIE SAID 'JUST HELP SOMEBODY!' SHE JUST LOOKED AT ME AND SAID, 'YOU NEED TO HELP SOMEBODY!' LUZ [GUERRA] AND I STARTED THIS GROUP IN OUR HOUSE. WE MET FOR THREE OR FOUR HOURS. LUZ AND I HAD BEEN WITH THEM CHILDREN FOR A WHOLE SUMMER—FLO[RINDA BRYANT], ZELL [MILLER III], PIPER [ANDERSON], KIM [CURETTE], AISHA [CONNER], [JEFFREY] DA'SHADE [JOHNSON]."\*  
—SHARON BRIDGFORTH

\* Phone interview with author, July 5, 2008.

forth got clear about how the jazz aesthetic principles support both the apprentice and the master teacher. Being an apprentice to Carlos led to Bridgforth's role as a master teacher when she followed Carlos's directive to "just help somebody." Bridgforth's work with young artists has now become a vital feature of her own theatrical jazz practice. Without this work, the practice would fade away; the elder's very life would be singular rather than multiple.

In Carlos's work, there is repeated interest in adults and their relationships with children. Some of the women elders struggle to make a good life for themselves and their children, while others succumb to the cruelties they have been dealt. In many of the works, adults do not caretake and the children are left confused, hurt, and alone. Deola, the ancestral matriarch in *White Chocolate*, chants to her children "*Oranyan ogun ma de o. Oranyan ogun ma de o.*"<sup>25</sup> In antiquity, this Yoruba plea for help was a special signal between *Ọrànmiyàn* (aka *Ọrányàn*), the son of the Yoruba progenitor *Odùduwà*, and his people. The people were only to shout this phrase when they were under attack, which would prompt *Ọrànmiyàn* to save them. Once, some of the people shouted the phrase when there was no need. *Ọrànmiyàn* arrived and unwittingly killed his own people. When Deola says "*Oranyan ogun ma de o,*" Lore instantly knows that they are under attack, and cannot be sure from where the threat is derived; her mother is as likely to entertain them with stories of far-off places ("I dream of Sweden and Paris in your eyes"<sup>26</sup>) as she is to restrain them when she goes out ("... now I have to tie you when I leave here. Both of you. None of you will help me)."<sup>27</sup> Like so many of Carlos's adult-child character relationships the Yoruba phrase is paradoxical—protective yet dangerous, revealing both parental care and parental carelessness. It's this very paradox that Carlos seems to explore in her work and through the many apprentice relationships she cultivates in real life. Carlos turns to an English folk song, "My Son John," in *White Chocolate* for an example of a tender parent-child

relationship. Ironically, Tiny sings this song of a father lamenting the loss of his son's legs in battle, just before Tiny receives a phone call from her emotionally elusive and absent father.

Carlos has a special kinship with Sharon Bridgforth that is not characterized by the “tough love” she dispenses to many others. Bridgforth says, “Once Laurie told me I reminded her of her sister Sharon who died. And I do feel she treated me like a sister. She has protected me and been very gentle in her guidance of me.”<sup>28</sup> Their relationship is similar to the closeness between Lore and Tony in *White Chocolate*. In the play, Lore and her sisters are left at home alone while the mother goes out. The mother has tied Tony's hands so she won't eat, and Lore knows that the consequences of untying her sister will be dire. Eventually, Lore gives in to Tony's pleas for freedom and unties her. Upon returning the mother says, “I knew you would let her go. You always choose them over me now I have to tie you when I leave here. Both of you.”<sup>29</sup> In an interview with Sydne Mahone, Carlos explains the relationship in this way: “I had never told my sister how much I loved her but I risked everything to untie her that night . . . The risk I took was a risk my grandmother did not take for my mother while she was being raped all the time; which was also the risk my mother never took for me when she found out my step-father had molested me. But I risked everything for my sister.”<sup>30</sup> Carlos cares for Bridgforth as Lore cares for Tony, creating a unique *ikôş'ê* apprentice–elder bond between these artists.

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Figure 18. Postcard from Djola Branner's *Mighty Real*. In 2000 Laurie Carlos directed Branner's *Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester* at Intermedia Arts in Minneapolis. For Carlos, *ikôş'ê* not only is an apprentice–elder relationship but occurs among peers who learn from each other as they nurture one another's work. Photo by Ruth McFarlane.



**Àdúgbò / Environment****Àdúgbò / Environment****Àdúgbò / Environment**

Carlos was born in Queens, New York, in 1949, but was raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1950s and '60s. This was the *àdúgbò*, the neighborhood,

that shaped her truths about family, art, community, and politics. Raised in what she calls “a university of the street,”<sup>31</sup>

Carlos was very aware of the vibrancy that characterized her environment and how it shaped her artmaking. At that time and in that place, an artistic and political revolution was beginning that contributed to the refashioning of the United States. The *mélange* of people, languages, sounds, foods, smells, clothing, music, spiritual practices, and daily habits helped establish for Carlos a specific understanding of what art and life were.

JOHN GENNARI: “The East Village proved more progressive and emerged as a center of the black avant-garde. A kind of downtown Harlem Renaissance arose on the Lower East Side, with the Umbra writer’s collective, Freedomways magazine, La MaMa Experimental Theatre, and the Negro Ensemble Company foreshadowing the full flowering of the Black Arts Movement uptown in Harlem later in the decade. Black writers and artists on the Lower East Side in these years [mid-1950s to mid-1960s] included David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, A.B. Spellman, Tom Dent, Calvin Hernton, Lorenzo Thomas, Brenda Walcott, Sarah Wright, Emilio Cruz, Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, and Bob Thomson, and such ‘new thing’ jazz musicians as Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Marion Brown, and Sonny Murray.”<sup>o</sup>

<sup>o</sup> “Baraka’s Bohemian Blues,” 254.

