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"You don't climb a pepper tree, you go around it"

Chisom Awachie

Sarah Lawrence College

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“YOU DON’T CLIMB A PEPPER TREE, YOU GO AROUND IT”

Chisom Awachie

April 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts] in Theatre
Sarah Lawrence College

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Abstract

Uche lacks fulfillment in her work and dating lives and has trouble sharing this with her family and friends. Following nightmares of being digested by a white supremacist stomach, she seeks aid from an ancestor. Attempting to build an altar in her home leads her to connect with old parts of herself and her people, resulting in the safety she craved all along.

Theatrical Script

Scene 1

Uche faces the audience. She stands at a podium with a wheeled monitor and laptop beside her. The monitor displays a PowerPoint presentation about "Bias." She may have a microphone.

UCHE

Alright, moving on: so what is bias? The Merriam-Webster definition reads:

She references the projector screen (maybe has index cards of her own).

UCHE

“Prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.” Essentially, bias is the thoughts, feelings, and related behaviors we have or do towards something that can be considered unfair.

The next slide.

UCHE

Biases can be organized into two groups, conscious or explicit bias, and unconscious or implicit bias. To have a conscious bias means to be aware of your bias, for example, intentionally not choosing women for manual labor. Let’s say you’re hiring construction workers for a job and you ask your assistant to only send you the resumes of men who applied. Conscious bias. To have an unconscious bias means to not be aware of your bias. Let’s say you’re a woman, or someone of a marginalized gender, you’re walking home late at night and you instinctively cross the street when you see a man (or someone who presents as a man) walking toward you. Emphasis on “instinctively.” Unconscious bias–

The monitor starts to glitch, flickering on and off.

UCHE

Oh, shoot, um...why is it doing that??

The monitor screen goes black. The lights begin to dim.

UCHE

Oh wow, okay. Hello? Hello, I’m still in here!

A loud screeching noise. In the back of the space, a swirling, shimmering...Thing emerges. The screeching repeats with a distant, haunting quality. Uche turns her back to the audience, totally absorbed in the video. A moment before she speaks next. Then:

UCHE

Well, that's...spooky. I used to only have this dream at night. It's like I'm trapped somewhere, stuck, sinking deeper bit by bit. And this....thing....is getting closer and closer. There's nothing I can do to stop it. No way to fight, I open my mouth to scream and no sound comes out. I wonder if anyone knows I'm missing...

She turns to the podium, stage left.

UCHE

You'd let me know if I was in trouble, right?

The Thing disappears. Lights up on the podium. She begins to set it as an altar, starting with fabric and candles, also adding a small plate of food and a mug of coffee. VO of a spoken Igbo prayer to ancestors fills the space, calmly and methodically.

She sits at a small dining table stage right, and lights come up on her apartment.

UCHE

I ran through it a couple more times, and my boss seems satisfied. I'm good to go! I wonder if anyone will actually show up. Like, what's the point of asking me to put a training together if it's optional? Optics, I guess. "We care bout diversity so much we hired *one* additional employee! Isn't she cute?"

She waits for a response from the altar. Nothing.

UCHE

I should quit. Maybe then you'd say something. Here I am! In need of assistance! My boss keeps calling me into her office to talk about "my lived experience of working in corporate America" and gets super disappointed when I don't have any sob stories to share. (And I mean, I do. But that's not her business! Why does she wanna know?!) You know, sometimes she looks at me like she's trying to physically stop herself from like, grabbing me and *animalistic growling noises* and I don't know what the fuck to do with that.

She waits. Nothing.

Come on auntie, give me something, I've fed you, got you flowers, and I will *consider* buying dark liquor next time! What's it gonna take?

Scene 2

Blackout. A projected video (CUPCAKE) plays, silent and in black and white.

Uche is on a dinner date with Beth. Things are going well. They each have a cupcake on the plates before them. They chat and eventually hold hands. Beth looks down at her plate, where the cupcake has transformed into a small card with a clip art photo of a stomach. Uche doesn't notice but immediately feels ill. Beth watches her intently. Uche, holding her stomach, excuses herself from the table.

The scene resets and Uche can tell that something is off. Beth continues the conversation, oblivious. As Uche settles in, Beth looks at her cupcake again, which is now a card with a photo of a smiling mouth. It's more detailed than the stomach, there are lips and teeth. Uche tries to speak and realizes that she can't. She starts to panic. Beth watches her, unmoved.

The scene resets and Uche has caught on. Beth doesn't understand why Uche is upset. Beth looks down at her cupcake, now a detailed, anatomically correct image of a heart. Uche sees this, reaches out, and crushes her own cupcake with one hand. Beth looks at her, shocked. She leaves the table. Uche relaxes. She eats a bit of destroyed cupcake from her hand.

Fin.

Lights up on Uche's apartment. There's an LED vanity mirror on the kitchen table. She holds two blouses on hangers. She speaks to the altar.

