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Turiya Autry

The Portland performer, poet and activist hits the stage with a timely one-woman show about a young black woman's search for identity

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
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For the past two decades poet, performer and teaching artist Turiya Autry has been getting up close and personal with Portland audiences. Known for her visceral, lyrical autobiographical pieces, she works in many mediums, from radio shows and slam poetry competitions to her education and mentorship work through both Portland State University and Caldera Arts, where she served as education director.

Last year the seasoned slam poet released "Roots, Reality & Rhyme," her debut poetry book following a young black woman's search for identity as she navigates poverty, violence, oppression and motherhood. The collection seemed to come at the perfect time. As police brutality against African American men continues to be a national talking point, "Roots, Reality & Rhyme: offers insight into the much overlooked experience of black women in America and the oppression they face.

This month Autry and director Kevin Jones will premiere "Roots, Reality & Rhyme: The One-Woman Show." It's a multimedia poetry performance based on the book. The show will be one of several works premiering as part of Fertile Ground 2015, a city-wide festival theater festival focused on highlighting new works in the Portland performing arts scene.

I recently sat down with Autry for coffee and to talk about her one-woman show, the purpose of art and poetry, and what is next for this tireless activist artist.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: *What was the genesis of this project?*

Turiya Autry: It was right around this time last year that I self-published the book "Roots, Reality and Rhyme," and I had this vision of a one-woman show for this project to kind of close the chapter. So this is actually the stories behind some of the poems.

It talks about my experience with domestic violence as a child, my mother's experience with that. It talks about assault, about being homeless briefly, finding out I'm pregnant with my daughter, all these really personal things that a lot of people don't know about my story. My hope is that it's beautiful and transformative. Then my other goals would be in telling my story, connecting it to the bigger story. I think we hear a lot of statistics about what it is to be black and a woman and poor and a single mother, all those different demographic things, but it doesn't get personalized. It's just these numbers. I think people are really immune to that information. (For example) there've been some recent studies that were done where they interviewed thousands of black women and come to find out that out of the pool like 60 to 80 percent of those black women have experienced assault by their early 20s. So what does that really mean to think that most black women have been assaulted, that a large percentage will deal with domestic violence? We see those numbers but we don't ever have to deal with black women as human beings. They're always still mythic, separate, as if we don't

need help. There's this way where black women are just pushed to the side. So my hope is to make us more visible and to make these situations visible in a way that people can relate to and think about and maybe start to engage with the community in different ways. I want other people to feel empowered to share their stories. So while it's my story, I'm very aware that it's not the individual: It's this bigger picture and I'm just one of many people who have had these experiences.

A.G.: *Tell me about translating this book into a performance.*

T.A.: This book has been this work of pain and joy and love for over a decade. Only a small percentage of the poems in here are actually in the one-woman show. It's not going to be just me reading the book. I can cut and pick what I want to be said and I don't have to worry about losing something because the book still exists as is. Some of it has been shifting the language, too. There's a poem in there, "Purple and Yellow," that's about the situation with my mother and domestic violence. It still has those poetic elements and you don't necessarily know whether or not it's my story. In this I'm actually going to be talking about my mom and me at the bus station trying to escape and about how we actually got out of that situation. I talk about some stuff in college. I reference date rape and slut shaming, so it's also this kind of retrospective, meaning being where I'm at, looking back on it, analyzing it, seeing how those things shaped

A beginner's reading list of black feminism

Turiya Autry's work is informed by Black Feminism, a school of thought emphasizes the intersection of class, gender and race in oppressive social structures. Black feminist works most often focus on documenting the varied experiences of black women and their struggles for self-realization and identity. Here are Turiya Autry's four must-reads for anyone looking to learn more about Black Feminism.

■ **Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment** by Patricia Hill Collins

■ **Assata: An Autobiography** by Assata Shakur: First published in 1990, this critical text was among the first to specifically name and define Black Feminism. The book explores the work of several prominent black feminists, using their writings across different time periods and genres to form a critical framework for Black Feminist thought and critique. Activist and former Black Panther Assata Shakur wrote this autobiography while in exile in Cuba, where she remains today.

■ **for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf** by Ntozake Shange.

■ **Poem About My Rights** by June Jordan: This choreopoem, a collection of poems meant to be choreographed and set to music, presents the heartwrenching coming of age stories of seven black women, each representing a different color of the rainbow. Demonstrating the many varied and complex experiences of African American women, the book is a great example of black feminist thought as expressed through poetry and fiction.

me. At the end of the day, what I hope people take away is that even as we survive through all this pain and hardship we can still come out whole and beautiful. We can choose how those things define us.

A.G.: *Do you find yourself thinking about your audience when you are writing or writing to a certain audience?*

T.A.: I tend to think when I'm writing or when I'm looking at a piece, that I'll probably share it because I perform all the time. So there's a way that I'm looking at pieces as far as how does that sound off the tongue or is that clear, will people understand? With a one-woman show, because I'm going into really heavy topics I've tried to keep it in a way where hopefully it's not triggering. I think about those things. At the end of the day it's really about being true to me. I write for myself and to please me, and then I give it out to the world. I think that's a better way to write

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