“IT ALMOST CAN’T BE ISOLATED TO A LOCATION. THERE WAS A MIND-SET THAT GENERATED A CHANGE IN FORM. A BLACK PRESENCE WAS ALWAYS THERE, BUT IT WAS WHAT WAS BOHEMIAN THAT MADE IT ALL WORK.”\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* Phone interview with author, June 2009.

“It’s all about environment . . . I used to go to Café Wah on McDougal. Right there, this is one of the places that Bill Cosby would work in. And Richard Pryor worked there. Dick Gregory was around all the time. He worked over at the Village Gate. And you got Miles Davis around a lot. You got Coltrane at Slugs a lot, the club on 8th Street and 3rd Avenue, the Five Spot, everybody in there. People would be playing

the Five Spot 24 hours a day. It was one of those places they would go to when they left from uptown. Being at the Café Wah—and there was a place called Minneta Lane, I would just stand there and just hang out being in Paris for four or five hours in that one spot. And I would lean against a building, I would be in Paris . . . there was a theatre and a Dojo<sup>o</sup> and an art gallery. That became a hub at the time . . . for all kinds of exchanges, in ’68–’69 The Stones, Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Sly and the Family Stone hung out there at the Dojo upstairs. All

<sup>o</sup> Here Carlos is referencing the ice cream spot at 8th and St. Mark’s that sold ice cream with drug-named flavors such as Panama Red and Acapulco Gold. For more information on this now gone New York favorite, see <http://vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2010/12/ice-cream-doj.html>, and Cael Greene, “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Ice Cream But Were Too Fat to Ask,” *New York Magazine*, August 3, 1970.

these painters who hung out upstairs and downstairs. Before that, that place was a linoleum store. Upstairs was where they kept all of their stock. That's where we rehearsed *colored girls* for two weeks from noon to midnight until 6:00 in the morning . . .

I come from an experience where artists could just stand up without knowing all the answers to the questions. My experience was P.S. 122, Henry Street, Dance Theatre Workshop, New Federal, and I grew up in a jazz tradition and American folk music at Slugs—it was a big try-out place, and Café Wah was a big try-out place. Where you could go in front of an audience to discover what you could do. Coltrane, 'Jackie' McLean up at Slug's, you'd get Bob Dylan, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Odetta, all those people came through the folk tradition where you write a song the night before and you get up and say it the next day or even from the table with the coffee to the stage. That's how I understood the creation of art, what became the matter of art. The way I understand how art is created there is always that insistence in the practice.

It was musicians and traditional poets, Langston Hughes and those poets, LeRoi Jones, Lofton Mitchell—lived in my projects. "Tuli" Kupferberg, Allen Ginsberg, Josh White. This way of making work translated every discipline. At the same time you are also dealing with Circle in the Square, NEC, actors and writers for the theatre . . . they came to the location and gave you permission to get the work done that wanted to get done. No matter what kind of exploration you were doing. No matter if you were Lenny Bruce or Bill Cosby or Pryor. I walked in a snow storm on my 16th birthday to see Bill Cosby—not famous, he was just very funny. The Electric Circus, where the Chambers Brothers, Sly and the Family Stone, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were. This is who is walking down the street. You had the Rolling Stones. Anybody and everybody hit this part of the world. So the 60s is when I came of age in a lot of ways."<sup>†</sup>

—Laurie Carlos

<sup>†</sup> Phone interview with author, June 16, 2008.

The gumbo of city life, so conducive to the formation of theatrical jazz, was Carlos's artistic blueprint.

Her own household provided a similarly dynamic education. Her great-grandfather was a guitar player, her grandmother a dancer on the Chitlin' Circuit, her father a drummer, her grandmother a pianist and music teacher, and her mother a dancer. Carlos's childhood living room was often filled with artists and activists testing ideas and images and sounds with one another. Carlos came to think of the world in these terms—vigorously contested and constructed, infused with art and politics as the way of daily life.<sup>32</sup>

This way of making work, in which the work itself is an investigation rather than a presentation of what one has already discovered, laid the foundation for the creation of the Late Nite Series—“Non-English Speaking Spoken Here”—first at Penumbra Theatre, then at Pillsbury House. Carlos hosted these events as a way to provide space for artists at every level of their development to explore in an East Village way, and in a grand gesture of institutionalized *ikóʼǰé*. Late Nite became a training ground where artists stretched into new terrain.<sup>33</sup>

## Blackness

## Blackness

## Blackness

The world of overlapping aesthetics in Carlos’s home and neighborhood offered a sense of Blackness, and of the world generally, that was multiple and incorporative. While Carlos understood the legal and social limitations imposed on Black people in her world, she also felt permission to borrow from all that was around her and fold this into her own evolving aesthetic. For Carlos, Blackness exists within a wide range of social protocols, historical memories, and understood

“WHITE CHOCOLATE STRIVES TO CREATE A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN AESTHETIC GROUNDED IN, AND DRAWING FROM, THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BLACK AMERICAN DIASPORA. IT SEEKS TO TELL THE STORIES OF AN AMERICAN BLACK FAMILY.”\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

contradictions—and her written and performance work reflect this blending. Carlos describes her autobiographical performance novel *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)* as “the journey of an American family of women,” and has famously called her work “American Theatre,” eschewing Black Theatre or Theatrical Jazz as identifying markers. For Carlos this is not a facile declaration of apolitical art, but rather an insistence on Black being able to stand in for U.S. American.

\* *White Chocolate for My Father*, 7.