UCHE

We are just getting coffee, so this might be too much. I can always put a jacket over it though, and keep my makeup simple...oh god, should I even wear makeup? Is makeup too much?? Studs or hoops, heels or flats, BOOKBAG OR PURSE??

Uche tries to calm down. Nothing from the altar.

UCHE

Am I doing the most? Yes. But in my defense, this is the first Black person I've had a real conversation with in like, three weeks. I know I need to get out more, but I'm working so much these days I end up sleeping most of the weekend. And if I'm being honest—

Loud music plays through the space. Either a drum solo or an instrumental of an Arctic Monkeys song. Uche is still speaking to the altar, but the audience can't hear what she's saying. This continues for a while, then abruptly ends. Uche is still speaking.

UCHE

So the stakes are just really high! It's super embarrassing, but what if she thinks that—

The music plays again. Uche may decide on a blouse or start applying makeup, still speaking to the altar. The music ends.

UCHE

And I wish you would just—flicker a light or something!

Nothing from the altar. Uche looks defeated. Maybe she takes off her earrings, puts her makeup away.

UCHE

Right. Thanks for nothing.

Scene 3

Uche, back at work. She sets the monitor. The podium is still set up as the altar. She begins her presentation, but the slides are wrong.

MONITOR

THIS IS UCHE

UCHE

Oh, what the fu—

MONITOR

UCHE IS AFRAID OF A LOT OF THINGS
PRIMARILY VULNERABILITY

UCHE

These aren't my slides?!

MONITOR

ALSO BEING ALONE

ALSO ALSO, BEING IN DANGER AND NOT BEING ABLE TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT

Uche clicks through frantically until she finds her real presentation. She looks at the audience.

UCHE

Sorry, for the technical difficulties....actually, why don't we take a bio break?

Scene 4

Uche at her kitchen table. She rubs her temples.

UCHE

I must be losing it.

She looks to the altar. Nothing.

UCHE

I have one more idea. I found these photos of performances I did as a kid. The choreo will be...rusty, but shy of sacrificing a chicken I don't know what else to try.

Music plays in the space for the Igbo Atilogwu dance. Uche stands center and begins to dance. It's hesitant, as she remembers steps from long ago. Her movements become more confident leading up to a climax in which she gets totally swept away, eyes closed and surrendered to the music. The music ends. She climbs back into her seat, trying to catch her breath. She looks at the altar. Nothing. Uche is crushed. She slowly pulls on her work blazer.

Scene 5

Uche pulls out the monitor, still dejected. Her presentation slide reads "PARTNER REFLECTION."

UCHE

I was going to have you all split into small groups but...what's the point?

She changes slides. The next one reads "QUESTIONS AND TAKEAWAYS."

UCHE

Sitting there listening to me isn't going to change your minds. A PowerPoint isn't going to make anyone safer. It's definitely not going to make *me* safer.

She unplugs her laptop.

UCHE

I think I'm just going to go home. Maybe call my siblings. And try to remember a time when I was safe. When being vulnerable wasn't a big deal. And maybe that'll help.

Scene 6

Uche strikes the monitor. A video begins on the back wall as the lights slowly fade to black. The video is a vision board with magazine cut-outs of Black actresses. There are words like "creativity," "wealth," and the phrase "Black girl rising." Slowly, small videos pop up. Some are videos of Uche, some are of her family and friends. The audio overlaps, becoming a gentle cacophony. One by one, the videos disappear. Cut to black.

Scene 7

Uche returns to the stage with a guitar. She sits in a chair and plays.

UCHE

JUST WATCH

LOOK AT THE WAY HE TALKS TO ME

JUST WATCH

CARELESSNESS SO BREEZY

I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHAT I WANTED

IF I GOT IT

IF HE'S GIVING ME WHAT I DESERVE

AND I'LL LEARN TO STAY HONEST

HYDROPONIC

I WAS ROOTED BUT I'M SLIPPING NOW

IT'S ONE THING OR ANOTHER

WHY'D I BOTHER

WOULD HE LET ME GO

I KNOW

I DON'T

JUST WATCH

SWINGING HANDS, THEY'RE INTERTWINED

JUST WATCH
MAYBE WITH A LITTLE TIME

YOU PULL ME IN, WANT MY ATTENTION
YOU DON'T MENTION
PRESS YOUR PALM AGAINST MY BACK
I DON'T RECALL WHAT REALLY HAPPENED
DID I IMAGINE
POKING HOLES IN ALL MY CRIES FOR HELP
UNTIL MY EARS ARE RINGING
GOT ME CLINGING
TO WHAT, I DON'T KNOW
I FLOW
TO AND FRO

JUST WATCH
LOOK AT THE WAY HE TALKS TO ME
JUST WATCH
I'VE LEARNED MY LESSON WELL

The song ends. Uche sits back, relaxed.

Blackout.

Performance Recording

Timestamp: 1:25 to 24:50

<https://vimeo.com/816941865>