Theatrical jazz brings to the stage Black people and situations not typically seen in performance. The cosmopolitan understanding of Carlos’s characters often manifests in the music. At the end of *Teenytown*, Her sings “Enay ma tov u na nachiem she vech ahim gon yah haugh,” then says “Me [*sic*] casa es su casa en la dia en la noche en toda. Won’t let nobody turn me around turn me around . . .”<sup>34</sup> as she extols the power of community and freedom across three cultural traditions. Portuguese fados, Ashkenazi Klezmer bands, Black gospels and quadrilles move through *Nonsectarian Conversations with the Dead*. In *White Chocolate*, after disdaining association with “Niggers all along the tracks,” Mama sings the “Toreadors Song” from Bizet’s *Carmen*, as if offering proof of her social status. Her daughter Mickey counters with the “Toreadors Song” from *Carmen Jones*, the 1954 musical film starring Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte that reimagined the Bizet opera through a contemporary Black lens. Carlos’s Black folk know opera, film, as well as “ragtime and that low-count Bessie Smith.”<sup>35</sup>

Theatrical jazz steadfastly resists stereotypes and racism, sometimes by exposing them. In early work, Carlos tackles white supremacy straight on—

This holiday where you celebrate  
 The freedom  
 Of the nation is an affront  
 To those who were brought involuntarily  
 To this place  
 And to all who  
 Were here  
 When you came searching  
 For freedom  
 Establishing your name  
 With our blood  
 Your freedom and the righteousness of it  
 Niggers of Europe  
 Each of you knowing the wrongfulness of slavery  
 For yourselves  
 Leaving the chains to separate us  
 From our Gods  
 No need for us  
 To dance at this party.<sup>36</sup>

Another direct confrontation with racism is found in *Teenytown* when Carlos and her Thought Music collaborators, Robbie McCauley and Jessica Hagedorn, challenge racism and sexism in the film industry (“Hollywood is too hard without a white man. The world’s a bitch without a Jack not a Joe. A Joe, good or not, would never do. There is still no cure for a nigger gone bad with kisses.”<sup>37</sup>), confront the appropriation of rhythm and blues (“who wrote the song / who gets the credit”<sup>38</sup>), and expose global racism (“Paris is a stinking racist town / Argentinians refuse

“‘WHITE CHOCOLATE’ WAS SOMETHING THAT WE HAD BECOME IN THIS PROCESS: WE’RE STILL HERE, BUT WE ARE UNRECOGNIZABLE TO EACH OTHER. WE DON’T KNOW WHAT TRIBES WE COME FROM, WHO THE FATHER IS, WHO THE SPIRITS ARE THAT WE’RE LOOKING AT.”\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* *White Chocolate for My Father*, 3.

to serve / us steaks we don’t even want—”<sup>39</sup>). *White Chocolate for My Father* gets its name from Carlos’s understanding of the decimation of Black people in the United States. The play ends with Deola, the African ancestor, warning, “When this shit gets to 1979 Im gonna board a ship the fuck out of here. Niggers will be trying to get polite with these white dogs. I remember, I shoot this shit cause I remember I still feel the pain in my head. You gonna learn how to, live with them and talk like them and see the world like them. 1979 Im not doin none of this again. Where are your gods who will cry out for?”<sup>40</sup> In her more recent work, the ravages of racism are woven into the everyday fabric of her characters’ lives. The performance novel format of *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)* allows a fullness of detail and bifurcation of narrative perspective where the particularities of Black-

ness can radiate. Through first-, second-, and third-person narration, through the details of scene, summary, and description, and through an epic sweep of memory in *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, Carlos is able to narrate/enact the richness of her character's lives in the specifics of food, music, clothing, familial relations, and class concerns; in this way, both race and racism are implicit.

On this street in Memphis slipped the best colored folks in and out of their gracious dwellings, tidy, respectable and gently used /

[. . .]

Way back imperatives of roughness were waved away with lace, with gentility / They scrubbed and washed with purpose all the time daily / Nothing from the street absorbed the rugs nothing, no dust, or muddy satin shoes / Under the glass cut lights even in French no hair on fire made entrance here /

The best pomades cooled and dressed these diverse torrents of ribboned controversy / Everyone had their own comb and brushed their secrets to be burned in the plate so the birds would not get them / Just sweet music / Only the sweetest music was ever played on her piano / No RagTime / None of that in here / Not in this house she whispered / No RagTime in here, no, no, no, no Le Jazz Hot, no / The ongoing interrogation of Boleros continued at every gathering of invited guests /

Only the best people ever associated with this family here in the new south of colored entrepreneurs / The family that had come up from Mississippi wood laid a foundation solidly into the future / First there were the general stores owned by her uncle, her father and later by her twin broths and firs cousin / The very best funeral parlors to serve any clientele in Memphis Tennessee enjoined their sterling reputation / All details were executed with distinction by a skilled and well trained staff / Nothing got past em / Taking notice of hair pins / emerald broaches / leather brad belts / stockings /

Watches / Hats important at all times no matter where you are on the ladder of life / Hats were gonna tell it all\*

\* Laurie Carlos, "The Pork Chop Wars" (unpublished manuscript, draft 1, 2006), 5.

**Egbé**

**Egbé**

**Egbé**

**Egbé**

Carlos graduated from New York High School for the Performing Arts in 1967 and began taking classes with Lloyd Richards at the Negro Ensemble Company in 1968. In the evenings, she worked with Mobilization for Youth (MFY), a city-run job corps program for teenagers (1958–70) that was part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. MFY offered actor training and filmmaking, along with training

in social justice strategies. Carlos was learning new models for theatre through MFY, which was becoming an important venue for the development of new U.S. playwrights. At the NEC, she worked as an usher, and at the front of the house handing out programs. It was through the NEC that she met her fast friend Robbie McCauley, laying the foundation for a long-standing bond. They performed together in *for colored girls*, founded the revolutionary performance art company Thought Music with Jessica Hagedorn, worked together at Penumbra Theatre, and have maintained almost daily conversations for decades.

Kathi Gagnon, another of Carlos's close friends, was an artistic elder to many in the Minneapolis–St. Paul community during the 1980s and 1990s. Her influence extended to Austin when she came to St. Edward's University to perform the role of Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her death from cancer left us stunned. She was Carlos's dear friend, driving Carlos on ever-eventful shopping trips, chatting like a blood sister about national politics, bickering in that well-worn way that longtime friends take comfort in, and sharing many artistic projects. They worked together on stage in Shay Youngblood's *Talking Bones* at Penumbra with Carlos in the role of Baybay and Gagnon playing Ruth. Carlos's respect for Marion Lake and



Figure 19. Lou Bellamy, Laurie Carlos, and Kathryn Coram Gagnon in *Talking Bones* at Penumbra Theatre. The 1994 Penumbra Theatre world premiere of Shay Youngblood's *Talking Bones* was directed by Robbie McCauley, with set design by Seitu Jones. Left to right: Bellamy as Mr. Fine, Carlos as Baybay, and her close friend Gagnon as Ruth. Daniel Alexander Jones played Oz in this production.

for their friendship is evidenced in the play for which Lake is named—“Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy.” Carlos says the stories of the play are Lake’s stories. This play marks a significant departure for Carlos as she explores work outside of her child’s voice and begins to imagine joy. Carlos and Lake lived in the same New York apartment building, raised their children together, and Lake created in Carlos “the ability to see the lessons in the hard times.”<sup>41</sup>

McCauley, Gagnon, and Lake are among Carlos’s most longstanding and intimate *egbé* members. She creates with them a stability, care, and respect that is in sharp contrast to the adult relationships found in her texts. These artistic and personal commitments are at the core of a theatrical jazz *egbé*.

The attention Carlos gives to food preparation reflects her distinctive brand of making *egbé*. Her written and performance work seems enveloped by food, and all the life-giving potential that it carries. Some of her titles—*White Chocolate for My Father*; *The Cooking Show and How the Monkey Dances*; *Persimmon Peel*; *If the Butter Burns, It Ain’t Biscuits*; *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*—reveal her penchant for the rich textures of the culinary arts. In *The Cooking Show*, while Monkey cooks for the audience, these stage directions are given: “*The recipe is a modification, an improvement, a memory without guilt. The MONKEY chews cilantro and hums. A way to the first memory. In the kitchen the monkey sings.*”<sup>42</sup> The stage directions suggest how food functions as sustenance for the body and for the spirit as Carlos likens the preparation of food to the exploration of personal history, a history that can be changed as needed without guilt. Recipes are for cooking and for ordering one’s life.

In an early draft of the performance novel, *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)*, Carlos begins with

They no longer desired to chew on sticks, crumble bones, mash leaves under  
tongues, fill cheeks with plum pits, and grind the rinds between to soften / They  
prepared for her arrival sucking back salted spit, skin off from lips, sugar culled  
outta gums swishing roasted parts leaking onto the throat / They were always  
preparing for her arrival /<sup>43</sup>

Later, the chorus of voices makes clear the relationship between careful cooking and the multiple life-sustaining properties of food when they say,

So in this turn she chose to lean on disasters / while they washed potatoes to  
boil for hours, soaked thyme in lemon juice, swallowed, laced claret in ber-  
ries swallowed with black pepper /  
Oooooooweee  
Make it taste like what it is /  
Some oyster, some corn cakes, stuffed fish /  
Make it taste like what it is / A thing that tastes like what’s suppose to /  
That’s how it has to be / They eat whatever they want to / somebody got to get  
what they want to taste / Eat up / That’s how it has got to be / Eat all you can

and leave nothing for the rest of em / Freedom does not look back for who  
is eating nothing.<sup>44</sup>

One's freedom is bound to the very skill of the cook, for food—properly prepared food—is required for physical and psychic survival.

In *The Cooking Show and How the Monkey Dances*, Carlos engulfs the audience in the preparation of food, by converting the space into her own kitchen where she prepares a meal throughout the performance then offers it up to the audience at the close of the show. I have seen two versions of this work, and while both retain the same basic shape, the specific content of each is drawn from different moments in Carlos's family life and from current world events. As with any good cook, she invents as she goes. The cooking itself is a communion with the audience, a supplication, as Monkey the cook offers her lineage to the Divine for acknowledgment:

Donna Sears / Tedra / Ellia Rodriguez / Cynthia Ann Scott / Janice  
Valentine / George Johnson / Ellen Woodlon / Deborah Aikins / Gladys  
Leon / Barbara Tepper /  
These names are prayers /  
Gentle ingredients / short recipes<sup>45</sup>

After this grace of sorts is said, the cooking begins:

Welcome to my kitchen world where the poems start sometime and all the problems get an airing and the possibility of dream walking with a casual visitor is dependent on how many of us eat garlic raw. And if you are here it's 'cause you want to be. Not like white boys want to just be any damn where they think it's all going on. But more like a true feeling for leaning long into the arms of a sister or a stranger who smells like wells of sadness sometime. Nothing academic to back up the story. Nothing to prove. No way to prove it. This is where the memory of smell and furious tasting goes on. Don't try to write down the recipe. Listen to where you are going. This is not like stealing the sheet music off the stand after the colored composer has finished the gig.

Recipe now: Chickpea salad, oh, yeah.<sup>46</sup>

The opening to the performance pulls spirit, politics, Black referents, history, homeplace, and cuisine all together, thereby suggesting that each is necessary and interdependent. Understanding the racialized history of the appropriation of Black music is as vital as the components for a chickpea salad; what you eat predicts how fully you can dream; the spiritual ritual of praying is sister to active listening. For Carlos, food preparation is anything but casual, and its potency makes its way very directly into much of her work. Food is specific, and engagement with it is intense and visceral.



Carlos's father, Walter T. Smith, was a musician and a cook who, as she puts it, "evolved into a chef." Carlos says, "I think I cook because of him."<sup>47</sup> This may be true in many ways. When he left the home, the four-year-old Carlos prepared the meals for her mother and younger sister. She remembers standing on a milk crate to reach the stove so she could prepare breakfast or dinner. It is also true that her father's skill as a cook was passed along to Carlos, though she has developed her own very particular way with food. Carlos's cooking demonstrates a tender relationship between her, the ingredients, and, importantly, those who will receive the meal:

I was a watcher . . . I learned how to cook things, not with my own point of view, with the aesthetics that the person who ran the kitchen cooked it. Tomorrow is the second anniversary of my mom's passing<sup>48</sup> and I'm going to make chili her way. I've always learned how to make the food how the person in the room wanted to experience the food. I put chorizo in chili along with ground beef. My stepmom would not do that, and my mother Mildred<sup>49</sup> would never cook chili. *She* would get it out of the can.

If you made black-eyed peas for my father, they had to have smoked ham hocks. If you made meatloaf, it had to have boiled eggs on the inside. Things I wouldn't do because they are not my taste. My grandfather loved succotash, corn, tomatoes, okra. I don't eat okra. I learned to cook without tasting. I would make gefilte fish without tasting it. I would make it, and they would can it and have it all winter.<sup>50</sup>

Carlos's attention to the recipient of her meals is a special brand of caretaking. Her attentive watching made her a much loved cook whose many meals for a Late Nite Series reception, or an impromptu gathering of women from the Austin Project, are lessons in the precise selection of ingredients and the expert presentation of the food. Special platters and serving utensils, picked flowers standing in a vase, a garnished tray of bright vegetables, just the right table cloth. These are the details that establish food as a culturally specific ritually driven art form. Food is at once history, identity, place, community, and security.

*During one of Laurie's conversations in the Performance as Public Practice graduate program in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas, she talked about which foods can be served together, and which cannot. She spoke of rye bread and mustard, definitely not mayonnaise. The rye and the mustard work together because of the specific peoples and histories attached to each. You can't have mayo because of the egg and that wouldn't be Kosher. She went on about which spices cannot touch which meats because of the wars people waged that were related to each condiment and each animal. Laurie told us about the trade routes that created specific relations that then led to distinctive*

*dishes. The history of food is shaped by human desire, travel, and commerce. To be a cook, she said without saying it, meant carrying all of that information. She spoke with such knowing, such passion. This is the way I had seen her in rehearsal, as if she was conjuring some ancient memories, as if she was steeped in nostalgia for just the right exhalation of breath or the perfect point of a finger, as if food carried secrets that humans must master.*

### LAURIE'S SURVIVAL RECIPES

The most important recipe is rendering fat. We've forgotten the process. We don't eat lard and we don't know about rendering fat. That's what people used to do. Heat it until all the fat came out. And you could use it to make biscuits and everything. That's an important recipe that we have forgotten how to do.

The other is baking bones. You put them in the oven and bake them all down. So that all the marrow is cooked through, then opening up those bones, then taking the marrow. Then you crush the bones. What I don't remember is what the bones are used for after that. What I do remember is that people used them for plastering their house. Add a little liquid and you use the bones to fill up holes.

I've been thinking about these recipes.

Baking bones, rendering fat, and making fish stock. Our grandparents all had chicken stock and fish stock. Most people ate fish heads. But you took those bones and filleted something, like the whiting, you take the little parts of that and put that in the pot, then you take a sieve and mash them all the way through, what you get is bones and you get the skin. People held on to fish heads and stuff, and opened them up and put them in that stock. Fish head soup. You hear a lot about it now, but I'm not sure who does it from scratch any more. Those recipes are major to survival. People talk about the chitlins, these recipes were basic to survival and, in a lot of cases, basic to prayer. Because you would kill the animal you had ritual with. People drank the blood, made blood sausage, people kept feathers—and people are not having that relationship any more. You are not having a relationship with the action of praying, with thanking the food you are about to eat. And that gelatin stuff, the bones being mashed is part of how you created pigment. You would mix other things in with those bones, so when you got ready to do something like paint, this was part of the ingredient. All of this had to do with how people made prayer and what their relationship to God was.

I wanted to talk about good fancy food. But it just doesn't have any place right now. Part of the action of having a kitchen and household and a farm plantation was food to escape with, food to travel with, was how you gathered bones and got the marrow. Some people didn't get any meat except in the marrow of the bone. But did you know where that comes from, eating the marrow and eating the gristle? This is all very instinctual, very basic to being human. The fact that people want you to eat a piece of chicken without no skin and it's crazy. And they take the bones. They are crazy. And they wonder why people are sick all the time.

Bill Moyers\* talked about people trying to keep up with the chicken on the conveyor belt. Chicken comes up and you have to cut off the breasts because that's your section. People of course lose fingers, and have problems with their wrists. Shoulders get dislodged, elbows freeze up that's because they are not doing anything that has to do with the life force of those animals. People get sick. Down in the ground sick. It violates who they are. Then we go buy 12 chicken wings. And we are complicit in this.

That's another reason why I began to think about the rendering of fat. I showed you these two places [on the tour in 2003]—a chicken market on Pitts St. and a chicken market on 13th St. And there are only two of those poultry markets all over the Lower East Side. You asked me about those knives and I start thinking about the smell, and my father had a large saw and a little saw so that you could saw the bones. When you asked me that question, all the smells came up. These smells are not very different than the smells of Jamaica Queens right now, the smells of certain parts of Brooklyn that have large populations of Blacks and Jews—and kosher, the animals have been slaughtered a certain way. You used to be able to go to these poultry markets on Saturday night mostly. They had them in Chinatown, I remember, you could buy a pound of chicken feet. After Shabbat you could buy chicken necks, you could buy backs. They would put it on the side, and nobody who was not a Jew could take those eggs and you could put it in the pot with the chicken to make the dumplings. The Chinese used to take that egg and put it in a bowl and put hot water over it. This is where you get egg drop soup. You put some noodles and you get egg drop soup. Those markets existed, and they are coming back because of the Hillel kosher connection. I mention that because the smell of where you lived was so deeply connected with how meat and poultry and fish came into your neighborhood. I told you I'm revising *The Pork Chop Wars*, but that line "They no longer sucked on bones"—that is a key to a big part of the story. In that is also, the rendering of fat is done by every single culture that eats meat. Ghee is a rendering of the fat from the butter. So there is some form of it in every single culture.

When you slaughter the animals, you've got to take that fat and put it in a pot, no water, and you've got to cook that down. What you get when you do that is you get lard, you get personal hair care products, you get body cream, you get a way to continue to cook other foods. You get something to make soap with, but I don't remember all the recipes. There is that great big pan that people put turkey in now. You put the bones in that pan or you take the bones and put them in the fire and cook them just like that in the fire and you take that marrow out and I do remember seeing the marrow up in the bone. This is a special thing. Take a thing that looks like a knife, that was a scooper about a foot long and you move all the marrow onto a surface and it gets eaten or they give you some. I do know in the Philippines they take that marrow and mix it up with rice. Those are the recipes I'm going to give you.

I think part of it too is when we're talking about the cultural things that bind us, things we all share, we never talk about this anymore. Because we are not doing it

\* On the blog *Bill Moyers Journal*, there was much discussion of worker abuses in the poultry industry. Moyers documented these abuses, and supported the creation of the controversial documentary *Mississippi Chicken*, directed by John Fiege (2007).

any more. The Native Americans did this too with the bones of the bison. You used the skin, the hair, the teeth, you used the bone, you crushed the bone. You used the dung, so there's something about forgetting ourselves because we don't connect in that way anymore which brings us back to why in the hell does anybody do theatre except that we are all trying to commit to a common story in a public place and part of the issue for all of us is that there has always been only one of the stories which is why they have to tell it over and over again so they have to be sure they don't tell the truth about any of it they need to believe it as much as they need to believe it. We've gone along with it for a long time and at the same time we have to tell our stories. The reason that has been blocked so hard at the point our stories get told, their story relinquishes validity. This war in Iraq, it is harder to maintain the lie. So our story gets out anyway. Which is why we all go to the theatre. It has become our campfire again. I wish they would tell us about some chicken bones with some marrow. That's the new business we need to be in. Make some whole cakes with some cuchifrito and some beef marrow and a spoon. Cuchifrito, pork rinds—that happens because you rendered all the fat and what is left is the skin. Pigtales and all that stuff. That's why people buy the pork skin, there's something that reminds them. They know it ain't no good for them but they eat it anyway. There's nothing as good as pork rind and some coffee. Boiled coffee, pork skin and a piece of bread. That's a wonderful smell. In Texas they got the one that's hard on outside and soft on the inside, they call it crackling, and Mexicans have cuchifrito. They had a big cuchifrito place on Delancey St. They opened it in the '50s. The Jews went crazy. It was only about 3 blocks away from the poultry market. There was a big Puerto Rican migration. They opened that cuchifrito place and the people went crazy. There was a line for the pork tail, blood sausage and ox tongue and it would sit in the window. The smell would get you before you turned the corner on Clinton Street headed toward Avenue A, between Clinton and Avenue A on Delancey and that upset the Jews over there so bad, and so the Jews who lived upstairs had to move out that building. The housing then became Puerto Rican and Chinese, and lot of that had to do with the fact that that cuchifrito place opened up down there.

That's why we get up and go to different cities. There are places in the world, you can't get certain things unless you are in those cities. That's why the Europeans got up and left. They have no pepper, no cloves, no turmeric, I don't think they had cinnamon. They get up and go get something for their meat. They didn't have nothing. Everybody else had what they needed. As soon as they found out they could get up and find tomato, they got out of there. They didn't have corn or pumpkin or squash. They had to leave. They been trying to claim the silk road the spice road ever since. They didn't have palm oil, they didn't have coconut. I don't know, did they have nutmeg? I don't think so.†

† Laurie Carlos, phone interview with author, June 16, 2008.

**Gender Queer****Gender Queer****Gender Queer**

Queer appears in Carlos's theatrical jazz through confrontations with gender expectations.

GENDER IS LOST TO GIVE WAY FOR  
THE TELLING OF EACH SPIRIT STORY.\*

—LAURIE CARLOS

\* "Feathers at the Flame, Next Dance"  
(unpublished manuscript, 5th draft, May 25,  
1998), 2.

WARRIOR WOMAN LIKE I AM. WILLING  
TO STAND STILL IN THE STORM ON THE  
MOUNTAIN.\*

—DANIEL ALEXANDER JONES, AS GLENA

\* "Feathers at the Flame, Next Dance"  
(unpublished manuscript, 5th draft, May 25,  
1998), 17.

In *An Organdy Falsetto, Cry*—one-third of an all-girl band—says, "She was my man. My steady thought till I was eleven when some one told us kissing like that was wrong and tragic."<sup>51</sup> Cry tackles constraints on friendship, comfort, eros, and gender expression. In this way Carlos's work is queer in its acknowledgment of sexual *and* gender transgressions. She raises the question—"who qualifies for a kiss?"<sup>52</sup>

The women and men in her work are often in contentious relationships full of resentment, due, in part, to gendered prohibitions and disappointments. Hers are not tender love stories. They are pacts made for safety, power, or convenience. Men abusing women with too much or no sex, women full of disdain and sorrow.

If she wanted some part of him he would measure the time to be sure she was left dry / Too much noise for a decent woman to make with a man / There were woman who he loved to listen to when the deal was good / When he had bargained hard with whiskey and cash / Women who would hum, burn, or bark just for him as requested as bargained for / This wife of his didn't listen to his requirements / She leaked her unskilled sonatas unrestrained and this was not expected from her when they married<sup>°</sup>

<sup>°</sup> Laurie Carlos, "The Pork Chop Wars" (unpublished manuscript, 1st draft, 2006), 4.

Fine all my ladies are fine. Well packaged  
Good clothes. Show stoppers. All fine and  
eager to please. I need certain kinds of  
things sometime. Special things, only very  
special type ladies can give. And only the  
finest looking ladies are even considered.  
What it look like? That's what I want to know.  
Cause what it look like reflects on what I  
look like. Yeah damn right its vain. I like  
mirrors and I like ladies who like mirrors I  
do em in mirrors. I get into my tongue up  
against up against it in mirrors. I like

looking at myself. I am fine. Well packaged.  
 Good clothes. Show stopper. I have photos of  
 ladies who have been able to keep my interest  
 for however long they keep my interest. The  
 pictures with their long legs open smiling with  
 their less than perfect breast. And no matter  
 how fine they are naked they all have less  
 than perfect tits. That's why I will never  
 stop renting Vanessa del Rio. I always run  
 her on the VCR and make all my ladies watch.  
 Then come the photos I keep them so the way I  
 have them is different than loving  
 something. I got the pussy it's in my drawer  
 and I take it out when I want it and I don't  
 have to remember a thing or smell them or  
 hear them all fine and eager to please.\*

\* Laurie Carlos, "An Organdy Falsetto" (unpublished manuscript, 1985), 7.

Throughout *White Chocolate*, the girls imagine relationships laced with the heteronormative expectations they saw around them, even as those socially sanctioned relationships were rife with pain. The radio is Lore's lover, full of sad or mocking love songs—"Kisses Sweeter than Wine," "Love and Marriage," "Why Do Fools Fall in Love?" "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean." The absent father of the play, who sometimes calls and delivers "chocolate kisses" to Tiny via the phone, creates a longing for male connection. Tony fantasizes, "The way I want to marry is in a big yellow dress with pretzels and my hair in bobby pins new shoes & a lot of cake & beer ahhh. My nose will point down."<sup>53</sup> The down-turned nose suggests a stylized image of superiority from a magazine that serves—along with the dress, the hair, and the cake—to stand in for a perfect marriage that Tony, Tiny, and Lore never saw at home with their mother Mickey.

I'm just a girl the only one  
 I made my mind up to have you.  
 Don't care what nobody say  
 And I ain't got no daddy  
 Got lipstick these eyes  
 Put my sneakers in the garbage  
 Just for you.  
 Don't care what nobody say.  
 I'm just a girl the  
 Only one

I made my mind up to have  
You<sup>°</sup>

<sup>°</sup> Laurie Carlos, “Nonsectarian Conversations with the Dead” (unpublished manuscript, 1985), 11.

Lore’s relationship fantasy does not fix on the spectacle of the wedding but reveals her childlike understandings of what marriage is:

I told her see John O’Conner that’s a boy in my class, he’s in the third grade too. He asked me at the monkey bars to marry him. To be a bride with him. His father was a teacher at our school P.S. 188. And John’s father and his sister were Irish. His mother was Irish too but she was dead so John and his sister came to school with their daddy. We gonna marry and have Chinese children. See he said I am pink and you are brown that makes yellow Chinese! . . . The fourth grade John went to a private Catholic school. His father said he would never come to 188 again. We laughed in celebration that day, I was happy, I was singing.

There were Chinese apples. Chinese checkers. Chinese children!<sup>54</sup>

It is telling that the journey into marriage begins at the monkey bars, evoking the mask of playfulness worn by the monkey, a common image for Carlos, coerced into entertainment. Marriage, then, is a show concealing the imbalanced power dynamics beneath. Her fantasy also pulls in all the race, class, and gender codes that serve to support the corrosiveness of patriarchy.

I’m a man. A full grown man. A natural man. When I make Love to a woman ain’t that a man. M.A.N. Man. Oh child I’m a full grown hurt so good man.<sup>°</sup>

<sup>°</sup> Laurie Carlos, “An Organdy Falsetto” (unpublished manuscript, 1985), 5.

## Love and Joy

## Love and Joy

## Love and Joy

“Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy” is a significant departure for Carlos from much of her previous work. Although Carlos cites *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)* (2006) as the move away from her “little girl voice”—and by the time *The Pork Chop Wars (a story of mothers)* appears, the vexed character Monkey has gone from her work—it is earlier, in “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy” (2003) where the child’s pain is not riding the top of the story. In the company of the women of “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy,” Monkey/Laurie can open to an adult self-love. “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy” retains some of the autobiographical content, the attention to breath and food, and the spiraling storytelling of earlier work, but the river is now introduced as a dominant image and spiritual animator.

MONKEY

What do you dream at the river / Do the dances flow from this place? /

ANANYA

I wade and remember / The temples are behind us /

MONKEY

The regrets are all I know now / The inability to shake regret is all I know standing here at the river / I want new clothes / A disguise / a revealing look that gives comfort / New choices

ANANYA

Changing your clothes won't give you peace or bring you back time or cleanse regret / (Ananya hums)

MONKEY

I've known / I know / I have always known this / Every day for hours at a time I dig into the wounds of it / If when we hear the music we could know the emptiness of the melody at the first note / So much regret / He was dead all that time / (Oliver Lake's horn blows Ananya finds it and gestures) Which river is this?

ANANYA

My river /

MONKEY

If the sea could take me home /

ANANYA

If winds were blue in this dream /

MONKEY

If all of it would just go up /

ANANYA

If living forced some good /

MONKEY

If goodness were all there is / \*

\* Laurie Carlos, "Marion's Terrible Time of Joy" (unpublished manuscript, 2007), 3.



Throughout the text, as the characters ask about the river, deeper moments of personal truths are revealed. When Ananya asks Monkey “When did you find your river?” Monkey shares a story of the difficult relationship with her daughter and the bond between herself and Marion. Monkey concludes this lengthy passage with “The river over flows . . . River running fast and away to the shore.”<sup>55</sup> This flooding strips away and replenishes. When a river exceeds the bounds of its banks, it can uproot trees, wash away homes, and reorganize the landscape, leaving layers of fertilizing silt behind. Populations along the Nile relied on annual flooding to help strengthen the soil for the next planting season.<sup>56</sup> The river of “Marion’s Terrible Time of Joy” allows the women to pour forth the challenges they face with their children, and the river is a palliative to these struggles. After one such pouring forth, Monkey plays “Suzanne” on the jukebox—“Suzanne takes you down to the river / she has been there / she has seen things”—and the stage directions instruct, “she hums ‘Suzanne’ and Nina[Simone]’s version clears the night.”<sup>57</sup> The river, the women’s weeping, the subsequent path to healing, create a significant transition as Marion then begins to speak of love.

## LAURIE'S LINEAGE\*

Laurie . . .

works with Dianne McIntyre

originates the role of the lady in blue in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*

directs reading of Aishah Rahman's *Mojo and the Sayso* with Daniel Alexander

Jones as Blood at Brown University

creates Thought Music with Robbie McCauley and Jessica Hagedorn

creates *Teenytown* with Robbie McCauley and Jessica Hagedorn

directs *Alaskan Heat Blue Dot* with Florinda Bryant, Zell Miller III, Emily Cic-

chini, Richard Smith, and Omi Osun Joni L. Jones at Hyde Park Theatre

(HPT)

directs Sharon Bridgforth's *blood pudding* with Florinda Bryant, Zell Miller III,

Djola Branner, Renita Martin, and Stacey Robinson for HPT

directs Djola Branner's *Mighty Real* at Pillsbury House

directs Daniel Alexander Jones's *Clayangels* with Daniel Alexander Jones and

Todd Jones, Kim Koym as set designer, Grisha Coleman as composer, Omi

Osun Joni L. Jones as dramaturg at New World Theatre; later Sonja Perry-

man as production assistant at HPT

directs Sharon Bridgforth's *con flama* with Florinda Bryant, Ana Perea, Zell Miller

III, Sonja Parks, Leilah Stewart set designer, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones as dra-

maturg for HPT; later with Ambersunshower Smith, Djola Branner, Aimee

Bryant, Mankwe Ndosì, Sonja Parks, and Seitu Jones as set designer for Pen-

umbra

directs Renita Martin's *Five Bottles in a Six Pack* at Cherry Lane Theatre and

Jumpstart Theatre with Renita, and Jane Wang on bass

writes *The Cooking Show & How the Monkey Dances*

writes *White Chocolate for My Father*

writes *An Organdy Falsetto*

writes *Persimmon Peel*

writes *Nonsectarian Conversations with the Dead*

becomes a company member of Urban Bush Women

serves as Guest Artist for the Austin Project 2002–9 (except 2008 when flooded

Amtrak lines prevented her from getting to Austin)

co-directs *The Pork Chop Wars* with Deborah Artman, with Florinda Bryant,

Courtney Morris, Bianca Flores, Lisa L. Moore, Renita Martin, Virginia

Grise, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, and Rene Ford, with Sharon Bridgforth as

dramaturg

directs Florinda Bryant's *Half-Breed Southern Fried (check one)* with Bryant,

Monique Cortez, Jaclyn Pryor, Lara Rios, Terrence Stith the DJ, and Sharon

Bridgforth as dramaturg

mentors Djola Branner, Carl Hancock Rux, Grisha Coleman, Erik Ehn, Daniel

Alexander Jones, Sonja Parks, Ana Perea, Cynthia Oliver, Sharon Bridgforth

\* This partial listing of events, productions, and publications gives a sense of the intercon-  
nections among theatrical jazz artists. See Carlos's excerpted CV (Appendix I) for production details.

nurtures emerging artists Virginia Grise, Zell Miller III, Florinda Bryant, E. G. Bailey, Kim Thompson, Deborah Asimwe  
directs Rebecca Rice's work  
directs Luis Alfaro's *Straight as a Line* with Kathryn Coram Gagnon, Joe Wilson Jr.  
hosts the Austin Project Performance Company with Florinda Bryant, Amanda Johnston, Kristen Gerhard, and Leigh Gaymon-Jones for Late Nite  
hosts Kim Thompson and Annelize Machado for Late Nite  
writes *Marion's Terrible Time of Joy*  
devises *Map Lite* with Cynthia Oliver at a residency at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champagne  
performs in Erik Ehn's *Maria Kizito*  
directs Deborah Asimwe's work at CalArts  
performs *If the Butter Burns, It Ain't Biscuits* for Warfield Center / tAP  
performs *Washed* for Warfield Center / tAP  
directs *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks at Arizona State University  
directs Virginia Grise's *blu* at Company of Angels in Los Angeles

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